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Valentino's Bold Choice of LGBTQ Activism:  
A Semiotic Analysis of Maison Valentino

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# INDEX

INTRODUCTION .....	4
CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	6
1.1 BRAND ACTIVISM .....	6
1.1.1 <i>Shading light on the phenomenon</i> .....	6
1.1.2 <i>The importance of values: authenticity, transparency, consistency, materiality, leadership, ethics.</i> .....	7
1.1.3 <i>Millennials and Gen-Z are the present and next future.</i> .....	9
1.1.4 <i>The empowerment of citizens</i> .....	10
1.1.5 <i>The secret ingredient for a successful brand activism and the dark side</i> .....	10
1.1.6 <i>Definitions and differences: brand activism, CPA (Corporate Political Advocacy), CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), and CSA (Corporate Sociopolitical Activism).</i> .....	11
1.1.7 <i>Self-brand similarity</i> .....	12
1.1.8 <i>The moderate mismatch</i> .....	13
1.1.9 <i>Risks, gains and financial implications.</i> .....	13
1.2 ATTACHMENT THEORY .....	14
1.2.1 <i>What is attachment?</i> .....	14
1.2.2 <i>From attachment to brand attachment</i> .....	14
1.2.3 <i>The self-aspect of brand attachment</i> .....	15
1.2.4 <i>Antecedents and outcomes of brand attachment</i> .....	16
1.2.5 <i>The power of brand attachment against unethical firm behavior</i> .....	17
1.2.6 <i>Issue involvement</i> .....	17
1.2.7 <i>Favorable attitude does not imply strong brand attachment.</i> .....	18
1.3 BRAND PERCEPTIONS .....	18
1.4 THE EVOLUTION OF MARKETING AND THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF LUX .....	20
1.5 BRANDS AND STORYTELLING.....	22
CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH QUESTION, THE CONTEXT AND THE CASE.....	24
2.1 RESEARCH QUESTION .....	24
2.2 LGBTQ .....	24
2.2.1 <i>Stonewall 1969</i> .....	24
2.2.2 <i>The LGBTQ community</i> .....	24
2.2.3 <i>Gender fluidity</i> .....	25
2.2.4 <i>How fashion brands are engaging in LGBTQ+ activism.</i> .....	26
2.3 VALENTINO: THE SCANDAL OF THE MAN WITH THE BAG .....	30
2.3.1 <i>The company - Valentino</i> .....	30
2.3.2 <i>Communication and storytelling of the company</i> .....	32
2.3.3 <i>Valentino Milano Collection Campaign 2021 - Premise</i> .....	40
2.3.4 <i>The scandal</i> .....	41

2.3.5 <i>Valentino after the scandal</i> .....	44
<b>CHAPTER 3: ANALYSIS</b> .....	<b>46</b>
<b>3.1 METHODOLOGY: SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS</b> .....	<b>46</b>
3.1.1 <i>What's semiotics</i> .....	46
<b>3.2 VALENTINO BRANDSCAPE</b> .....	<b>50</b>
3.2.1 <i>Valentino cultural origin</i> .....	51
3.2.2 <i>Brand audit: Target market, consumer insights, target culture, brand positioning, competitive environment</i> .....	52
3.2.3 <i>Semiotic positioning of Valentino</i> .....	72
3.2.4 <i>Representation of the LGBTQ in media</i> .....	73
3.2.5 <i>Cultural icons</i> .....	74
3.2.6 <i>History of the gender fluidity in fashion</i> .....	76
3.2.7 <i>LGBTQ in marketing and advertising</i> .....	77
3.2.8 <i>The Brandscape construction</i> .....	78
<b>3.3 VISUAL SEMIOTICS: ANALYSIS OF VALENTINO'S POST</b> .....	<b>80</b>
3.3.1 <i>Figurative analysis of Valentino</i> .....	80
3.3.2 <i>The semiotic square of Valentino</i> .....	83
3.3.3 <i>The canonical narrative schema</i> .....	84
3.3.4 <i>The discursive structures</i> .....	85
3.3.5 <i>The theory of enunciation in visual semiotics</i> .....	86
<b>3.4 SOCIAL MEDIA LISTENING</b> .....	<b>88</b>
3.4.1 <i>Sentiment analysis</i> .....	91
<b>CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>96</b>
<b>4.1 RESULTS AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS</b> .....	<b>96</b>
<b>4.2 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS</b> .....	<b>97</b>
<b>4.3 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH</b> .....	<b>97</b>
<b>SUMMARY</b> .....	<b>99</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>114</b>
<b>WEB REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>117</b>

## INTRODUCTION

“Brand activism”, two words with many implications. According to this new phenomenon, brands adopt an activist behavior concerning controversial issues which, most of the times, divide the world in two oppositional parties. In the past, companies did not want to get involved in sociopolitical issues, but now they are called to act because consumers often identify themselves with brands and they want them to take a stand in favor or against important issues. People trust always more about brands and always less about institutions. The 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report shows that 64% of consumers identify themselves as “belief-driven buyers” who choose or reject a brand based on whether it stands on political and social issues they care about (Lab, 2020, July 19). Since then, iconic brands have gained authoritative powers up to the point that their ideas, values, and actions can change the way of living of many other people.

As reported in the article of Lab (2020, July 19), in the COVID-19 special edition of the CMO Survey, the 83.3% of marketing leaders believe that taking a stance on politically charged issues increases their company’s ability to attract and retain customers/partners, but only the 18.9% think it is appropriate for their brand to take a stand. Indeed, to do it well you have to find the right way.

The importance of taking a stand is not only in terms of positive implications for the entire society, bringing relevant effects on consumers’ behavior that foster brand profitability and customer lifetime value (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park, 2005), but also for the associations that it can create in people’s mind adding important meanings to the brand. Furthermore, the meanings gained through brand activism become part of the brand story because it helps in building emotional connections to the brand, and in the long-run, loyalty (Lab, 2020, July 19). Despite all the positive sides in engaging in brand activism, many other risks can undermine the brand’s reputation and credibility. In fact, some consumers do not believe that brands truly care about the cause they stand up for and thus see brand activism as ulterior profit-making motive. In this context, brands have always to seek an authentic communication with their customers in order to make them believe in what they say.

In this research, I would like to deepen this contemporary as well as controversial topic having a focus on LGBTQ+ activism.

Brands have started to incorporate this sociopolitical issue as representatives of authoritative entities firstly in the company’s values and secondly in the communication of these values to the crowd. I would like to address this topic with the aim to analyze this social issue which is having a great resonance at the economic level and in terms of marketing strategies that firms are adopting. For these reasons, I believe it is important to deepen how the different approaches

to this theme, which many brands are planning, could have a significant impact on society and how some strategies could be more efficient and appropriate than others reporting also some concrete examples of those brands which have already started to include this controversial theme in their present and future corporate plans.

In the first chapter I will go through a literature review of the brand activism thematic and other related fundamental concepts like attachment theory, brand perceptions, and more facts about marketing and storytelling applied to contemporary marketing communication.

Afterwards, in the second chapter, I will dive into LGBTQ+ activism from its origin to more recent attitudes of brands toward this issue. We will understand how choosing to stand in favor of such a controversial topic, as Valentino did in his last brand campaign of 2021, could turn into a scandal if not held properly.

In the third chapter, I will conduct a qualitative analysis of the Valentino social media campaign along with a semiotic analysis to explain the signification of the campaign and eventually to find out incongruences of values with those of the brand which could justify failure and give useful marketing and managerial insights when deciding to include this thematic in one's brand strategy.

Lastly, in the fourth chapter of this thesis, I provided useful results along with theoretical and managerial implications, stating also limitations of the current research and suggestions that could be implemented in future research.

## CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1 BRAND ACTIVISM

#### 1.1.1 *Shading light on the phenomenon*

Brand activism is a new phenomenon in which companies and brands adopt an activist mode and openly express their opinion about a cause or problem (Kotler & Sarkar, 2020). As reported in Kotler and Sarkar's book published in 2020, Wikipedia defines activism as follows:

*“Activism consists of efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to make improvements in society. Forms of activism range from writing letters to newspapers or to politicians, political campaigning, economic activism such as boycotts or preferentially patronizing businesses, rallies, street marches, strikes, sit-ins, and hunger strikes.”*

Sarkar & Kotler (2018) identify six broad categories for brand activism: social activism includes areas such as gender equality, education, healthcare; political activism includes lobbying, voting, privatization, policies; economic activism includes tax policies, income equality; workplace activism deals with labor and organizational issues; environmental activism includes air and water pollution, emission control issues, environmental policies; and legal activism dealing with citizenship and employment laws and policies.

Companies can choose to support or promote some of these issues and align them with their core values and vision. In doing so, they can express their feelings, for example, making a public open statement, lobbying for the cause, donating money or through a cause-related statement using marketing and advertising tools.

This practice has a two-fold aim: it can create buzz around the brand enhancing positive behaviors of consumers and lead to customer loyalty (Shivakanth Shetty et. al, 2019) and, at the same time, it may put brands in a position of educators for society, influencing consumer behavior, or as legitimate source of cultural power, having the responsibility to incite societal change (Moorman, 2020).

Another feature of brand activism that Scherer and Palazzo (2011) highlight is the competitive power of this latter based on the moral credibility of a good cause. In fact, Manfredi- Sánchez (2019) found that linking social objectives with governmental initiatives and economic activity can result in greater societal advantages.

As long as globalization has extended markets and raised demand for consumer goods and products, developing a brand image through new enticing ways may become critical to maintaining market competitiveness (Capriotti, 2013).

Previous studies have examined why taking a position has become so crucial for companies, concluding that abstention and neutrality no longer work and may even do more harm than good

(Korschun and Smith, 2018). Companies should ask “how” to engage rather than “whether” to participate. There is no longer a choice, but people are demanding companies to take a stand on major social issues because they need them to be supportive or work with the social cause in order to improve things.

All of this stems from a rising public distrust of institutions, as well as a growing sense of pessimism about the future (Manfredi-Sánchez 2019; Kotler and Sarkar, 2020). In this environment, businesses are expected to take the lead in the battle for change (Kotler and Sarkar, 2020).

According to Kotler and Sarkar's book (2020), we've lately seen several good instances of businesses participating in this flow, including Lego, Google, Sony, Rolex, and Walt Disney. These businesses have developed a reputation for doing the right thing because they do things that matter to people.

On the other hand, many of them are still struggling in the hopes of profiting from the increased attention that the practice may provide. In truth, these businesses have failed to implement such a plan. It is preferable to match brand values with the social cause in question as long as they wish to join this stage. The relevance of values as a core of brand identity will be explained in the next paragraph.

### ***1.1.2 The importance of values: authenticity, transparency, consistency, materiality, leadership, ethics.***

As previously said, values play a vital part for a brand which wants to gain authority and reputation, but these principles must also be put into action and be compatible with the cause the brand is advocating for. People may perceive brand activism as just another advertising or marketing ploy if it is not properly coordinated and matches the organization's basic values, ethics, and vision, turning this approach into a failure (Shivakanth Shetty et. al, 2019). Researchers have discovered several crucial values in the literature, which I will describe in greater detail hereafter.

First and foremost, there is a significant risk that businesses face when they decide to rally behind a cause: customers may lose faith in you (Alhouti, Johnson, and Holloway 2016; Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2010; Vredenburg et al. 2020). As a result, the need of authenticity in brand activism is clear as much as the risks for businesses that are not “walking the talk,” given that customers accuse them of utilizing societal concerns mainly as a commercial tool to generate more cash (Edelman, 2019).

Then, what does authentic brand activism entail?

Authentic brand activism is described as “*a purpose- and values-driven approach in which a brand adopts a nonneutral stand on institutionally disputed sociopolitical problems, to achieve*

*social change and marketing success*” according to a study published in 2020 by Vredenburg et al. To put it another way, it aligns a company's mission and values with activist marketing message and corporate behavior. Purpose, values, messaging, and practice are four variables that affect, determine, and build on one another in a comprehensive system to generate authenticity.

Practice and messaging must be in sync, but they aren't enough to sustain and build real brand activism. There must also be symmetry and a match between all of these elements. If all of this becomes effective, customers will be more inclined to regard a brand's position as relevant, genuine, and reliable. Authentic brand activism emphasizes the delivery of social and environmental benefits (Vredenburg et al. 2020) over the company's immediate economic objectives, thus businesses that do not follow this sort of alignment are more likely to be accused of woke washing (Sarkar and Kotler, 2020; Wettstein and Baur, 2016).

Low authenticity mitigates the positive effects of aligned CPA<sup>1</sup> on identification and choice, but it does not mitigate the negative effects of misaligned CPA, according to Hydock (2020). At the market level, however, authenticity results in smaller gains for small-share brands.

Consumers are accustomed to identifying with politically aligned companies and disidentify with politically misaligned ones when it comes to ethics (Hydock et. al, 2020). Concerning unethical acts, consumers have a considerably larger unfavorable bias than when it comes to ethical ones. As a result, customers are more inclined to reject bad information than accept good information (Trudel and Cotte, 2009).

Korschun and Smith (2018) identified four elements of transparency, consistency, materiality, and leadership as essential criteria for stakeholders in determining reactions to corporate political activity.

Stakeholders must have faith in organizations, and becoming a trustworthy company necessitates openness and transparency. People are more likely to accept a company's political stance if they believe in it.

Consumers like predictability over unexpected shifts, therefore they look for consistency in the actions of businesses.

Contrary to popular belief, linking political concerns with money does not always elicit negative emotions. It has been demonstrated that as long as a firm is transparent, consistent, and industry leader, the pursuit of profitability may be seen positively.

If all of these principles are in sync, then leading a crowd in support of a specific political or social issue may even be a point of actual difference for a business.

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<sup>1</sup> Corporate Political Advocacy



Advertisers' primary goal these days is to cater to the tastes of millennials and Generation Z. In this environment, many businesses see brand activism as a means to reach out to a younger demographic audience that is considerably more progressive and politically engaged than their parents. As a result, businesses are attempting to access this market by matching their values with environmental and societal concerns in order to better attract this big segment of the population (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).

### ***1.1.3 Millennials and Gen-Z are the present and next future.***

If you don't want your marketing efforts to be ineffective, you must first have a clear concept of the target audience you wish to reach.

Marketers believe millennials and Gen-Z to be the most important and profitable consumer group, thus they are the most triggered targets nowadays. The Millennials' target, in particular, is defined by a great buying power and a long-life expectancy (Twenge et al., 2008), and they constitute the largest group of real buyers (Terrell, 2019). With all of this in mind, it's clear that this audience has far greater expectations of brands and businesses who choose to take a position on social or political issues (Waddock, 2008). Given the significance they place on marketing and brand advocacy, their judgements are likely to be harsher, veiled in skepticism. As millennials and Generation Z are more likely to seek authentic and culturally relevant brands (Terrell, 2019), honesty and transparency in brand marketing and advertising communication become more important (Bergh & Behrer, 2013) and companies are being pushed to be more socially responsible and act outside of their commercial interests (Steckstor, 2012). According to the Edelman Earned Brand Global Report (2018), new-age customers are more ethical and value-driven, and they are more likely to boycott or switch brands if they are dissatisfied (Shivakanth Shetty et. al, 2019). In reality, millennials purchase items that express their individuality and establish their identity (Terrell, 2019). Digitalization has led to the formation of a more informed and aware consumer (Parment, 2012), and Millennials' extensive exposure to ads has made them wary of large promises that are often simply profit-driven (Shivakanth Shetty et. al, 2019). According to Hong (2018), Millennials prefer to buy from a company that supports a cause that is best connected with the brand's ideology and personality. It is about creating a more conscious generation that must be formed, nourished, fostered, and engaged with respect to prior generations. As a result, firms who wish to engage in brand activism risk to be regarded as false and alienating their customers (Garfield, 2018). So, what makes brand activism successful, and what are its drawbacks? I'll discuss the positive and negative aspects of it in the following paragraphs.

#### ***1.1.4 The empowerment of citizens***

Not only the issue but also the context is important to consider. In fact, stakeholders operate within a larger context that includes external factors such as business and societal expectations, political division, the internet, social media, and technology. In this environment, stakeholders have started engaging in the political system in a different way. In the face of injustices, social and environmental issues, citizens and businesses do not stay apathetic. Instead, people began to actively participate in order to affect change on a larger scale. Stakeholders can influence the system through a variety of methods, including voting, demonstrations, petitions, conveying views and attitudes, and, more recently, social media. Citizens, in particular, can exert pressure on businesses to agree with their political ideas, therefore avoiding the use of further political tools such as boycotts and buycotts to influence corporate policy (Fernandes, 2020; Korschun et al., 2020).

#### ***1.1.5 The secret ingredient for a successful brand activism and the dark side***

Practicing brand activism may be both beneficial and harmful. It may create consumer backlash or boycotts as a consequence of their differing social, cultural, political, or environmental convictions, but if correctly executed, it may match the company's values with those of the customers, resulting in a successful outcome. Neutral brands are not allowed anymore, instead millennials want to associate with brands that take a position for something controversial. Consumers might engage in boycotts to penalize a company or brand for unethical or socially irresponsible behavior or policies (Gardberg & Newbury, 2009). These anti-brand activities are a result of perceived presence of injustices in the marketplace with the accuse for parent companies of being “exploitive” or “unethical” (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2006).

According to a research conduct by Edelman in 2018, the 64% of global customers boycott or boycott a company because of its stance on societal concerns, a 13% rise year over year.

Hong (2018) discussed boycotting and buycotting extensively, defining them as “*a consumer’s decision either to punish (i.e., boycott) or to reward (i.e., buycott) private companies by making selective choices of products or brands, based on social, political or ethical considerations*” (Baek, 2010, p. 1066). More specifically, boycotting is defined as “*punishing specific products and businesses for their unfavorable acts by performing non-consumption*”, whereas buycotting refers to “*supporting specific products and businesses by performing selective buying*” (Basci, 2014; 166). A boycott can have a number of negative consequences for a firm, including decreased sales, cash flow, and stock prices (Farah & Newman, 2009), reputation or brand image, customer attitudes, and purchasing intentions (Farah & Newman, 2009; Klein, Smith, & John, 2004). According to Romani et al. (2015), businesses should work on preventing unfavorable consumer reactions and eventually create successful methods to recover from poor

corporate behaviors, such as providing trustworthy explanations and avoiding hatred, bad publicity, and negative WOM.

**1.1.6 Definitions and differences: brand activism, CPA (Corporate Political Advocacy), CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), and CSA (Corporate Sociopolitical Activism).**

Bhagwat et al. (2020) define CSA as “the firm’s public demonstration (statements and/or actions) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue”. Stakeholders’ responses to these problems are polarized (Kotler and Sarkar 2017), resulting in various levels of partisanship. In fact, polarization is a characteristic of CPA, which distinguishes it from CSR, which frequently evokes customer support. As further explained, “corporate sociopolitical activism is comparable to two other firm activities: CSR and CPA (Nalick et al., 2016)”. Corporate social responsibility refers to “company actions that advance social good beyond that which is required by law” (Kang, Germann, and Grewal, 2016, p.59)

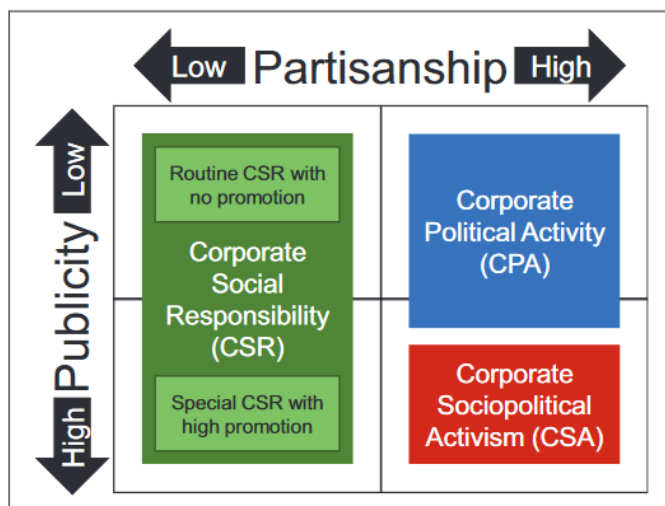


Figure 1 Conceptual distinctions among CSR, CPA, and CSA

and “constitutes the gradual formalization of cause-related marketing and corporate philanthropy aimed to “do well by doing good” through a strategic focus” (Varadarajan and Menon 1988, p. 60). As seen in figure 1, although being on the same partisanship continuum, CSR is low in partisanship since it includes high societal consensus, but CSA is polarizing, entailing a significant

diversity in stakeholders’ reactions based on their sociopolitical beliefs (Bhattacharya and Elsbach, 2002). Firms may also participate in CPA on a regular basis, which entails the firm’s attempts to influence political processes so that it is well-positioned to acquire policy-based competitive market advantages (Lux, Crook, and Wehr 2011). Rather to supporting a social cause, the primary purpose of CPA is to achieve a specified goal with immediate cash rewards (Hillman, Keim, and Schuler 2004). According to Bhagwat et al. (2020), CPA and CSA differ in the extent to which each activity is publicized: while CPA does not make as much noise and is generally aligned with the firm’s interests, having positive effects on firm value (Lux, Crook, and Wehr, 2011), CSA is promoted as a communication of the firm’s values (Kotler and Sarkar, 2017), but its effect on firm value is limited. In terms of brand activism, there are two primary features that distinguish it from CSR: CSR focuses on actions and the results of those actions,

like as reputation and sales; moreover, the majority of consumers view CSR efforts to be beneficial. Brand activism, on the other hand, lacks widespread support because there is rarely a widely agreed viewpoint on a sociopolitical topic (Korschun et al, 2019; Nalick et al., 2016). As a result, brand activism is seen as a development of CSR, according to Sarkar and Kotler (2020).

### ***1.1.7 Self-brand similarity***

Hydock et al. (2020) explain that consumers are always looking for that relationship that connects their physical and mental self-concept with the brand identity. People may be drawn to identity-consistent brands or repulsed by identity-inconsistent brands, according to the self-congruity idea (White, Argo, and Sengupta, 2012). According to the consumer-brand identification theory (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), self-brand similarity can lead to stronger self-brand identification and consequently to more positive attitudes toward the brand, increased purchase intentions, and higher levels of brand advocacy. Even if this holds true in most of the cases, Mukherjee and Althuizen (2018) give an important insight in their work arguing that *“self-brand similarity on consumer attitudes, intentions, and behavior is likely to be asymmetric in the domain of moral judgments. If consumers disagree with the moral stand taken by the brand, it implies that the consumer and the brand place different emphasis on moral foundations<sup>2</sup>, which should lead to low self-brand similarity. Since people tend to consider their own moral beliefs to be superior or sacrosanct, it is unlikely that they will change their position on the issue in order to align it with a brand’s stand. Therefore, consumer-brand disagreement, which indicates low self-brand similarity should lead to lower levels of consumer-brand identification”*. Said that, what they expect is *“consumer-brand disagreement regarding a divisive social or political issue will negatively influence brand attitudes, intentions, and behavior”*. Instead, *“when consumers agree with the stand taken by the brand, it indicates that the moral foundations of the consumer and the brand are well aligned, implying higher self-brand similarity and, consequently, higher consumer-brand identification”*.

Apart from that, it has been discovered that when there is consumer-brand agreement, a brand taking a stance does not always make a significant change in customers' views, intentions, or behavior. This is because the moral stand is likely compatible with consumers' moral basis. This means that, in this case, consumers expect that the brand takes and engages in that "right" moral behavior, and it looks as if the brand has to act in accordance to the rules of society set out to

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<sup>2</sup> According to the moral foundations theory (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009), individuals may arrive at opposing moral judgments concerning such issues due to differences in the emphasis placed on the five moral foundations: care (versus harm), fairness or proportionality (versus cheating), loyalty or in-group (versus betrayal), authority or respect (versus subversion), and sanctity or purity (versus degradation).

relate to one another (Gilligan & Wiggins, 1987; Turiel, 1983). Therefore, consumers are not likely to reward that brand for doing what they expect or simply a “ought to” social behavior.

### ***1.1.8 The moderate mismatch***

Previous scholars (Cornwell, Howard-Grenville and Hampel, 2018; Mandler, 1982; Warren and Campbell, 2014) suggest that there might be positive brand equity returns if the enterprise selects a somewhat "optimally" non-congruous sociopolitical issue. This is because the incongruity leads to deeper processing which may generate a greater reaction (Mandler, 1982). Congruence, on the other hand, does not take much time developing notions since they are not that remarkable (Martindale, 1991). In contrast, mild incongruity between the brand and the cause may lead to more intriguing consumer developments and assessments (Mandler, 1982). The notion of toxic masculinity, introduced by Gillette to the screens, is an excellent current example of this type of mismatch, which pushes viewers to delve and discover what the brand truly wants to express. Other factors, such as the consumers' values and whether these values are threatened or confirmed by the cause in object, have a role in determining a positive or negative response to moderate mismatch. People don't like it when their beliefs are questioned or attacked; this might lead to a negative reaction since it contradicts their identity or well-being (McGraw and Warren, 2015). Regardless, good outcomes are possible if: 1) the brand activist message deviates from conventional standards and/or the company's past reputation, 2) the viewer views the divergence as nonthreatening, and 3) the brand deviates from a societal norm in a limited, but not excessive, manner (Warren and Campbell, 2014; Warren and McGraw, 2015). What is then most essential, is the susceptibility of the audience to accept societal standards that brand activism might question (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

### ***1.1.9 Risks, gains and financial implications.***

The polarizing effect of CSA makes it an uncertain strategy to choose because it may strengthen some relationships while damaging others. At the same time, it has been demonstrated that CSR and CPA are less risky in terms of overall effects and firm value which may bring to the company (Luo and Bhattacharya 2006; Lux, Crook and Woehr, 2011). Moreover, CSR is linked to various positive performance outcomes, including firm reputation, product evaluations, customer trust, and long-term loyalty. Despite the fact that CSR has been shown to lower business idiosyncratic risk, some investors may regard it as a waste of financial or human resources (Luo and Battacharya 2009). Furthermore, prior research has shown that while CSA might need a considerably smaller initial financial investment, it can possibly raise company risk owing to increased uncertainty caused by punitive measures such as boycotting, employee walkouts, and retaliation (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

Hydock et al. study in 2020 focuses on the possible risks and gains in engaging in CPA both at the individual-level and at the market-level. They show that “*consumers are more (less) likely to choose a brand that engages in CPA when its position is aligned (misaligned) with their own and that this effect is driven by (dis)identification with the brand*”. Furthermore “*the impact of CPA on individual-level choice is characterized by a negativity bias, such that a brand is more likely to lose an existing misaligned customer due to CPA than it is to gain a new aligned customer*”. On the other hand, they also show that “*when these individual-level effects are aggregated at the market level, brands can actually benefit from CPA. Specifically, while large-share brands do tend to lose more customers than they gain from CPA, small-share brands tend to gain customer overall because they have few existing customers to lose and many potential customers to gain, thus offsetting negativity bias, identifying also authenticity as an important moderator of these effects*”.

## **1.2 ATTACHMENT THEORY**

### **1.2.1 What is attachment?**

Bowlby's attachment theory was originally proposed in the realm of psychoanalysis in 1979. He defined this complex construct, in his work on infant-mother attachment, as *a relationship-based construct that represents the emotional tie connecting an individual with a specific target item*. The emotional state of mental preparation that develops between the individual and the object impacts the allocation of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral resources to the object (Holmes, 2000). Despite the growing relevance of this issue and the substantial research done by psychology (Bowlby, 1979; Mikulincer & Arad, 1999) into this complex notion, the attachment construct has gotten little attention in the marketing industry.

### **1.2.2 From attachment to brand attachment**

By defining emotional brand attachment as *emotional bonding*, Thomson, MacInnis, and Park (2005) were the first to design a measurement for it.

Mikulincer and Shaver (2007), in keeping with Bowlby's (1979) attachment theory, explain that this link is the consequence of a rich and accessible memory network (or mental representations) that includes ideas and feelings about the brand and its relationship with the self.

Brand attachment, according to Japutra et al. (2014), is a multifaceted concept including self-connection, importance, and emotions.

Marketers have shifted their attention from people's attachments to persons (e.g., newborns, mothers, romantic partners - Weiss, 1988) to attachments to other entities because of their significance to consumer behavior.

Material goods (Kleine and Baker, 2004; Ball and Tasaki 1992), presents (Mick and DeMoss, 1990), places (Williams et al., 1992), celebrities (Thomson, 2006), social media (Dwivedi et al., 2017), and brands have all been recognized as these entities (Percy et al., 2004; Slater, 2000; Keller 2009). Brand attachment, according to Park et al. (2010), indicates *the strength of the tie between a customer and a brand, as evidenced by the perceived ease of accessibility and recognition in the mind of the consumer*. As a result, it's possible to say that this relationship establishes a link between the brand and the self.

### ***1.2.3 The self-aspect of brand attachment***

Later studies on this topic expanded beyond the emotional element of brand attachment to include the cognitive tie that exists between the brand and the self-identity (Japutra et al., 2014; Park et al., 2010). The attachment construct is linked with the idea of self, as Mikulincer & Shaver (2005) describe, establishing a causal relationship between brand-self connection and attachment.

The brand-self connection reveals *the extent to which consumers believe the brand is relevant to their self-identity, leading eventually to a strong attachment*. The customer develops a sense of oneness with the brand by recognizing it as a part of themselves, forming crucial cognitive associations with it (Park et al., 2010). There are several reasons why customers become attracted to a brand, but according to Mittal (2006), consumers view the brand as a reflection of themselves or as important to their own objectives, worries, or future life projects. In this context, brand attachment has been considered as a *type of self-extension which brings the consumers to compare themselves with the brand to see whether this one matches their personality or represents their values* (Kleine & Baker, 2004; Johar and Sirgy, 1991). People like brands that as closely as possible embody their values and symbolic meanings (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994, 239) because they are always striving for an ideal congruence between their self-identity and the objects to which they feel connected. Because strong brand attachments indicate tight links to the self, customers are compelled to keep the emotional bond intact in order to retain their self-concept (Mikulincer et al., 2001). Because the qualities that customers use to identify a brand also define themselves, people pick or prefer brands or goods with values or symbolic meanings that are compatible with their self-identity (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994, 239).

High brand attachment between consumer self-identity and brand image/value leads to favorable brand and product attitudes, according to a large body of research (Jamal and Goode 2001).

When consumers evaluate business activities for social concerns, this desire for self-congruity is likewise pursued to evaluate a brand activism approach (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001).

Consumers tend to examine the degree of congruity between their self-concept and a brand's identity when evaluating the brand's advocacy messaging, according to Goldsmith and Yimin (2014).

Although brand-self connection has been shown to be an essential factor in determining brand attachment, Park et al. (2010) argue that adding brand prominence to the equation adds accuracy to evaluating the "strength" of the tie between the brand and the customer.

Brand prominence is determined by *the level of accessibility of thoughts and feelings concerning the brand which may exert a certain pressure on consumer intentions and decision making eventually affecting purchasing behavior* (Alba and Marmorstein, 1987; Akçura, Gönül, and Petrova, 2004). As affirmed by Park et. al. (2010), consumers with a strong brand-self connection and prominent associations are more likely to participate in relationship-sustaining activities than those with a strong brand-self connection but low prominence. This is supported by the fact that the popularity of a brand raises the importance of relationship-sustaining activities. As a result of brand recognition growth, brand-related thoughts and sentiments become more commonplace, strengthening brand attachment.

#### ***1.2.4 Antecedents and outcomes of brand attachment***

In past research, several causes and consequences of brand attachment have been discovered. Personal attachment styles (Swaminathan, Stilley, & Ahluwalia, 2009), emotional experiences (Orth, Limon, & Rose, 2010), brand features (Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000), and brand-self congruency (Kim et. al., 2005; Mala'r et al., 2011) are all important drivers of brand attachment. Thomson (2006) also emphasizes the significance of brand responsiveness, which can influence brand attachment. As a result of this assumption, enriching customers' self will result in stronger brand attachment (Vlachos et al., 2010).

Building a good reputation and trust among customers may activate favorable behaviors from them, such as recurrent purchases and readiness to spend resources to attain the brand, to invest time, money, and effort, ultimately leading to brand loyalty (Lee and Workman, 2015). Consumers who have a strong attachment to a brand participate in proximity maintenance - the want to remain near - as well as the readiness to defend and invest in the attachment object (Feeney & Noller, 1996). These individuals will be dedicated to and willing to safeguard and preserve interactions with the brand, ready to forego personal resources in order to sustain a long-term relationship with it (Park et al., 2010). All of this might lead to a strong desire to recommend, repurchase, and return (Japutra et al., 2014). Furthermore, brand connection might reduce the impact of bad information or unethical company activity (Schmalz & Orth, 2012).



### ***1.2.5 The power of brand attachment against unethical firm behavior***

Another advantage of brand attachment, according to Schmalz and Orth (2012), is the ability to protect brands against unethical business practices. This research combines motivated reasoning and attachment theories to determine how brand attachment affects consumer perceptions of company ethics and the emotional and behavioral repercussions of their errors. As previously said, strong brand attachments emerge, and because this tie is linked to the self, customers are compelled to preserve this emotional bond in order to maintain their self-concept (Mikulincer et al., 2001). When customers are faced with bad information about a brand, they are more inclined to strive to safeguard that emotional link, giving attachment a mitigating effect (Schmalz et al., 2012). This mitigating effect, however, varies depending on the degree of negativity; for example, deeply connected customers should tolerate unethical brand conduct up to a point (Babin, Griffin, & Boles, 2004; Einwiller et al., 2006). Furthermore, if the reported behavior is excessively immoral, a point will be reached when the brand will no longer be able to contribute to the self-concept. The idea of motivated reasoning offers insight on the possible implications of attachment on ethical firm conduct assessment (Schmalz et al., 2012).

### ***1.2.6 Issue involvement***

According to Costley's (1988) definition, issue involvement refers to the *perceived connection between an individual and an issue because of personal interest, commitment, or issue importance to one's own life*. The significance of addressing this subject stems from the role it plays in influencing consumer views of CSR initiatives (Hoeffler and Keller 2002; Trimble and Rifon 2006). The more customers' attention and emotions are involved, the more they will shape how CSR actions are perceived (Bhattacharya et al. 2011). Consumers are more inclined to devote attention, effort, and other resources to social responsibility initiatives if they are passionate about the subject or issue (Hoeffler and Keller 2002; Lafferty and Goldsmith 2005). When analyzing a brand's advocacy messaging, consumers often examine the degree of congruity between their self-concept and the brand's identity (Goldsmith and Yimin 2014). There are two forms of involvement: cognitive and affective. The term "cognitive engagement" refers to *an individual's interest in the contents of a communication, which typically focuses on analytical or cognitive aspects*. People may recall concepts and knowledge from previous years, such as information sufficiency, knowledge levels, or personal support, in a given situation (Kahlor 2010; McKeever et al. 2016). Affective involvement, on the other hand, refers to *the feelings and emotions evoked by a message's content*. In practice, these feelings can have just as much, if not more, of an influence on customers' behaviors and attitudes as cognitive engagement may have (Matthes 2013; McKeever et al. 2016). Consumers will have more favorable opinions regarding message contents when they are favorably affectively involved,

according to prior studies, and vice versa (Putrevu and Lord 1994). This is also true for highly cognitively active persons, with the exception that, as a result of their increased attention to the problem, they may express more concerns about the issue if they fully disagree with it (Li et al., 2020). Li et al. (2020) confirm that customers who find a social problem to be significant, meaningful, and/or emotionally relevant are more likely to support a specific campaign and the company that decided to address the issue. Furthermore, those whose viewpoints coincide with the company's one react more positively to the campaign results. Consumers, on the other hand, may feel alienated if they experience negative emotional engagement as a result of the company's opposing viewpoint on the matter.

As a consequence, customers who share a brand's personality and values are more inclined to support the brand's social policy stances (Lichtenstein, Drumwright, and Braig 2004).

### ***1.2.7 Favorable attitude does not imply strong brand attachment.***

Thomson et al. (2005) emphasize the importance of distinguishing brand attachment from other constructs, such as brand attitude, because even though they are highly correlated, they cannot be one the causal effect of the other, i.e., having favorable attitudes toward things does not automatically imply being attached to those things because the link between attitude and behavior is dependent on a variety of factors (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). The type of affect elicited by the two constructs differs (Fedorikhin and Cole 2004): attitudes elicit colder, evaluation-based affect (Cohen & Areni, 1991), whereas attachment elicits “hot affect” (Fedorikhin and Cole 2004; Thomson et al., 2005).

Park et al. (2010) in their study on “*Brand Attachment and Brand Attitude Strength: Conceptual and Empirical Differentiation of Two Critical Brand Equity Drivers*” found that the attachment construct represented by both brand-self connection and prominence is a significantly better predictor of actual behaviors than brand attitude strength. This is due to the fact that the brand attitude strength construct only catches the brand’s mind share of consumer, whereas attachment may capture both heart and mind share. This is an excellent point to consider for managers when assessing brand equity.

## **1.3 BRAND PERCEPTIONS**

In their study, Brunk et al. (2018) argue that brands, like people, may have personalities. They have human-like features and attributes that allow customers to form connections that are akin to human social interactions (Aaker, 1997; Aaker et al., 2004; Fournier, 1998). This is also known as “anthropomorphism,” which is the practice of ascribing a human shape, human features, or human conduct to inanimate objects (Hudson et al., 2015; Bartneck et al., 2008). Consumer experiences, marketing communications, and/or word of mouth, according to

Romaniuk & Sharp (2003), may all influence brand perceptions. Simply said, any information associated with the brand name may be connected to the brand in memory and therefore become part of the brand's image if adequately processed.

It takes time to develop good brand perceptions. Additionally, as customers become more sophisticated, they want companies to become more involved in social and political problems. On the other hand, brands must remember that if the cause for which they are advocating or promoting is not one that the brand has previously advocated or promoted, or if it does not fit with the brand's identity, customers will respond adversely. As a result, companies must engage customers on both an intellectual and emotional level, rather than focusing just on selling the product, because consumers continuously want to belong to and identify with the things they buy. Eyada (2020) portrays a framework in which the interactions and connections between brand values and human beings are explained (figure 2).

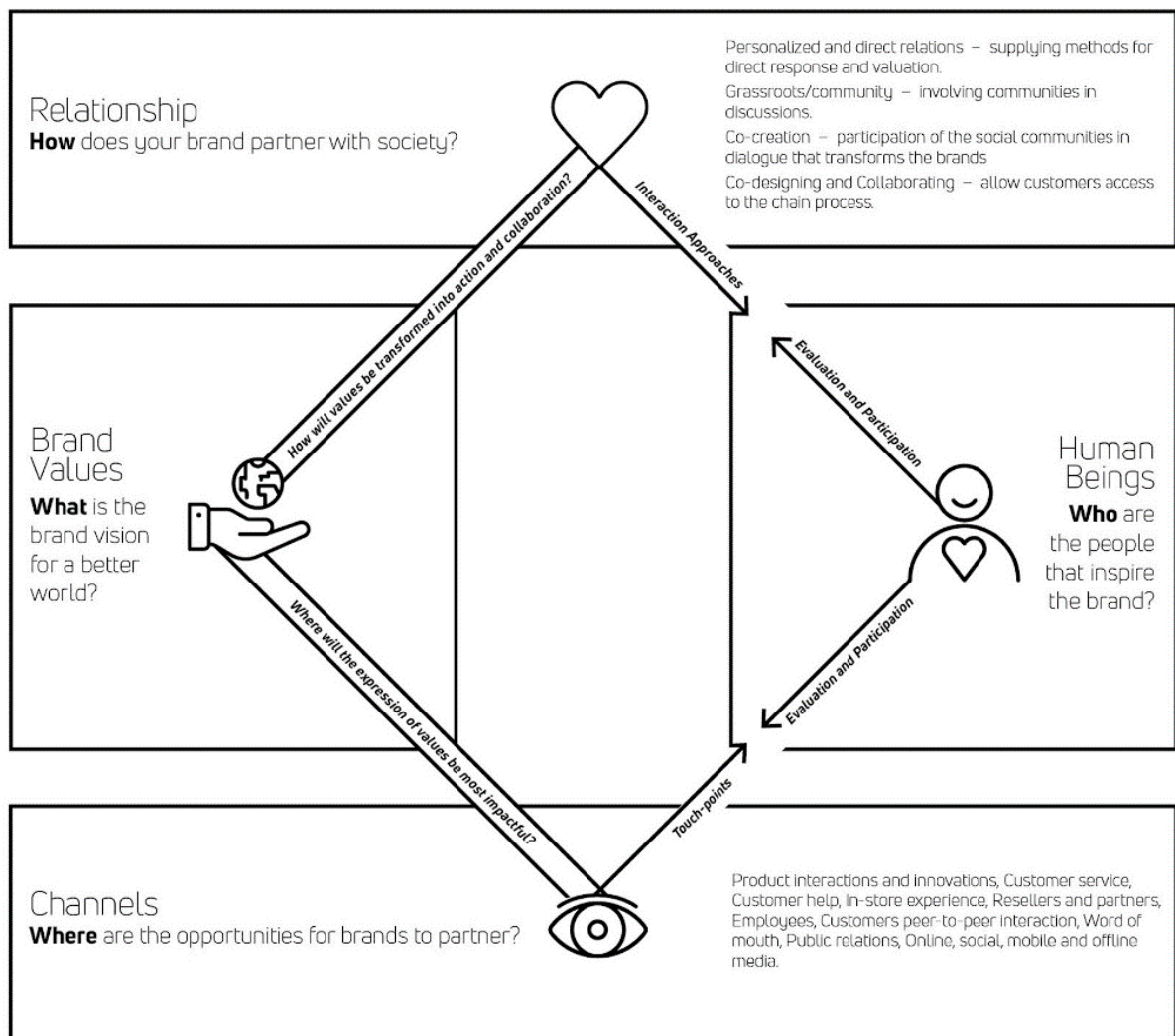


Figure 2 Framework of interactions and connections between brand values and human beings

In sum, it shows the existence of a co-creation of contents by consumers and brands in order to address values and society-based issues and targeting people on the right media, in the right way.

#### **1.4 THE EVOLUTION OF MARKETING AND THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF LUX**

Marketing has evolved during time and Kotler, Karatajaya and Setiawan (2010) have identified three types of marketing: marketing 1.0 considered the Product-Centric Era, where marketers appealed to the consumers' minds; marketing 2.0 considered the Consumer-Centric Era, where marketers appealed to the consumers' emotions; and finally, marketing 3.0 known as the Value-Centric Era, where marketing, advertising, and brands create a deep connection with their audience through transparency and social responsibility.

This last kind of marketing 3.0 establishes brand integrity (Kotler et al., 2010) through trust and works along with the values communicated in the brand identity and image. Now, companies aim to convince customers that by delivering ideas in a way that makes a difference in terms of social, emotional, mental, and political aspects, they can make a difference in their lives. To do that, brands use a powerful technique called "storytelling" (Eyada, 2020).

With the introduction of the internet, we have seen a significant shift in both consumer interactions with products and how companies communicate product values and brand identity. The rapid advancement of digital technology has enabled many barriers to be broken down and a global connection to be established, which is often instantaneous. Despite the numerous benefits of digitalization, it has also led to the creation of additional difficulties linked to the large quantity of data that must be examined in order to ensure an effective marketing plan. The topic of Big Data is getting increasingly intriguing, and businesses must take proactive measures to retain clients. On the other side, brands must deal with a new type of client known as the "prosumer." This new kind of internet user is both a consumer and a creator of data. Digitalization has also contributed to media fragmentation, necessitating the integration of content across several channels in order to provide consistency to viewers. In this fragmented environment, consumer profiles cannot be precisely defined in organized schemes, but must be updated on a regular basis to meet people's needs. In particular, social media serve as ideal intermediaries between businesses and consumers, allowing the latter to engage in the co-creation of content that they are also users of. As a result, each industry had to figure out how to thrive in this new environment, which posed significant challenges to their business models and necessitated new tactics to compete on the market.

In this study, I would like to focus on the luxury market, the challenges of transitioning to the digital era, and the consequent achievements of well-designed solutions.

Luxury brands were initially wary of digitalization because, as most of us know, the fundamental business of premium is quality, heritage, personalization of services and products, and everything before and after the emotional experience of purchasing a luxury item. In some ways, the internet has facilitated the "democratization" of knowledge by enabling anybody to access valuable information at any time and from any location, allowing customers to become more knowledgeable and to plan their purchases before entering stores. Before having total access to cellphones and digital devices, people could only rely on friends and family recommendations or salesmen, which were critical in the consumer journey at the point of purchase. The primary issue for luxury brands was that, with customers' increased awareness, salespeople had to deal with more informed clients who likely already knew what they wanted to buy when they walked into a store, blurring the crucial function of customer advisers. In this brand-new environment, where every industry was already adapting to new business models that included digitalization of channels and a new marketing approach, the luxury sector had to find new ways to engage consumers whilst still maintaining a high level of quality while also sharing company information on the digital world. Furthermore, as Mark Zuckerberg asserts

*“The biggest risk is not taking any risk. In a world that’s changing really quickly, the only strategy that is guaranteed to fail is not taking risks”.*

What they were most concerned about was the possibility that becoming digital would generate a bad association with being "cheap" or "limited in quality," because digital is available to everyone, and what is accessible to everyone is not "exclusive," as lux is. Luxury companies may demand a premium price because of their exclusivity, quality, customization, and legacy, which gives them a distinct advantage over quick fashion firms.

The first steps toward digital integration were taken in 2005, and the year 2012 marked a complete turning point. Luxury brands have established themselves on social media, creating blogs to educate customers on products and trends, launching their own websites, and, most recently, expanding their sale business on the e-commerce channel, which has recently increased its returns due to the Covid-19 pandemic situation (Venezia, A., & Da Venezia, A., 2016).

## 1.5 BRANDS AND STORYTELLING

Nowadays, many are the channels through which brands can talk to consumers because media are segmented as never before. Because of this segmentation, companies should try to develop a strategy which can take into account any possible channel in such a way to integrate communication and intercept the consumer at every touchpoint as much as possible.

Media could be differentiated in three different categories: PAID media, OWNED media, and EARNED media (also referred as POE)<sup>3</sup>.

The secret of a good channel mix consists in the development of a strategy which includes all these three types of channels (Venezia, A., & Da Venezia, A., 2016).

Storytelling is what may help in the creation of this valuable and integrated channel strategy. With storytelling, the company can better engage its consumers literally telling a story with the attempt to deeply involve users because she can easily identify with the brand identity, with the main character of the story, or simply because the story reminds her about a past experience (i.e. childhood) or something she desires to achieve in her life.

Salmon (2008:38) describes storytelling in the realm of advertising and branding as the "*instrumental use of the narrative*" to "*construct a specific brand image, ascribe values, and develop an emotional relationship with the customer*". Storytelling is the next phase in advertising communication's progression from selling things to selling brands (see also Pérez Latorre 2013:71; Semprini 1992; Rossolatos, 2021). Furthermore, according to Fog et al (2005)., there are two main areas of interest in storytelling: values and emotions, on which a strong brand must be constructed, and the goal of a good narrative that is communicating these values in a way that is both intelligible and emotionally attractive. To be deemed a good narrative, storytelling requires several important components, including plot, character, themes or values, and aesthetics. Brands must develop memorable, relevant, and compelling tales with which the customer can readily identify in order to better engage their audience. Whatever the degree of likability, it is the emotional effect that makes things memorable. Of course, it's preferable to be remembered positively, but people will speak about the brand anyway. In general, "original" narratives based on "universal plots" and genre codes are favored since they are more generally recognizable and simpler to comprehend by viewers. Furthermore, these stories are frequently based on cultural myths that have become well-known over time.

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<sup>3</sup> PAID MEDIA: entails the use of paid advertising channels in order to drive traffic and obtain visibility. Examples: print, TV, newspapers, weekly magazines, OOH, social media, direct marketing, browsers...

OWNED MEDIA: are the media "owned" by the company that is those directly managed. Examples: institutional web site, mobile site, personal app, company blog, the company's accounts on different social networks like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram...

EARNED MEDIA: are the media "earned" that is those channels in which the company assures a presence thanks to citations, reviews, and users' conversations. Examples: reviews, likes, tweets, shares on social networks... (Venezia, A., & Da Venezia, A., 2016).

Narratives are the most effective approach to inspire involvement by leading individuals from a state of equilibrium to one of imbalance, and then back to equilibrium.

Kozloff and Sánchez Moreno (2015) showed how narratology can be used in advertisements and how they can be analyzed like any other narrative material. But what is in between the story and the values the brand wants to communicate? The answer can be easily found in “semiotics”. I will investigate semiotics in the third chapter of my research and apply it also to a real case.

## **CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH QUESTION, THE CONTEXT AND THE CASE**

### **2.1 RESEARCH QUESTION**

In the light of what summarized in the literature review, it is clear that brands do not have many choices when concerning brand activism, indeed they should stand for something. We had also realized that the socio-political cause for which companies are standing is just as essential as standing, in the sense that it must suit the brand identity and be linked with the self-identity of people attached to the brand. There still exists an extent of mismatch between the brand and the cause acceptable to consumers' eyes, considered optimal to create that kind of elaboration of concepts in people's mind which allow them to create connections to the brand. The main reason why many brands fail in the choice of the cause is that they do not consider fundamental the alignment of their values with the issue they stand for, creating buzz among already existing customers and losing some loyal ones. In this context, I would like to understand why Valentino's campaign has sparked such outrage, and then look into possible inconsistencies between the brand's identity and the social cause of LGBTQ. I would like to learn more about the brand's history and values by conducting a semiotic analysis of both the scandalous image and the brand itself, and then completing my research with a qualitative analysis of the post appeared on Valentino's main social networks.

### **2.2 LGBTQ**

#### ***2.2.1 Stonewall 1969***

It was June 28, 1969, and it was late at night. When the police raid turned violent in Greenwich Village (a Manhattan area), the homosexual community fought back at the Stonewall Inn. It is widely regarded as the catalyst for the gay liberation movement and the twentieth-century struggle for LGBT rights in the United States. Residents of the Village organized into activist groups in a matter of weeks to claim some spaces for gay men and lesbians to display their sexual orientation without fear of being jailed. To commemorate the one-year anniversary of that terrible night, the first LGBT pride marches were held in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Since then, every June the LGBT community celebrates the "Gay pride" month (Wikipedia, 2021).

#### ***2.2.2 The LGBTQ community***

The acronym LGBT stands for: lesbians, gay, bisexual, and transgender. It replaced the noun "gay community" since the '80s because many people found that the other term did not accurately represent all those the term was referred to. Later in 1996, another letter added to the original acronym, which is the "Q" for those who identify themselves as "Queer" or are still



questioning their sexual identity. Other words frequently used to identify this community are: LGBTI, where “I” stands for “Intersexual”, or LGBT+, where the “+” wants to include all those cultures based on sexuality and gender identity which are non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender<sup>4</sup> (Wikipedia, 2021).

### 2.2.3 Gender fluidity

During the last years, despite the various difficulties encountered for integration in the society, gender diversity is in some ways trying to find its manner to freely express. The fight for rights has never ended, but big steps further have been done. In addition to the various requests by the people concerned, an important role has been played by all those who took a stand in favor of the cause: among them we can undoubtedly mention brands.

*“Future is not binary, is fluid”* affirms Beatrice Cristalli in the article of January 7, 2021, published on Treccani.it.

There is no more a net difference between homosexual and heterosexual. In particular, this blurred line which separates these two worlds, since the history exists, is becoming always more invisible to the new Gen Z. If we want to explain this complicated term as “gender fluidity” is, we can first refer to the word “fluid” linked to the cross-sectional change in the Z-world, namely to the ephemeral border between online communication and real life. Thus, the key word which links to the broader matter of gender is “border”. Fluids, as we know from physics, flow and, using a metaphor, the Gen Z is like a fluid trying to flow across the border of binarism. The option to have no gender identity, or the non-essential requirement of identifying in a confined category in order to play a well-defined function in society, has profoundly altered this new

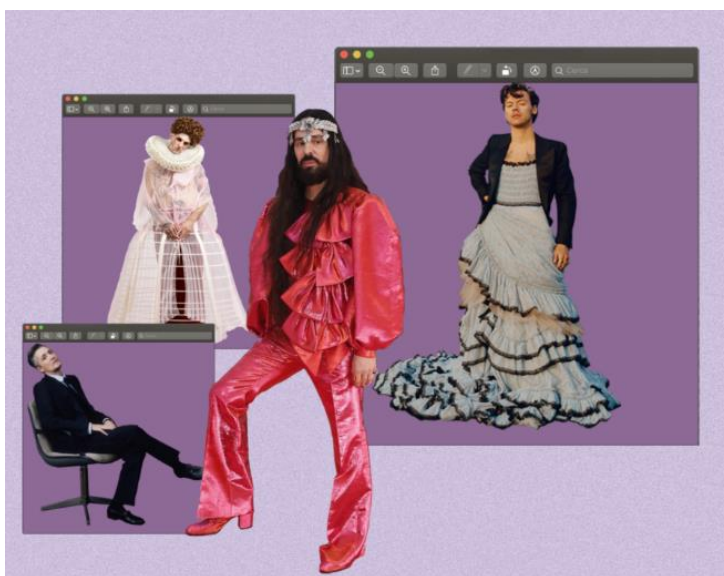


Figure 3 Gucci and the gender concept

generation's perspective on the world (Cristalli, 2021). This is the latest reality companies, which want to engage with young consumers, have to face and take into account in their choices and strategies.

In the fashion industry, many brands are experimenting new approaches to eliminate stereotypes. First steps in this

<sup>4</sup> People whose gender identity corresponds to the biological gender and sex.

direction have been done in the world of body care where Dove, in 2007, has marked a turning point in the storytelling of femininity. #Inclusivity, #genderfluid, #genderequality, and many other similar key words are dominating the web scene trying to spread positive WOM and sensitise about this subject. Not only iconic brands such as Fenty Beauty by Rihanna, Heineken, Gucci (figure 3), Converse, Reebok, Apple, Valentino (to address some of them) but also famous celebrities are starting to ride the wave of gender fluidity in their ways of expressing art (A.M., 2021).

#### ***2.2.4 How fashion brands are engaging in LGBTQ+ activism***

Engaging in LGBTQ activism is not easy; in fact, fashion businesses must find the best method to tackle this issue without coming off as insensitive, and above all, without giving the impression that they are doing LGBTQ activism "simply for the money." Taking a public stance on potentially contentious issues carries a significant risk, especially for publicly traded companies. Having no stance, on the other hand, entails alienating customers.

*"Brands who are neutral have no future."*

(Cédric Charbit of Balenciaga, CEO of Balenciaga)

As a result, it's not surprising that fashion brands are increasingly supporting the LGBTQ community (Langer, 2021).

According to a 2018 survey by the digital lifestyle magazine INTO and Brand Innovators, the 53% of businesses spend between 0% and 4% of their marketing budgets each year on LGBTQ consumers. Calvin Klein, H&M, Levi's, and Nike are among the most LGBTQ-friendly companies, but many more are going the same way. Furthermore, the 35% of customers are more inclined to buy from companies with LGBTQ themes, and the 70% of consumers are influenced by a brand's reputation for being LGBTQ-friendly (or not) (Sweeney, 2018).

All those brands, who want to take part to this kind of activism, do not miss the chance to do that during the Pride month (celebrated every June) in which an always increasing number of companies have started to commercialize the Pride flag, opening the door to discussions about "what" and "when" it is appropriate or when it is simply appropriation for marketing purposes. When it comes to the fashion industry, particularly luxury fashion, queer culture has always existed, and it may be difficult to tell which comes first: "queer culture" or "fashion influence." In any case, the radicalization of this notion in modern culture has resulted in more strong messaging of gender and sexual orientation politics becoming nearly mainstream in the last decade.



Figure 4 Chanel's models on the catwalk.

I would like to provide some instances of well-known fashion businesses that have begun to engage in LGBTQ activism. Starting from Chanel, in 2013, two models did their catwalk hand in hand (figure 4) because the luxury brand wanted to have a voice in the controversial sociopolitical issue of equal marriage rights in France.

The rainbow emblem found its way on catwalks in the last five years. Burberry, in its show of SS18 (figure 5) dedicated its final collection to organizations supporting LGBTQ youth around the world. The fashion designer Christopher Baileys, in that occasion, wanted to clarify:

*“There has never been a more important time to say that in our diversity lies our strength, and our creativity”.*



Figure 5 Picture from Burberry SS18 show.



Figure 6 Louis Vuitton rainbow runway.

In 2018, Louis Vuitton debuted with a 650 foot plus runway furnished with a rainbow (figure 6). The creative director, Virgil Abloh, wanted to put on the show his wishes of diversity and inclusivity with a collection named “Color Theory” and models from all over the world.

From the catwalks to the more recent digital world of social media, messages like these are spreading throughout the world with the attempt to raise awareness

on this topic and trying to break the walls of prejudice.



Last April, Valentino came out with a campaign which had a great social impact and response from users who did not react in a very positive way. I will analyze this case in the next chapter and give a theoretical explanation to this turmoil.



Figure 7 Gucci website



Figure 8 Bottega Veneta 2018

When the creative direction of Bottega Veneta passed to Daniel Lee in 2018, the company started a slow approach to a gender-fluid spirit. As shown in figure 8, many of the men's and women's coats, trousers, and shorts were indistinguishable from each other in a felt young and fresh mood (K. Nelson, 2019).

Gucci, for the FW20, wanted to leave its customers breathless, and I guess it quite managed to. With the new genderless shopping section "Gucci MX" (figure 7), its main objective was "dissolving lines of the gender divide in the name of self-expression". So far, this was the most striking gesture Gucci has ever done for the LGBTQ community, positioning as a leader and example that other brands, sooner or later, would follow (Russo, 2020).

Dolce&Gabbana supports The Trevor Project, the world's largest suicide prevention and crisis intervention organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer & questioning (LGBTQ) young people.

The Trevor Project provides free and confidential crisis counseling to LGBTQ youth via phone, chat, and text. Trevor also operates education programs, an advocacy department fighting for pro-LGBTQ legislation, a research team to discover the most effective means to help young LGBTQ people in crisis and end suicide, and an international safe-space social networking site for LGBTQ youth called TrevorSpace.



Figure 9 Dolce & Gabbana on its social networks, June 27, 2020

On its side, Dolce and Gabbana elicited its support to The Trevor Project with a post shared on its main social media accounts in 2020 (figure 9). As written by the brand, it is “[...the world’s largest suicide prevention and crisis intervention organization for lesbians, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer & questioning (LBTQ) young people.]” The campaign “Love is Love” was supported by a video with images inspired by the 1990s, meaning that the brand was supporting equality from its very start.

After this descriptive carousel of brands’ practices concerning the LGBTQ activism, we should come back to the initial issue of “How can brands engage in this activism without appearing fake-interested to the cause?”. Brands must consider how their ads fit into their broader brand strategy. If the LGBTQ advertisements are perceived as opportunistic or just a turnaround, the firm may face negative public reaction, which might be damaging for the brand. As a result, authenticity is critical. It is good to engage in contentious subjects as long as the brand’s communication and actions are timely, but most importantly, don’t pressure people to believe in anything that is not true. A serious, credible, and consequential brand, on the other hand, may make a huge impact. Instead of following trends, brands must strive to create their own story and be consistent with what they say and do, no matter what their values and views are (Cincik, 2019; Langer, 2021).

## 2.3 VALENTINO: THE SCANDAL OF THE MAN WITH THE BAG

*“I know what women want. They want to be beautiful.”*

(Valentino Garavani)

### 2.3.1 The company - Valentino

Maison Valentino was born in 1960 founded by Valentino Garavani and Giancarlo Giammetti during the era of Roman “La Dolce Vita”, opening its first boutique in Via Condotti, Rome. In a short time, Valentino was able to build his own highly esteemed brand image, recognized also at the international level thanks to its participation to the Pitti Fashion Fair in Florence attracting high society, stars, and nobility. In 1968, a golden V started to be incorporated into his designs on garments and accessories. In the same year, Jacqueline Kennedy wore a Valentino dress for her marriage to Aristotle Onassis, securing an American market for the Maison. In 1970, he launched the first Italian ready-to-wear collections for women and men, and fur and accessories lines for the American market. The company was sold to “Holding di Partecipazioni Industriali”, in 1998 and 9 years later Valentino Garavani announced his retirement celebrated with an exhibition in the ARA PACIS museum in Rome, receiving a great public response.

The principles of tradition and innovation, *Haute Couture savoir-faire* and Italian heritage are those pillars on which the Maison is standing since its birth.

Valentino fashion includes different categories of products from *Haute Couture* and *Prêt-à-Porter* for men and women to the accessories range of shoes, bags, leather, glasses, scarfs, ties and fragrances.

Today, the Maison boasts its presence in 100 countries all around the world with 175 boutiques and 1500 points of sale.

The CEO, Jacopo Venturini and the creative director, Pierpaolo Piccioli are now leading the Maison giving a continuum to its legacy and evolving in a contemporary and sophisticated vision.



Figure 10 Valentino posing with some models in his iconic red dresses

# VALENTINO

Figure 11 Valentino core business logo



Figure 12  
Valentino women  
prêt-à-porter logo

Figure 13  
Valentino  
accessories logo

Figure 14  
Valentino  
youth logo

Along with its core business brand, Valentino has three other brands differentiated according to product category and target (figures 12, 13, 14).

Valentino addresses to the target of Millennials and Gen X, which include a young clientele that belongs to the new generation of international jet setters. These people are generally attracted by emotional attributes and the status a luxury good could give them as a result of a love towards art, fashion, *haute couture* aesthetics. The Maison has ever embodied the Italian modernity, style, and a timeless elegance that, with the new creative direction of Maria Grazia Chiuri and later Pierpaolo Piccioli, have transformed in a contemporary and full of contrast grace and precious delicacy. Valentino embodies beauty in every aspect, elegant and feminine in an unconventional way. The Valentino's woman is contemporary with a taste of royalty. Evanescent and ethereal, but also magnetic and mysterious, Valentino is seductively ambiguous, unpredictable, and as elusive as a mirage<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Source: <https://www.valentino.com/en-us/world-of-valentino/maison>

### 2.3.2 Communication and storytelling of the company

In the definition of the communication and storytelling we first have to understand the brand DNA and all those brand codes which make it up.

Providing a definition for “brand DNA” and “brand codes”, we can say that the brand DNA can be considered *the sum of values that form the brand core*. These values are nothing more than a set of distinctive brand qualities that must be identifiable and well-defined, and they are the consequence of peak performances that have helped the brand to grow over time. The fundamental goal of brand DNA is to create a recognized and concrete personality and character that may reflect a brand's success, in conjunction with brand stylistics. Brand codes, on the other hand, are *the distinguishing components or traits of a company's DNA*. These one-of-a-kind codes let you remember the brand and recognize it whenever you see that exact sign(s)<sup>6</sup>. To understand the unique communication and storytelling of Valentino, which made it one of the most famous luxury fashion *maisons* of the world, I will analyze its brand codes one by one.

#### A TRIBUTE TO ICONIC VALUES



A TRIBUTE TO ICONIC VALUES – A FILM BY FRANCESCO MUNZI

16.168 visualizzazioni • 2 giu 2015

275 1 CONDIVIDI SALVA

**Valentino** 65.100 iscritti **ISCRIVITI**

The Council of Fashion Designers of America honored Creative Directors Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pierpaolo Piccioli with the International Award on Monday 1st June 2015. For celebrating this occasion, the Roman film director Francesco Munzi produced a short movie together with the Creative Directors, to tell the story of their personal lives and artistic career.

Figure 15 Frame of the short movie "A Tribute to Iconic Values"  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXVUR\\_DBzJI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXVUR_DBzJI)

<sup>6</sup> Source: <https://www.wearebrander.com/articles/what-are-brand-codes-and-why-are-they-important>



On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2015, Valentino published on its YouTube channel a short movie (figure 15) produced by the Roman film director Francesco Munzi, which in addition to summing up in few minutes many of the core elements of the brand DNA (i.e. the city of Rome, Red Valentino, heritage...) it wanted to be a tribute for the two creative directors of that time, Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pierpaolo Piccioli, telling the story of their personal lives and artistic careers<sup>7</sup>.

## HERITAGE

Valentino's story cannot be separated from that of Rome. The city of Rome is where all started with the first boutique opening in Via Condotti and also where all ended with the exhibition at the ARA PACIS museum to celebrate the stylist retirement. Scents of the ancient Rome but also of the Rome at the time of "La Dolce Vita" appear as a "*file rouge*" in his collections not only in the grace and delicacy, but also in symbols such as the Roman Stud.



Figure 16 The three secret dresses of the A/W 2015 Haute Couture Exhibition

In 2015, Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pierpaolo Piccioli, on the occasion of the A/W 2015 *Haute Couture* presentation, organized a three-days exhibition called "*Mirabilia Romae*" in the secret Rome. The exhibition was a journey of more than three hours and where pieces of the collection were set in some of the most exclusive spots of the city. The exhibition ended in the "Doria Pamphili Palace", more specifically in the "Mitreo", a temple of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. situated in the ancient basement of this place and dedicated to the Persian God Mitra, where three red dresses of the same color of the bull's blood revealed the secret of the exhibition (figure 16): the strong linkage of the Valentino's essence with the city of Rome<sup>8</sup>.

Valentino has created an exceptional feminine elegance and sophistication, expressing his greatest love for Old Hollywood glamour, perfect femininity, and *haute couture* craftsmanship, and has been dubbed "the only one and unique emperor of the Italian and international fashion"<sup>9</sup>. This kind of vision of saturated feminine

<sup>7</sup> Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXVUR\\_DBzJI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXVUR_DBzJI)

<sup>8</sup> Source: <https://style.corriere.it/blog-michele-ciavarella/2015/07/09/mirabilia-romae-valentino-alla-scoperta-della-roma-segreta/>

<sup>9</sup> Source: <https://www.lofficielusa.com/fashion/valentino-garavani-design-signatures-red-leopard-print>

beauty dates back to his adolescence when he understood that his future would have been in the women's fashion design thanks to the vision of the movie "Ziegfeld Girl".

Even though the Red Valentino is the most famous color, in 1968 he created a complete collection in white dresses. Red, white, and successively black (also combinations of black and white) are the most representative colors of the Maison's garments, often embellished with large bows, lavish flowers (like roses), feathers and intricate embroideries. Most recently, Valentino elevated leopard print through the custom catsuit made for and worn by Beyoncé in the music video "Black is King", even though this animal pattern was already in Valentino digital archives. An iconic piece of haute couture which passed to the history of Valentino is the dress worn by Julia Roberts the year in which she was awarded with the Oscar prize in the category for Best Actress starring in the movie "Erin Brokovich" (figure 17). The dress was not of the most recent collection but retrieved from a collection presented nine years before. Nowadays, it is considered one of the most iconic dresses in the Oscar's history<sup>10</sup>.



*Figure 17 Julia Roberts wearing Valentino at Oscar 2001*

Valentino's favorite fabrics have always been lace, silk, and chiffon accurately reinterpreted in more contemporary shapes by the current creative director Pierpaolo Piccioli. Piccioli used Valentino red in daywear looks with a deep-red "hoodie" coat and slinky red trousers that riffed on track pants, with a pink stripe running down each leg, as an example of how he has modernized the house's usage of the color. Pierpaolo Piccioli, for example, is attempting to give Valentino's collection a fresh modern flavor, but there is always a nod to the company's past,

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<sup>10</sup>Source: <https://www.lofficielitalia.com/moda/valentino-garavani-stilista-storia-moda>

which has contributed and continues to contribute to its status as an undisputed cornerstone of Italian fashion<sup>11</sup>.

## LOGO

The logo (figure 11) is simple and stylish to embody the timeless elegance which characterizes the brand. Because the design does not have any particular details added, there was no need to update it despite the different styles of the collections.

The serif font and the combination of bold and thin strokes contribute to the elegant touch of the logo. The wordmark is usually used alone but sometimes associated with the “V” symbol placed above (figure 13).

The company decided to get rid of the founder’s last name in the current logo, but you can still come across the older version (figure 13) with “Garavani” below, written in a sans serif font different from the word “Valentino”<sup>12</sup>.

## RED VALENTINO

There is a real story after this color. Everything dates back to a night at the Barcelona’s Opera. Valentino was still a student, but that night he had a sort of vision. He remembers that he saw a woman in the crowd worn in a red dress and he thought she looked perfect.

*“Among all the colors worn by the other women, she looked special to me. I never forget her. I think that a woman dressed in red always looks amazing.”* (Valentino Garavani)

Valentino defined his color saying: *“It’s not carmine, it’s not purpura, it’s not fire”*. In fact, the Red Valentino is a perfect mix of all kinds of red, transformed by the designer into a new color and named after him. It is the color that embodies the *charme* of the maison and it comes in a unique and regal shade. Furthermore, red was also the color of the Roman emperors and not by chance Valentino has been nominated “the last Emperor”.

The Red Valentino dress is an icon of the brand and although it evolved time after time, it is never out of trend<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Source : <https://www.lofficielusa.com/fashion/valentino-garavani-design-signatures-red-leopard-print>  
<https://moda.mam-e.it/valentino-2/>

<sup>12</sup> Source: <https://1000logos.net/valentino-logo/>

<sup>13</sup> Source: <https://mvmagazine.com/en/the-story-behind-the-red-valentino/>  
<https://www.amalfistyle.com/2020/10/27/discover-the-famous-valentino-red-in-rome/>

## THE STUD

The stud represents another of the brand codes of Valentino. It made its first appearance in 2010 with a collection of shoes which showed all the couture and chic expression of Valentino. Roman architecture inspired this iconic motif coexisting with the punk counterculture of the 70s.



Figure 18 The famous Rockstud shoes

(figure 19). These pieces have been elevated to a classic style, suitable for any outfit. Pierpaolo Piccioli's more recent version displays the stud icon on the Roman Stud bag, on which the metal pieces are renewed with a larger version. This bolder version wanted to accentuate an unconventional expressiveness which characterizes the new Valentino's lovers in a perfect match of punk and romantic attitude<sup>14</sup>.

This collection is made from high-quality leather, featuring a bold and exquisite design that does not pass unnoticed with its metal studs that pay tribute to the *bugnato* exteriors of the Roman palazzos alongside with a more modern punk connotation. The Valentino Rockstud has never gone out of style, thanks to the reinterpretations of the designers also in other product categories: the more recent Roman Stud bag



Figure 19 The Roman Stud bag

## THE STRONG ARISTOCRATIC CONNECTION

Valentino, since his primordial debut, cultivated strong relationships with the high society and celebrities. This allowed him to gain reputation and affirm his brand in the high cultural

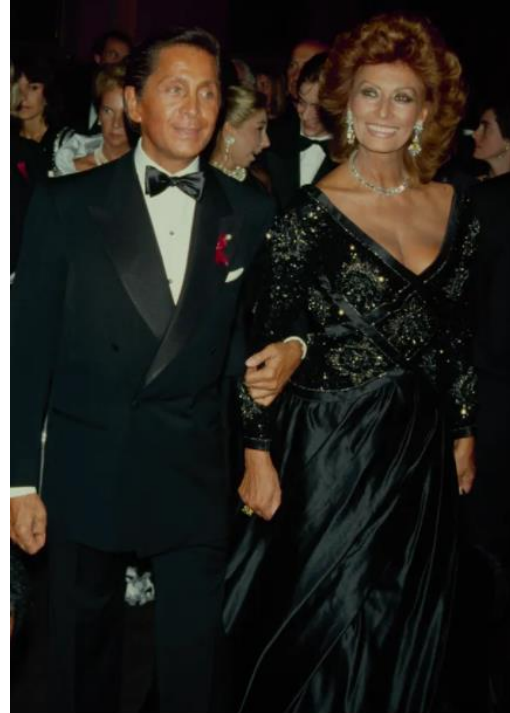
<sup>14</sup> Source: <https://vogue.sg/fashion-obsession-valentino-garavani-roman-stud/>  
<https://www.lofficiel.co.uk/beauty/the-new-valentino-bag-trends-2021>  
<https://blog.theluxurycloset.com/2017/09/04/valentino-rockstud-rage/>



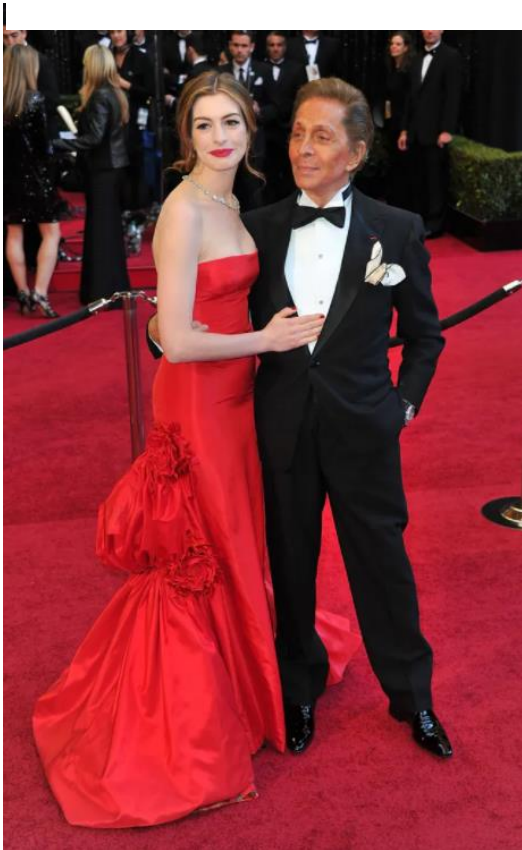
segment, opening up to many important opportunities. Valentino has dressed the most famous and influential stars and royals for red carpets and social events, starting from Elizabeth Taylor (figure 20), Jacqueline Kennedy, Diana Vreeland, and Sophia Loren (figure 21) to the more recent Anne Hathaway (starring in “The Devil Wears Prada”) (figure 22), and Gwyneth Paltrow<sup>15</sup>.



*Figure 20 Elizabeth Taylor e Valentino Garavani*



*Figure 21 Sophia Loren e Valentino Garavani*



*Figure 22 Anne Hathaway e Valentino on the Red Carpet of Hollywood*

### **THE MYTH OF THE CREATOR: VALENTINO “THE LAST EMPEROR”**

Fashion brands, most of the times, are surrounded by an aura of perfection, desirability, and impossibility to obtain it. All these contribute to create the so called “dream factor”. Along with products, companies sell a way of expressing themselves through their products. For this reason, creating the dream factor is fundamental to build intangible links to the brand. Designers play a role in the development of this dream factor because they create products from conception to

development and communication. For sure, Valentino could manage to create a myth around

<sup>15</sup> Source: <https://www.vogue.it/moda/article/valentino-muse-stile-jackie-kennedy-sophia-loren>

his personality in the right way, transforming his figure into a celebrity of the runway show to whom a docu-film was also dedicated in 2008.



*Figure 23 Valentino portrayed during the ARA PACIS exhibition*

The designer himself serves as a powerful communication tool, but in order to implement a good communication strategy it is essential to be supported by other media and channels. The approach of Maison Valentino to communication is to portray the exclusivity, in a grounded and relatable way. They created a system of signs to deliver the Valentino message, integrating every aspect, from the collection to the fashion shows, PR, retails, communication, and media. The store represents for Valentino the essential touchpoint to communicate directly with the customers. In every store you can breathe the timeless modernity and the Italian grace typical of Valentino.

Campaigns are used to present seasonal collection's themes, including special campaigns. There is always present a binary connotation to contemporary with a tribute to heritage. For its campaigns, Valentino chooses photographers who share the same values that can easily talk to a younger audience thanks to their modern languages of expressing different realities through the lens of a camera.

Valentino has also established a good presence on many social media all over the world, namely: Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube, Spotify, Twitter, Pinterest, WeChat, Weibo, Line, Kakao, xiaohogshu, website, e-commerce, company app (figure 24). Through social networks, the company provides the most recent information and get in touch with customers in a formal, modern, and romantic tone of voice. Their values are always displayed in the videos and images shared. During the last period, the e-commerce service able to deliver to more than 90 countries, and the mobile app have, for sure, acquired much more relevance

due to the Covid-19, guaranteeing customers a seamless shopping experience even in this tough time.

Valentino builds its image also on collaborations with artists and celebrities, such as the famous Ben Stiller and Owen Wilson starring in the movie “Zoolander” who walked down the runway during A/W 2015 fashion show (figure 25)<sup>16</sup>.

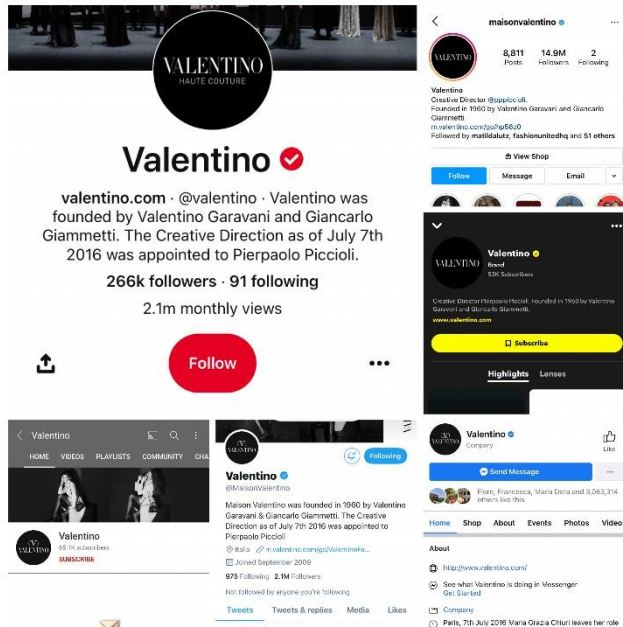


Figure 24 Social Media presence of Valentino



Figure 25 The protagonists of Zoolander for the A/W 2015

<sup>16</sup> Source: <https://www.instagram.com/maisonvalentino/?hl=it>  
<https://www.facebook.com/valentino/>  
<https://twitter.com/maisonvalentino>



### 2.3.3 Valentino Milano Collection Campaign 2021 - Premise

Identity, diversity, inclusivity are the essential values of the Maison and inspiration for the Creative Director Pierpaolo Piccioli for the new S/S 2021 campaign<sup>17</sup>.

This time, Pierpaolo Piccioli wanted to find an unusual way to drop off his new collection choosing poetry instead of only images. Ten writers (Donna Tartt, Elif Shafak, Fatima Farheen Mirza, Janet Mock, Lisa Taddeo, Matthew Lopez, Ocean Vuong, Raven Leilani, and Yrsa Daley-Ward) were called to borrow their precious words giving birth to a world of stories, imaginary love letters, and fascinating and mysterious one-liners in a single page.

The Creative Director admitted: *“I’m a poetry reader and this helps me visualize words and transmit my emotions and vision. I believe that poetry safeguards our humanity and allows interior explorations, it gives us the lens to touch the nature of our most intimate feelings”*. Just from his love for words that was born this first ever text-only ad campaign in luxury to illuminate works from the most compelling voices in contemporary literature.

These pieces of art were spread on the street’s walls of New York City, inviting people to find them via a post on their main social media channels. In each story the word “Valentino” is used or some references to Valentino are cited, like “V” symbol (figure 26).

The summer I lost my grandmother I made lattes at the corner café a car would one day crash into. For years I’d carried around my heavy manuscript and like clouds cracking after a storm its weight finally lifted. I didn’t know what to do with my hands. Sat on the same park bench pulling tissues. The sky said, *Look at the clouds made for you all pink and burnt orange*. When the manuscript was accepted I knelt in sajda-e-shukr behind the sticky café counter then stood to make cold brew.

I kept waiting for  
punishment but instead I  
was gifted: gold book, electric  
blue eyeliner, soft *Valentino*  
scarf the same bottle-green of  
my grandmother’s coat.

Carnivals of canapés and glitter and yes I did do my own hair thank you. At night I rode the Q across the bridge wondering if I was the same girl my grandma lifted onto the hood of our old Honda, saying *will you eat for me?* Every plate she left half-finished. Every story she nourished me on the moral was the same: be a good girl & listen to us & you’ll have a good kismet. I didn’t listen. Wrote my own story. When the punishment didn’t come I inflicted it on myself, go and keep going, no time for lunch, work lightheaded and dance dizzy. Tamed my hunger to pursue the wild appetite of my dreams. Then didn’t want anything she didn’t have. Picked glitter from my hair. In the end, they told her no more solid food, no more sugar. All I know of her secrets was how her children said goodbye: *You’ve fought long and hard Ma, you were brave for us, you can go gently now*. I wiped off my blue-eyeliner, met a stranger for dinner on his rooftop glowing with fairy lights. *Chirriya ke jaise khaathi ho*, he said, *You eat like a bird*. Caught out, called home: I was still the one my grandmother lifted saying, *Listen, don’t do what I did; now even when I want to eat, I can’t*. I confess: when my grandmother was dying, I snuck her frosted cake. She winked at me. Passed me a generous spoonful, I parted my lips.

Text by Fatima Farheen Mirza



‘WE DO NOT GIVE UP ON THE PLACES  
WE LOVE JUST BECAUSE WE ARE  
PHYSICALLY DETACHED FROM THEM.  
WE CARRY OUR MOTHERLANDS  
WITH US, IN FRAGMENTS OF  
DREAMS, OR BELOVED OBJECTS  
TUCKED INSIDE OUR SUITCASES.’

Wrote by Elif Shafak

she thought as she took a book out of her handbag. It was a book of poems, read & reread so many times the pages were slightly tattered & curling at the edges. Inside, to mark her favourite poem, she had placed a dried flower. Beauty longing for eternity. In a colour she associated with the hills of the island where she had come from, vivid and bright, a colour her co-workers in this new city would call “Valentino red”.



That second evening, while I was waiting for “The Third Man” to come on, Mrs. Barbour (all *Valentino-ed* up and on her way out the door to an event at the Frick) stopped by Andy’s room and announced that I was going back to school the next day.

Wrote from ‘The Goldfish’ by Donna Tartt



Figure 26 Three examples of the poetry posted for the ad campaign.

<sup>17</sup> Source: <https://www.valentino.com/en-iv/world-of-valentino/news/valentino-collezione-milano-485208>



This campaign is part of an experiment of the brand codes' resignification that Piccioli is pursuing. This process is occurring, for example, in the casting of new and different beauty models (which entails also the inclusion of gender fluid images) and in the decision of taking a break from the Parisian spots preferring the industrial city of Milan for his shows<sup>18</sup>.

### 2.3.4 The scandal

It was the 10<sup>th</sup> of April 2021, when on Valentino's social media appeared this photo (figure 27).



**maisonvalentino** A freedom of expression and an appreciation for the boundlessness of individuality marks the new #ValentinoCollezioneMilano campaign, featuring a self-portrait by photographer @michaelbaileygates with the Valentino Garavani #RomanStud.

Creative Director: @pppiccioli  
Art director: @nameisriccardo

Classified as the post with more interactions of the last six months, the picture, that is one of a series of six shot by the same photographer Michael Baileys Gates, apparently is not so outrageous put in a context where every day we can see men dressing and doing their make-up like women, but for some reasons it turned into a scandal for the Maison. Incredibly, this photo has unleashed the inappropriate comments of many haters, either on the company account and on the photographer's personal profile who was forced to close private his account for few days. The photographer decided to portray

himself, naked, only dressed in the Roman Stud bag from the Valentino Garavani collection. So, what was really scandalous for people? The fact that he was naked, his blonde fluid long hair, or his sinuous pose? The picture, although provocative, did not want to be vulgar in its expression. It is about an artistic photo as many others we can see, posted daily on social media, of which we do not get offended or are not scandalized. The picture was the result of the inner world of the photographer but also the desire of the Creative Director to give a shift to his brand

<sup>18</sup> Source: <https://www.rivistastudio.com/valentino-campagna-scrittore/>  
<https://www.collater.al/valentino-collezione-milano-writers-campaign/>

toward a more gender fluid vision. Behind this shot there is the obvious wish to break the rules and the stereotypes of gender in which society is stuck. I am not just talking about the binary vision of gender but also about different types of bodies that must be free to express themselves as they are, without the fear to be judged because not conforming to society standards. But who really decides standards? Actually, the concept of beauty is not objective so what could be beautiful for me could also be awkward for someone else, but it does not allow any other saying that I am wrong. Many men reported, in the comments below the indicted photo, that they got their virility offended in seeing it portrayed in a feminine-like body, or even women got offended for having replaced the role of a woman model with a man acting like a woman. Because of the hundreds of evil comments appearing in the social page of the Maison, Pierpaolo Piccioli felt the necessity to clarify his position and take the parts of the guy flooded with a myriad of homophobic words. He posted on his personal account the following thoughts (figure 28):

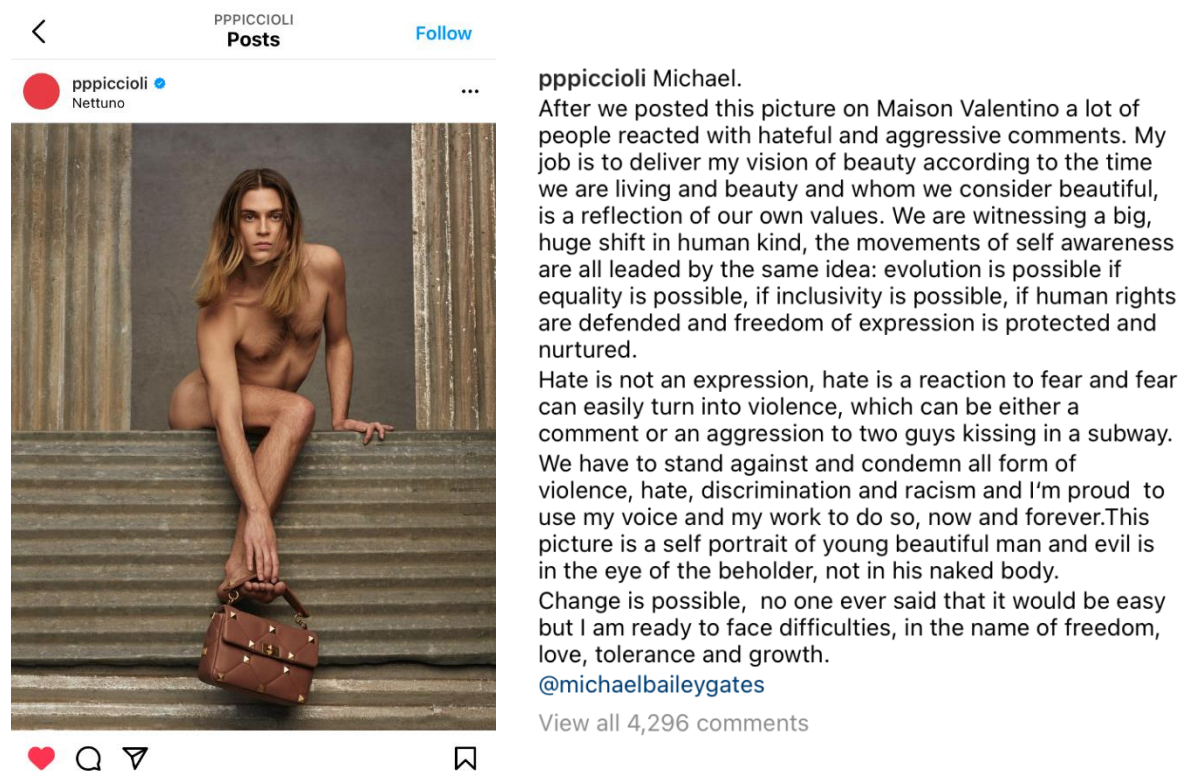


Figure 28 Pierpaolo Piccioli's post about the scandalous picture

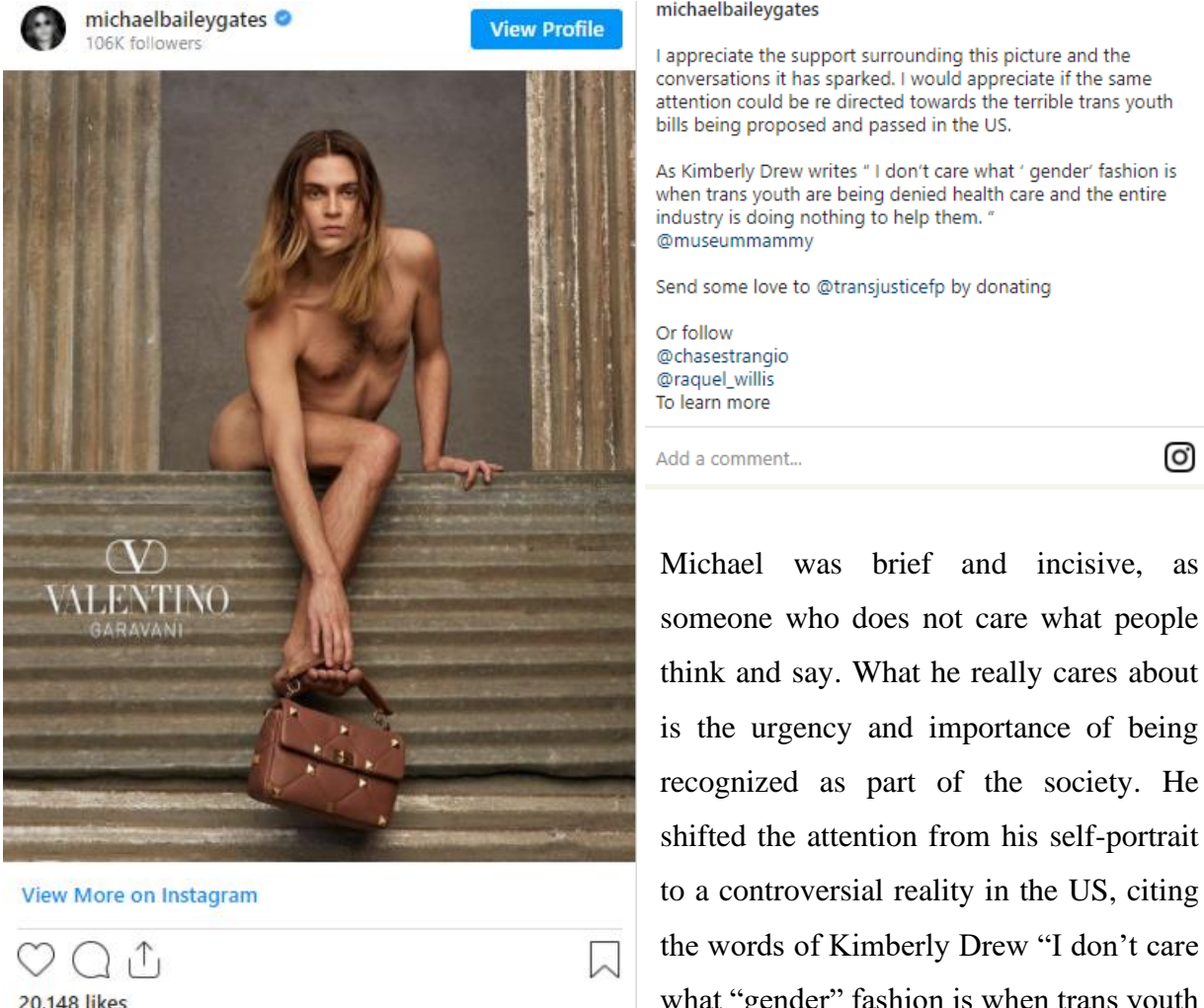
This campaign enters in those actions Piccioli is carrying on to redesign aesthetic canons with the attempt to blur the border between masculinity and femininity, enhancing any kind of beauty and approaching to a more gender fluid vision.

“A freedom of expression and an appreciation for the boundless of individuality” are the words which accompany the Maison’s post, but it seems that this freedom of expression is not accepted

by everyone, instead it may result annoying to some people's eyes who have been rude with their comments in an unjustified way.

Piccioli precises: "Hate is not an expression, hate is a reaction to fear and fear can easily turn into violence...Change is possible, no one ever said that it would be easy but I am ready to face difficulties, in the name of freedom, love, tolerance and growth." It is clearly an anthem to freedom of expression, tolerance and self-determination and I think that even if referred to an image of a naked, feminine-like man, the same concept can be extended to other kinds of beauties, ways of being and expressing one's inner world.

Some days after the avalanche of comments, the photographer himself broke the silence reposting the image with his own thoughts below (figure 29):



michaelbaileygates  
106K followers  
View Profile

michaelbaileygates

I appreciate the support surrounding this picture and the conversations it has sparked. I would appreciate if the same attention could be re directed towards the terrible trans youth bills being proposed and passed in the US.

As Kimberly Drew writes " I don't care what ' gender' fashion is when trans youth are being denied health care and the entire industry is doing nothing to help them. "  
@museummammy

Send some love to @transjusticefp by donating

Or follow  
@chasestrangio  
@raquel\_willis  
To learn more

Add a comment...

View More on Instagram

20,148 likes

Figure 29 Michael Baileys Gates' post

industry is doing nothing to help them.<sup>19</sup> Thus, fashion seems to serve just as a vehicle of propaganda to give voice to a bigger problem rooted in the system and as we know marketing

<sup>19</sup> Source: <https://www.donnamoderna.com/lifestyle/campagna-di-valentino-pierpaolo-piccioli-stereotipi-genero-michael-bailey-gates>

advertising, social media and more recently brand activism are all powerful tools through which expressing opinions and eventually influencing people’s behavior, hopefully in the right way. Among all the comments, there are also some who express their skepticism about the authenticity of the brand’s stand, affirming that the advertising campaign of Valentino is just a publicity stunt in search for hype and visualizations. The ad has also outraged parents who want to safeguard their sons’ sensitivity. As we can see in figure 30, comments like “Stop poisoning our children with campaigns that go against nature” or others alleging that there is something wrong in posting pictures like this, contrary to what is “normal” in the world and even unrespectful for women, have filled the board of the Maison for many days after the picture has been published<sup>20</sup>.



Figure 30 The offensive comments of people below the Valentino's post

### 2.3.5 Valentino after the scandal

Piccioli has not been intimidated by the thousands of negative comments, on the contrary he continues to affirm and choose a genderfluid style, acting as spokesperson of a “universal aesthetic”, which is starting to heavily influence markets and more generally society and culture (figure 31).

<sup>20</sup> Source: <https://www.insidemarketing.it/campagna-di-valentino-fluidita-di-genere/>





*Figure 31 Other gender fluid images from the Instagram profile of Valentino*

The Creative Director is inviting people to accept and protect freedom of expression. Moreover, he is part of those who want to make a change and he want to do so showing people that there is no difference, but that difference only resides in their minds<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> Source: <https://www.insidemarketing.it/campagna-di-valentino-fluidita-di-genere/>

## CHAPTER 3: ANALYSIS

### 3.1 METHODOLOGY: SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

#### 3.1.1 *What's semiotics*

“Consumers shop for meanings, not stuff”

(Laura Oswald, 2012)

Since the development of marketing has radically affected customers' buying habits, businesses have begun to modify strategies in order to stay competitive and maintain a stronghold in people's mind. What truly counts for businesses today, from a product-centered to a consumer-centered point of view, is the provision of value for consumers that translates into brand equity<sup>22</sup>. As long as creating products that meet customers' needs is not enough, brands strive to establish their own identities based on values and beliefs that distinguish their products from those of competitors, but most importantly, they find ways to enter people's daily lives through communication and the development of strong customer relationships. According to Rossolatos (2015) in his book "Handbook of Brand Semiotics," a brand may be thought as a mark or sign capable of producing various meanings and pragmatic consequences on people and things, identifying, changing, and giving them value (s). “Brands provide these advantages (values) to customers in the form of meanings, such as the perception of quality, a symbolic link, a vicarious experience, or even a feeling of identity,” says Oswald (2012). [...]. Brand meaning is not only an added value, but it is also a prerequisite for the production of brand value. Brand meaning is more than just a bonus. It is the state of being able to create brand value. Controlling brand equity, therefore, necessitates first and foremost managing brand meanings or semiotics.” Nowadays, brands supply not just product quality but also, and perhaps most importantly, societal ideals that become embedded in things, allowing individuals to disconnect from the materiality of their belongings and form connections with the imaginaries and values associated with those possessions. As a result, items are expected to serve a secondary purpose in addition to their primary one, becoming textual representations of their brands. In this sense, every product, from advertisements to physical products, becomes a text to be scanned, read, and interpreted in a cultural context and environment, and can conceal interesting social, psychological, and anthropological connections to the world we live in, catching our attention without us realizing it (Rossolatos, 2015).

The word “semiotics” comes from the Greek word *semios* which means “sign”. It was first used in the 19th century to refer to the study of signs and symbols, as well as how they are used and

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<sup>22</sup> Financial value of goods derived from intangible brand benefits that exceed the good's use value (Oswald, 2012).

interpreted. It began as a social-science subject dedicated to the study of signs in a cultural context, but it has since expanded to encompass the entire collection of signifying processes at work in a sign system, such as a brand, an advertising text, or a retail setting (Oswald, 2012). In structural semiotics, linguistic theories are applied to non-linguistic systems including visual media, public space, consumer insights, and culture. To make sense in a particular context, structural semiotics relies on language notions such as the code, system, and sign binarism (Oswald, 2015). Because of the adaptation of linguistic theory to the study of nonverbal signs and symbols that acquire different meanings depending on the culture and context in which they are used, this discipline can become an important tool for managing brands' communication strategies, inasmuch brands acquire value for the firm and for investors to the extent that consumers associate the brand with meaning or "semiotic" value (Oswald, 2012). Roland Barthes was the first to use semiotics to study rhetorical figures, cultural references, and symbols in advertising, attempting to separate the visual signifier from its literal meaning in order to build a connotative dimension of the ad. Semiotics in advertising helps advertisers to not only analyze brands more deeply, but also to discover new uncharted territories in the market to compete in and to rethink brand tactics where fallacies may have hampered brand communication effectiveness. Advertising material is like an open door into consumer culture, involving content analysis<sup>23</sup>, structural anthropology, and semiotics. In this evolved context, brands are sign systems which possess three fundamental characteristics:

- 1) Create imaginary or symbolic linkages in consumers' minds
- 2) Differentiate themselves from competitors
- 3) Add measurable value (brand equity) to their product offerings

This more nuanced brand approach is the outcome of a shift in consumer behavior, which has shifted from material to symbolic consumption. *Consumers' use of products to build personal identities, identify with groups, and "expand" their self*, according to Oswald (2012), is referred to symbolic consumption. People acquire things, most of the times, not because they require them in a tangible or functional sense, but because they require all of the symbolic and abstract realities associated with their ownership, such as status, beauty, and self-determination, among other things. The ability of consumers to project and integrate meanings of products into their lifestyles is impacted by their inclination to connect memories and emotions to commodities. Cultural standards or traditions define some consumption occasions, such as the Christmas tree at Christmas or turkey at Thanksgiving. As a result, consumers perceive commodities as signs in a symbolic activity, and semiotics may be useful in the development and interpretation of

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<sup>23</sup> Content analysis is a methodology used to develop hypothesis about a market or social group, track changes in social trends over time, and draw attention to the underlying attitudes, values, and political tensions within a culture (Kassarjian, 1997 in Oswald, 2012).

sign systems such as writings, pictures, performances, multimedia projects, fashion, or everyday life.

Codes, according to the code theory, are necessary for tracing meanings in logical and obvious patterns inferred from data sets such as consumer interviews, advertising, popular culture, retail sites, or a product category (Oswald, 2015).

Understanding the binary structure of discourse and signs is essential to the application of semiotics. The concept of sign may be expressed in a variety of ways, but according to Saussure's ideas, its meaning is dialectical in nature, and the key to understanding signs is binary analysis.

Signs can work through any of the senses (visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory or taste). Thus, any sign has a signifier which denotes<sup>24</sup> a signified and at the second level of connotation<sup>25</sup>, this whole sign becomes a signifier for another signified. What must be kept in mind is that all the possible binary associations are ruled by social convention and thus these relationships are considered dynamic according to the context in which they are used. Signs, in fact, are context-sensitive and consumers give them different meanings according to the market of reference. Social and cultural codes function as lenses through which filtering and shaping brands' identity. With his sign theory, Saussure managed to demonstrate that the meaning of signs is entirely constructed by linguistic codes, rather than nature or personal choice.

Codes are social instruments that can control the linkage of meanings with symbolic representation in a specific culture, such as the association of a ring with an engagement status. Saussure's earlier views were further elaborated by Lévi-Strauss, who combined structural linguistics with cultural systems by adopting the concepts of sign, code, paradigmatic analysis, and binarism anthropology (in Oswald, 2015).

Lévi-Strauss argued that binarism was responsible for the structuring of culture into paradigmatic systems and that it constituted the universal structure of mind (Oswald, 2012). Furthermore, it is not nature that determines social conduct, but the codes through which things gain meanings, broadening McCracken's idea of "meaning transfer" (1986).

Texts, rituals, and designs are merely tiny components in larger systems in marketing semiotics, such as a collection of advertising, package designs, or service sites (Oswald, 2015). As a result, they are part of a larger symphony of elements that work together to generate a certain meaning. The marketing semiotic analysis is broken down into different phases, as follows:

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<sup>24</sup> Denotation: the literal meaning of a sign or text; a description of the text; what the audience sees/hears in the advertising.

<sup>25</sup> Connotation: the secondary meaning suggested or implied by denotation. It is the associative meaning since it describes the interaction when a sign meets the feelings or emotions of the people and the values of their culture.



First and foremost, a data set tracking must be performed in order to discover recurring patterns and codes. Following the discovery of codes, each individual unit of discourse is examined to see if it follows the recurrent patterns identified in the first phase.

More specifically, the synchronic analysis finds the abstract coding system that transcends cultural change, whereas the diachronic analysis helps to discover repeating patterns in the data. So far, we've seen how phenomena are divided into binary pairs dialectically, and how semiotic analysis is used in marketing to form assumptions about a customer segment or category based on the examination of recurrent patterns or behaviors in a set of data. Advertising, then, seeks to define the codes that structure these patterns in order to establish a brand essence that transcends any single ad campaign or piece of communication (Oswald, 2012). As also affirmed by Mangano and Marrone (2015), a brand is a symbol that has pragmatic effects on people and things by creating multiple meanings: it identifies, transforms, and gives them values. Thus, contemporary brands not only promise product quality, but also societal ideas that are only discernible once they are integrated in products (Mangano and Marrone, 2015).

I will proceed in my analysis with a decryption of Valentino's consumers, history and cultural environment in search for semiotic meanings which make up the Consumer Brandscape reflecting at the same time the culture, consumer experiences, and the communication function of the brand. After an understanding of the Valentino's framework, I will narrow my analysis deep diving in the visual semiotics of the image published by the Maison on its social media. In the end, I will scrutinize the comments below the post in order to understand the general sentiment of people and try to make inferences about Valentino's culture and popular culture on a hot topic like gender diversity is.

### 3.2 VALENTINO BRANDSCAPE

Brands exist as a collection of texts and discourses that constitute a complex ecosystem of commercial, cultural, and social factors, rather than as a single product or logo. Many realities collide to express a brand identity, shaping the physical, virtual, and symbolic landscape in which a brand exists. All of these elements combine to create the "Consumer Brandscape," a summary of the brand, consumer, and cultural environment.

The meanings that make up the Brandscape come from a variety of sources, not simply advertising. The Brandscape's dimensions are depicted in the diagram below (figure 32).

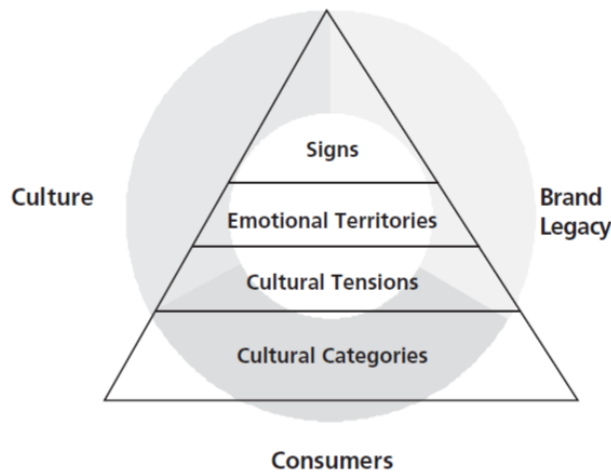


Figure 32 Dimensions of Brandscape

To use Aaker's words, the goal of the Consumer Brandscape is to align all brand functions around a core brand identity or message, envisioning the brand as a "system." According to Aaker (1996), in terms of brand messaging and mission, there must always be congruence between product, organization, and symbols. If just one of them fails to support the others, it may have serious consequences for brand equity.

Consumers may interpret advertisements and uncover meanings linked to their culture across time and around the world by using cultural codes. Semiotic codes organize the meaning of a product category, organizational culture, brand personality, and symbolism used to distinguish meanings from competitors in the marketplace. Symbols recognized by people's mind, such as company logos and celebrities, are used to connect meanings. Also, meaning transfers get ingrained in popular culture; for example, when people ask for a pen, they frequently say, "Can you pass me a Biro?" where Biro refers to a brand selling pens that has become so iconic that people swap the words "Biro" with "pen." Semiotic references will contribute to give sense to the brand, but also integrate into consumer culture and readily meet consumer needs and wants (Oswald, 2012).

Using these principles as a foundation, I will attempt to construct a Consumer Brandscape for Maison Valentino in order to define the present terrain in which the brand manages every element of its operations.

I'll start by gathering and analyzing information on brand history, customer insights, and target culture. Second, I'll perform a competitive brand audit to determine Valentino's semiotic stance in relation to its competitors on the LGBTQ issue. Finally, I'll do a cultural sweep to have a better understanding of the brand environment for trends and popular culture on the same subject.

### **3.2.1 *Valentino cultural origin***

Valentino was born at the beginning of the '60s, the decade of the Italian economic growth following the country's post-World War II difficulties. The 1960s witnessed the largest generational shift in the past century, with socio-political and cultural changes that profoundly influenced future generations' values, aspirations, and lifestyle. People were highly enthusiastic and driven by cultural developments, and exactly because of this that fashion and music flourished. Italy has always been a country where arts, beauty, and body image have been valorized, either for its deeply rooted history and for important artists who could give relevance to them in each and every field. The '60s represented only a starting point for a continuous progress up to present days. The city of Rome, which gave birth to Valentino, was the one depicted in "La Dolce Vita" of Fellini (figure 33), an evergreen of the Italian cinematography as well as an accurate portrait of the early '60s society, whose social life had its basecamp in Via Veneto, where cafes, restaurants, and hotels were used to host and entertain intellectuals and internationals along with celebrities representing the cinematographic "élite" of that time. Photography and paparazzi are witness and proof of that society, a world that continues to evoke a lighthearted and devoted to worldly pleasure lifestyle.



Figure 33 Picture from "La Dolce Vita"

This is the world from which Valentino took inspiration and that still represents a “*file rouge*” in the culture of the brand. Valentino is synonym as timeless elegance, romanticism, feminine beauty, all important pillars of the Maison that still today symbolize the values thanks to which people recognize this icon among many others.

### 3.2.2 Brand audit: Target market, consumer insights, target culture, brand positioning, competitive environment

#### TARGET MARKET AND CONSUMER INSIGHTS

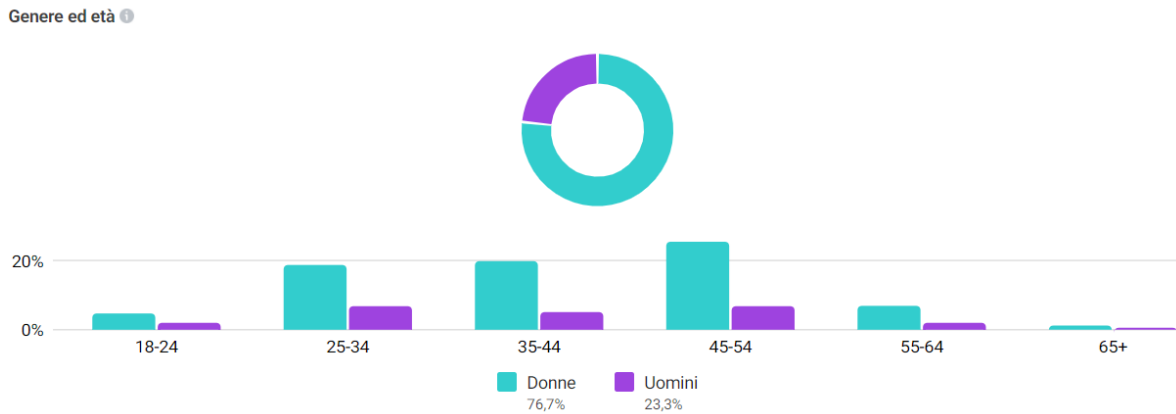


Figure 34 Facebook Audience Insights, 2021: Target interested in Valentino.

I conducted a brief investigation on Facebook Audience Insights to extract useful data on the target market, filtering population by interest in Valentino and luxury.

As visible from the graph (figure 34), the target is composed predominantly by women (76,7%) between the age of 25 and 45. More specifically, we can talk about Generation X and Generation Y (Millennials).



Figure 35 Segmentation pyramid of luxury market.

Taking as starting point the segmentation pyramid of luxury market (figure 35) and positioning Valentino in the Couture and Ready-to-Wear segments, it can easily be stated that people who

are interested, actual clients, or potential customers of Maison Valentino belong to the middle/high class and have middle/high income. This can be explained by the fact that moving from the bottom to the top of the pyramid, the price gets higher along with creativity and quality, allowing brands to charge premium prices. In the *Haute Couture* segment, brands offer exclusive made-to-measure pieces, with the highest craftsmanship, and that could be considered real pieces of art. The price is extremely expensive, ranging from 20 000€/€ to 50 000€/€. These garments are made for very few people, most of the times they are celebrities and international clients (VIP/VIC<sup>26</sup>) who use this unique attire for social occasions (i.e. Red Carpets, Met Gala etc.). The idea on which brands in this segment are based is selling a dream and building an exclusive brand image. In the RTW (Ready-to-Wear) segment, there is also a high level of the designer’s creativity expressed in the fashion shows. Clothes are made of high quality and are usually “Made in...”, but can be used both in daily occasions and important events, embracing a wider target. Prices are also high (from 3 to 5 times the mass market price) but more accessible than *Haute Couture*. All this premised, it comes straightforward that the people who wear Valentino are:

- Professionals with solid careers
- Socialities/heiress as we have seen also from the strong relationships Valentino Garavani created with this segment

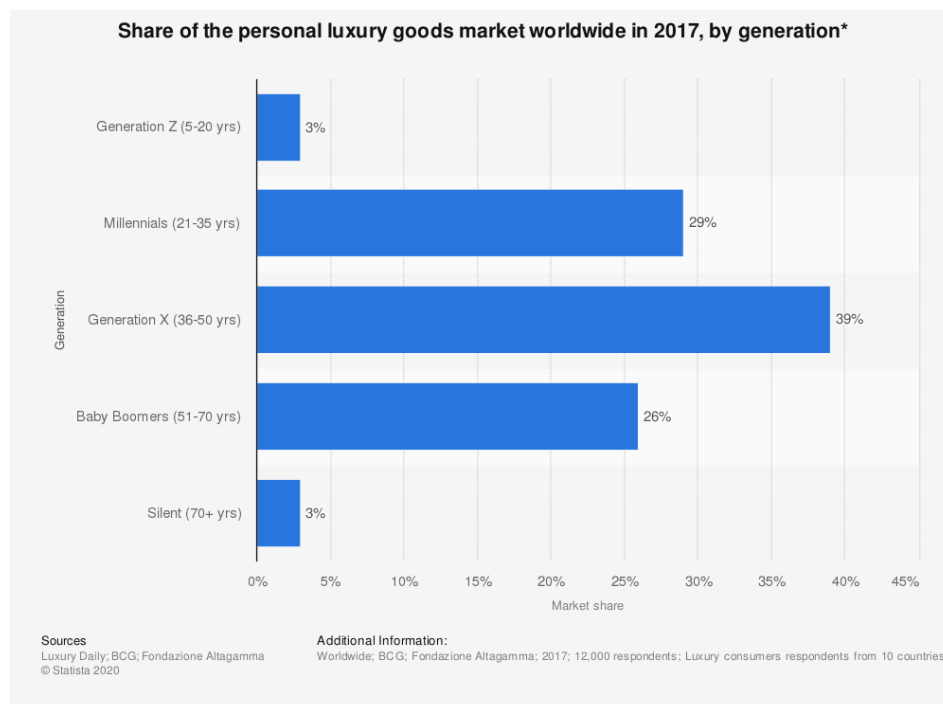


Figure 36 Statista, 2021: Share of personal luxury goods market worldwide in 2017, by generation.

<sup>26</sup> VIP: Very Important People  
VIC: Very Important Client

The chart in figure 36, retrieved from Statista, reports that the segments of Generation X and Millennials are those which possess the largest share of personal luxury goods according to a survey ran by Altagamma in 2017<sup>27</sup>.

People who buy luxury products are generally attracted by emotional attributes and perceive luxury goods as status. These people are educated to appreciate arts, fashion, *haute couture*, and have a distinct taste for aesthetic.

Consumers who buy Valentino probably chase the fulfilment of hedonic needs and search for products that satisfy their emotional and sensory desires. They purchase products for pleasure and happiness and find satisfaction in buying fashion as a reward for their work or achievements (Armstrong and Kotler, 2015).

### **TARGET CULTURE**

Starting from the oldest generation that is the X one (born between 1965 and 1980), it can be said that it represents the smallest segment among the biggest Baby Boomers and Gen Y (or Millennials). Because it comes after the well-known Baby Boomer generation and before the Millennials generation, it is frequently referred to as the “middle child” generation. Generation X has fewer individuals than either of those groups, which is the reason why it is often neglected or forgotten when the generations are addressed.

Generation X, also known as Gen Xers, grew up at a time when there were more dual-income families, single-parent households, and children of divorce than there were while the Baby Boomers were growing up. Between 1981 and 1999, the number of divorces in the US ranged between 1,22-1,14 millions, numbers that declined with the entrance in the new century<sup>28</sup>. As a result, many Gen Xers grew up as latchkey children, spending part of the day without adult supervision, such as when they returned home from school while their parents were still at work.

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<sup>27</sup> Source: <https://www.statista.com/>

<sup>28</sup> Source: <https://www.statista.com/study/9824/families-in-the-us-statista-dossier/>

Gen Xers were the first generation to have grown up with computers in some form, making them tech-savvy (figure 37). In fact, from a statistic reported on Statista, in 2021, the 96% of Gen Xers used the internet.

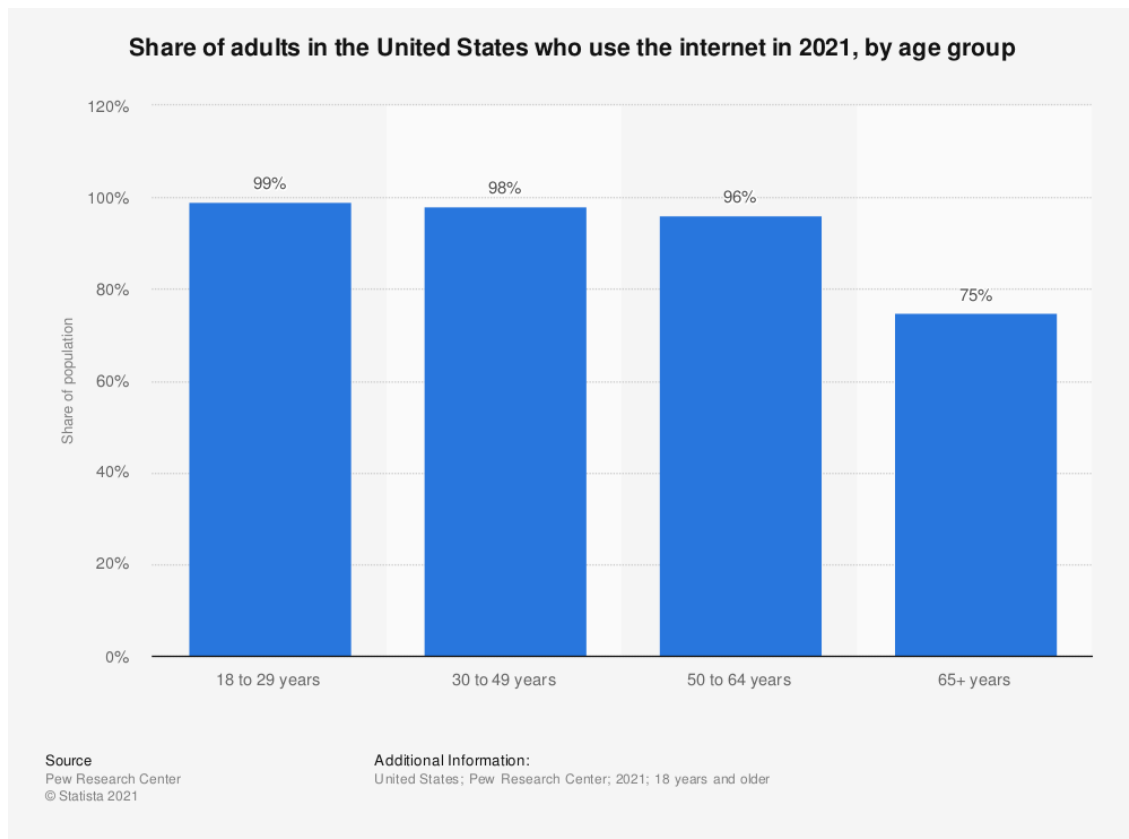


Figure 37 Statista, 2021: U.S. Internet usage penetration 2021

As youngsters and young people in the 1980s and 1990s, they too lived in difficult economic times going through some of the most drastic social changes and developments in history and for this reason they developed a certain flexibility, ready for change at any times. Gen Xers are known for being resourceful, independent, and committed to achieving work-life balance thanks also to their higher level of education with respect to previous generations.

They are more liberal on social issues and have a wider range of ethnic backgrounds than Baby Boomers. During the 1990s, Gen Xers were frequently labeled as slackers or whiners, however these labels have since been debunked<sup>29</sup>.

Millennials or Gen Y (born between the beginning of 1980 and 1994) is the digital natives generation. They switched from an analogue to a digital world, and they blended offline and online life all at once.

<sup>29</sup> Source: <https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/generation-x-characteristics-history/>  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Generation-X>

The statistic in figure 38 shows the results of a survey ran in 2015 among American Millennials concerning their personal characteristics. The 59% of respondents considered their generation

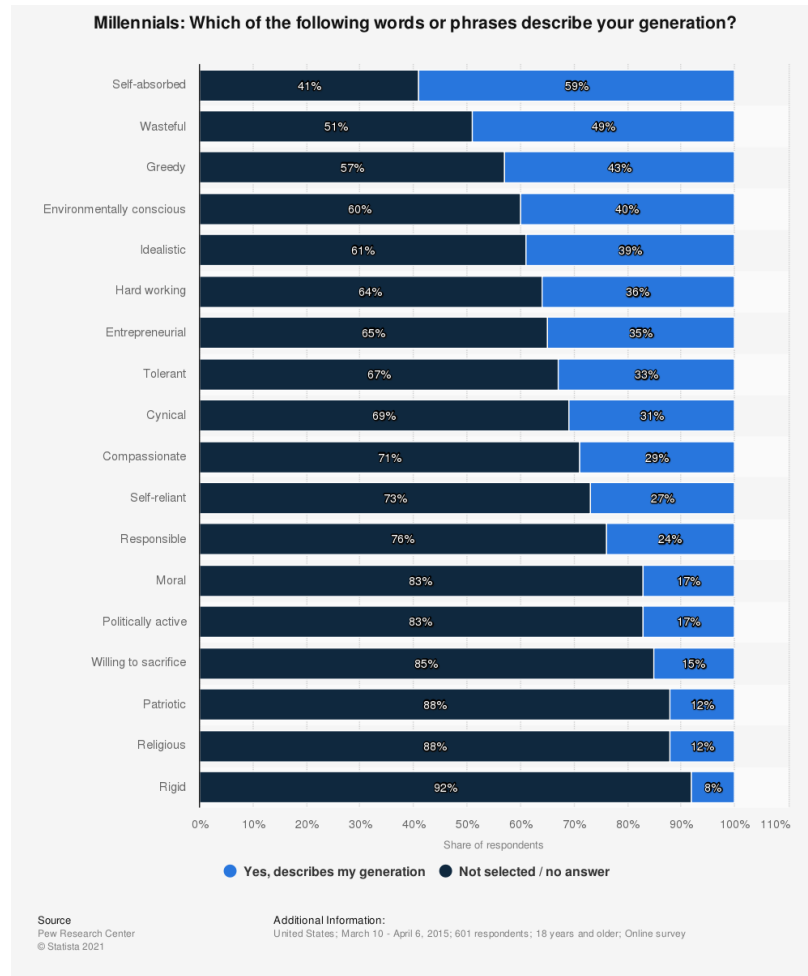


Figure 38 Statista, 2021: Personality characteristics of Millennials in 2015

self-absorbed (egocentric). Further results show that the 49% believe that they are wasteful and the 43% describe their generation as greedy. Thus, Millennials tend to be critical of their own generation, however, they also consider themselves to have positive characteristics, such as: environmentally conscious, idealistic, hardworking, and tolerant. It is curious that Millennials consider themselves to be both environmentally conscious yet wasteful at the same time. Most relevant for business trends is the importance that this segment of population places on social issues that involve sustainability, equality, climate change, peace, justice, and poverty. All these values turn into different consumption behaviors which consequently force brands to conform to this target tastes and wants.

When it comes to greed, Millennials have grown up with a weaker economy, having found it more difficult to find work. Despite having more debts than other generations, they like to spend their spare cash on new clothes.



They believe there is no limit to what they can achieve, thanks to their idealistic personalities, forming their ideas also on popular emergent figures, who revolutionized society, such as Mark Zuckerberg. Gen Y likes to feel involved and included, they often look for openness and transparency especially when it comes to brands. Communication among members of this group is much more digital: they prefer to send emails, text messages, or use social networks to connect rather than phone calling. They also chase for constant approval and gratitude from peers, and they look for this mainly posting on social networks (figure 39). They like to be loved and appreciated<sup>30</sup>.

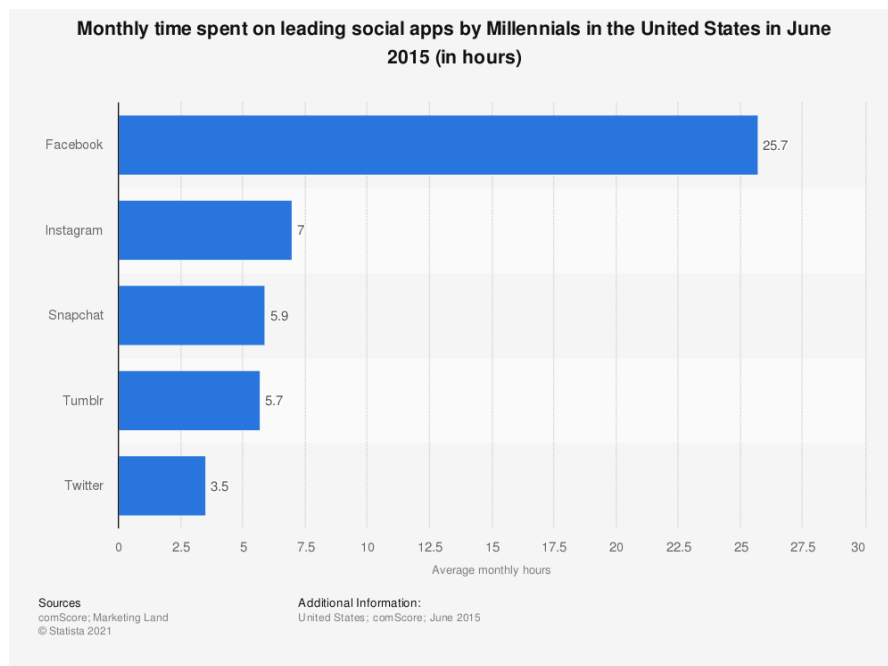


Figure 39 Statista, 2021: Monthly time spent on social apps by Millennials in the US, 2015

As mentioned in Chapter 1, this generation expects brands to participate and take a stand in important issues and they can easily switch to other brands if the brand does not align with social values. They work to leave a better planet to future generations, and they also urge businesses to do the same. Furthermore, the internet has contributed to create an empowered citizen able to stay connected with the rest of the world and always updated about trends and news, giving him/her a superior level of education that goes beyond the scholar one<sup>31</sup>.

## BRAND POSITIONING

Valentino offers the complete range of stylish and luxurious Italian designer wear. It operates in the luxury market competing with prestigious fashion labels. The preservation of Valentino's

<sup>30</sup> Source: <http://www.generationy.com/about-generation-y-in-the-workforce/characteristics/>

<sup>31</sup> Source: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/margueritacheng/2019/06/19/8-characteristics-of-millennials-that-support-sustainable-development-goals-sdgs/?sh=5fe6237629b7>  
<https://www.statista.com/>

deeply established legacy, as well as its reinvention in modern trends, are the brand's distinguishing features. The brand is dedicated to perfection, exquisite quality, and elegance. Valentino is known for being a socially conscious company that adheres to environmental and humanitarian ideals<sup>32</sup>.

## COMPETITIVE ENVIRONMENT

In 2021, Valentino has clarified its position about gender fluidity publishing and presenting explicit content about this controversial issue (see also page 41).

In January 2021, it has been presented the *Haute Couture* collection (figure 40) considered the



Figure 40 Haute Couture Collection, January 2021

Ziggy Stardust of David Bowie with a contemporary scent. The collection is permeated with ambiguous elegance, embodiment of a contemporary gender fluid generation, the perfect clientele for a unisex style, made of tailored garments, easy to exchange between her and him, without season, time and gender<sup>33</sup>.

Valentino counts many competitors known as icons of the luxury fashion

industry. Competitors have rooted histories and heritage as well. I will consider only brands that operate in the luxury market and analyze them according to their communication strategies about gender fluidity.

### 1) CHANEL

Chanel is a French privately owned company operating in the luxury market. Founded by Gabrielle Chanel at the beginning of the last century, Chanel offers a broad range of high-end creations in three different activities: fashion, fragrances & beauty, and watches & fine jewelry. Chanel is also renowned for its *Haute Couture* collections, presented twice yearly in Paris, and for having acquired a large number of specialized suppliers, collectively known as the *Métiers d'Art*. Chanel is dedicated to ultimate luxury and to the highest level of craftsmanship. It is a brand whose core values remain historically grounded on exceptional creation. As such, Chanel promotes culture, art, creativity and “*savoir-faire*” throughout the world.

<sup>32</sup> Source: <https://www.valentino.com/it-it>

<sup>33</sup> Source: [https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/topnews/2021/01/26/moda-couture-fluida-per-la-ziggy-stardust-di-valentino\\_cb417f3f-be6a-4674-bb66-b0e978d019b2.html](https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/topnews/2021/01/26/moda-couture-fluida-per-la-ziggy-stardust-di-valentino_cb417f3f-be6a-4674-bb66-b0e978d019b2.html)

The brand has always been a leader in the luxury sector thanks to its capacity to constantly reinvent itself, innovate, and challenge existing boundaries through its creativity in haute couture and ready-to-wear clothes<sup>34</sup>.

Boy Chanel (figure 41), a gender-neutral fragrance, was released by Chanel in 2016. It was created as a fragrance for males that could be worn by women to show that both sexes may wear the same scent without it being unpleasant<sup>35</sup>.



*Figure 41 Sample of "Boy Chanel"*

Just one year after, in 2017, Karl Lagerfeld (former creative director of Chanel until 2019) wanted to embrace equality launching the Gabrielle handbag with a unisex style inspired by the upcoming changes in the gender ideology. The ad campaign involved four recognized personalities, both men and women: the actress Kristen Stewart, the singer Pharrell Williams, the actress and model Cara Delevigne (openly declared to be pansexual), and the French model Caroline de Maigret. The advertising photos all feature these four celebrities carrying the new handbag, as shown in the images below (figure 42).

The Gabrielle bag signified both comfort and freedom<sup>36</sup>. The creative director wanted to highlight the versatility of the bag and its wearability in different circumstances. Lagerfeld wanted to follow the emergent trends of that time, when gender fluidity and androgyny were becoming a part of the mainstream of fashion<sup>37</sup> and thus starting to embed this value in the company's history.

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<sup>34</sup> Source: [https://services.chanel.com/i18n/it\\_IT/pdf/Report\\_to\\_Society.pdf](https://services.chanel.com/i18n/it_IT/pdf/Report_to_Society.pdf)  
<https://www.chanel.com/it/>

<sup>35</sup> Source: <https://www.mic.com/articles/138699/chanel-is-going-gender-fluid-with-their-debut-unisex-perfume>

<sup>36</sup> Source: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/channels-karl-lagerfeld-debuts-gender-fluid-handbag-campaign-kristen-stewart-pharrell-williams-9-985793/>

<sup>37</sup> Source: <https://medium.com/@areneew/challenging-the-gender-binary-one-bag-at-a-time-pharrell-williams-the-first-male-model-in-a-b4ee2b13f3ac>

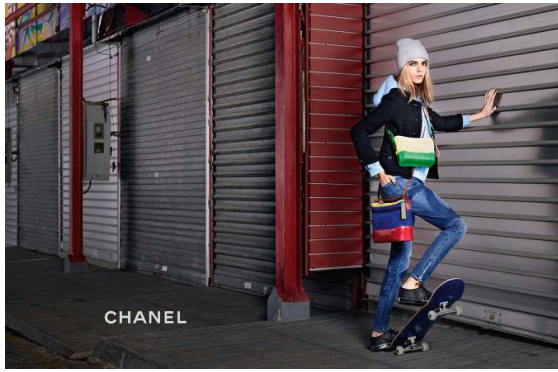


Figure 42 Pictures from the Chanel Campaign

## 2) CHRISTIAN DIOR

Christian Dior has been appointed the designer of dreams. He founded his House in 1947. The brand has been incorporated, in 2017, in the French group LVMH. Dior Couture, the House of Dreams, is recognized for its French heritage & vibrant culture sublimating its unique *Savoir-faire* and creativity through empowering “*metiers d’art*”<sup>38</sup>.

In 2018, Jennifer Lawrence was the protagonist of the Dior’s Fall 2018 campaign (figure 43) portraying an androgynous figure of the woman. Maria Grazia Chiuri, creative director of the brand, chose Jennifer to star in a gender-blurring territory for the new campaign. The collection clearly draws inspiration from masculinity, with clothes adapted for a female audience<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>38</sup>Source : <https://it.linkedin.com/company/christian-dior-couture>  
[https://www.dior.com/it\\_it](https://www.dior.com/it_it)

<sup>39</sup> Source: <https://www.lofficielsingapore.com/fashion/jennifer-lawrence-goes-androgynous-for-dior-fall-2018-campaign>





*Figure 43 Jennifer Lawrence for Dior's Fall 2018 Campaign*

The concept of gender fluidity is proposed again in the Men's Fall 2020 campaign (figure 44) displaying a gender fluid campaign for the men target.



**DIOR**

*Figure 44 Dior Men's Fall 2020 Campaign*

### 3) BURBERRY

Burberry, founded in 1856, is now a global brand with a distinctly British attitude. The core belief at Burberry is that “creativity opens spaces” being a central value from the very start. The brand is specialized in the design of luxury goods with the aid of highly skilled craftspeople<sup>40</sup>. Burberry presented, in 2016, a collection (figure 45) that was almost entirely unisex inspired by Virginia Woolf’s Orlando (telling the story of a man mysteriously changing to a woman).



Figure 45 Burberry's 2016 Collection

On the catwalk (figure 46), models showed off with the same makeup regardless of gender. The makeup artist affirmed “*There’s no true divide between masculine and feminine this time, with the girls that could pass as boys, and boys so beautiful, they could possibly be girls*”<sup>41</sup>.



Figure 46 Burberry on the runway

<sup>40</sup> Source: [https://www.burberryplc.com/content/dam/burberry/corporate/oar/2021/pdf/Burberry\\_2020-21\\_Annual\\_Report.pdf](https://www.burberryplc.com/content/dam/burberry/corporate/oar/2021/pdf/Burberry_2020-21_Annual_Report.pdf)  
<https://it.burberry.com/la-nostra-storia/>

<sup>41</sup> Source: <https://www.elle.com/fashion/news/a39384/burberry-fall-2016/>



The A/W 2021 Men collection (figure 47), instead, inspired by the dream of being able to explore as a consequence of the freedom denied during Covid-19, features skirts and women. The traditional trenches were reimaged with pleats, panels and fringes in a completely new vision of menswear<sup>42</sup>.



*Figure 47 Burberry A/W Men Collection*

#### 4) PRADA

Prada has established itself as one of the most desired and well-known labels in the fashion and luxury goods industry. Since Mario Prada opened his first exclusive store in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, Milan, Prada embodies the finest of Italy's design and manufacturing traditions, as well as refined elegance and high quality. It is capable of changing standards by predicting and establishing new trends as one of the most creative fashion companies. This is due to the fact that Prada's creative approach is continually applied not just to design creation, but also to the most cutting-edge production processes, communications, and its distribution network<sup>43</sup>.

Prada started to embrace gender fluidity about in 2016, with the new fragrances L'Homme and La Femme (figure 48). These two products were born to challenge the traditional gender assumptions regarding the significance of gender in the olfactory experience of the typical male

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<sup>42</sup> Source: <https://lifestyle.livemint.com/fashion/trends/burberrys-outdoors-fashion-is-all-about-gender-fluidity-111614065576534.html>

<sup>43</sup> Source: [https://www.annualreports.com/HostedData/AnnualReportArchive/p/OTC\\_PRDSY\\_2019.pdf](https://www.annualreports.com/HostedData/AnnualReportArchive/p/OTC_PRDSY_2019.pdf)

and female smells were used in each fragrance, but they were united with conflicting elements to disrupt the status quo.



*Figure 48 Prada gender fluid fragrances*

The campaign was led by millennial actors: Mia Wasikowska, Mia Goth, Dane DeHaan, and Ansel Elgort (figure 49). In the behind-the-scenes campaign video, the four protagonists discuss about gender fluidity and the changing of social norms<sup>44</sup>.



*Figure 49 Prada gender fluid campaign*

In the same year, the Prada Runway surprised everyone with the Men S/S 2016 collection. A completely gender fluid collection displaying both men and women leaving behind their biological sexes. There was a unique mix of sexes showed in the looks of models<sup>45</sup>. Despite the inclusion of gender fluidity in the brand culture, for the time being, Prada has not dedicated important campaigns to this topic.

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<sup>44</sup> Source: [https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/09/02/prada-fragrance-gender-fluidity\\_n\\_11835030.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/09/02/prada-fragrance-gender-fluidity_n_11835030.html)

<sup>45</sup> Source: <http://www.catwalkyourself.com/fashion-shows/prada-men-spring-summer-2016/>



## 5) LOUIS VUITTON

Louis Vuitton is in the of the world's most valuable luxury brands and is a division of LVMH. Founded in Paris in 1854, Louis Vuitton perpetuates the ambitious vision of its namesake. Today, Louis Vuitton's legacy is expressed through its rigorous spirit of innovation, the boldness of its creations and an uncompromising demand for excellence<sup>46</sup>.

The most relevant gender fluid campaign made by Louis Vuitton went out in 2016 for the S/S womenswear. The campaign's protagonist was Jaden Smith (figure 50), who perfectly embodied the idea of gender fluidity, is a rapper, actor, and young philosopher known for oscillating between both men's and womenswear. Smith poses among female models standing at the right side of the group<sup>47</sup>.



*Figure 50 Jaden Smith starring in LV campaign*

<sup>46</sup> Source: <https://www.forbes.com/companies/louis-vuitton/?sh=be5ee26dbe7e>  
<https://www.lvmh.com/houses/fashion-leather-goods/louis-vuitton/>

<sup>47</sup> Source: <https://www.trendhunter.com/trends/louis-vuitton-springsummer1>



Figure 51 Jaden Smith for LV S/S 2021

Jaden Smith still represents for Louis Vuitton the perfect testimonial for the gender fluid ideology and for this reason he is continuing to appear in the company's promotion of products such as for the campaign Spring/Summer 2021 (figure 51).

The gender fluid theme comes back again for the Spring-Summer 2021 fashion show (figure 52) that presented adventurous and masculine cuts for women, and feminine fabrics and finishes for men<sup>48</sup>. Women are empowered by making her own the male wardrobe. Vuitton is starting



Figure 52 LV gender fluid on the runway S/S 2021

<sup>48</sup> Source: <https://www.excellencemagazine.luxury/dolce-vita/lifestyle-en/louis-vuitton-gender-fluidity/>

to define a kind of non-binary clothing through the mixing of different materials, shapes, and embroideries<sup>49</sup>.

## 6) VERSACE

Founded in 1978 in Milan, Gianni Versace S.r.l. is one of the leading international fashion design houses and a symbol of Italian luxury world-wide. It designs, manufactures, distributes and retails fashion and lifestyle products including haute couture, prêt-à-porter, accessories, jewelry, watches, eyewear, fragrances, and home furnishings all reporting the distinctive Medusa logo<sup>50</sup>.

Versace approached gender fluidity only recently with its first gender fluid collection presented in Milan in 2020 (figure 53).



Figure 53 Versace runway 2020

Both male and female models wore gender-neutral clothes to stress Donatella Versace ideas, stating “For me, with this show, I want to highlight that, today, there is a generation that doesn’t care about gender”<sup>51</sup>.

## 7) GUCCI

Gucci is an innovative, influential and progressive fashion house and part of the global luxury group, Kering. The House has redefined luxury for the 21st century, further reinforcing its positioning as one of the world’s most desirable fashion houses<sup>52</sup>. It is considered one of the

<sup>49</sup> Source: [https://www.ansa.it/canale\\_lifestyle/notizie/moda/2020/10/06/vuitton-punta-sul-gender-fluid-nella-nuova-collezione- c5d14108-3b6b-4ed4-aca2-df5938b82c92.html](https://www.ansa.it/canale_lifestyle/notizie/moda/2020/10/06/vuitton-punta-sul-gender-fluid-nella-nuova-collezione- c5d14108-3b6b-4ed4-aca2-df5938b82c92.html)

<sup>50</sup> Source: <https://www.versace.com/us/en-us/about-us/company-profile.html>

<sup>51</sup> Source: <https://gothammag.com/gender-neutral-luxury-fashion>

<sup>52</sup> Source: [https://www.gucci.com/it/en\\_gb/st/about-gucci](https://www.gucci.com/it/en_gb/st/about-gucci)  
<https://it.linkedin.com/company/gucci>

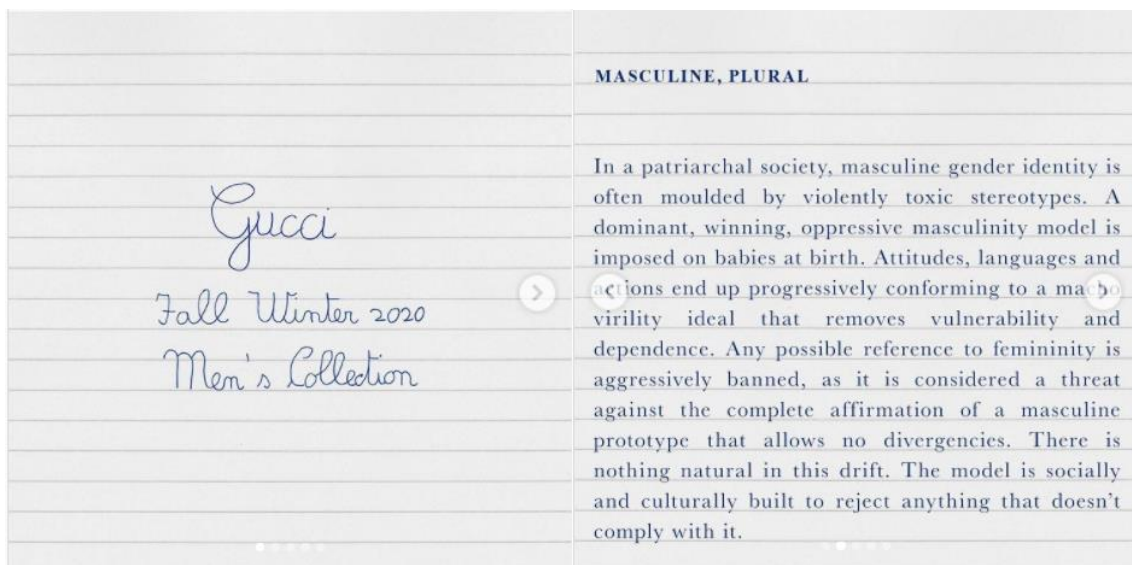


most important precursors of the genderless ideology. It's been some years that Gucci is implementing different strategies in communication and trying to change the rooted idea of binarism in fashion. Let's see some of them.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of January 2020, on the occasion of the Fall/Winter 2020 Men's collection presentation, Gucci posted on socials what could be defined an "educative" post (figure 54). It is an invite to come back on school desks and learn again the definition of "masculinity". The tagline says:

*"It's time to celebrate a man who is free to practice **self-determination**, without social constraints, without authoritarian sanctions, without suffocating stereotypes. A man who is able to reconnect with his core of fragility, with his trembling and his tenderness. A man on his knees in front of surrender, who honors fears and its thorns. A man full of kindness and care," from the men's #GucciFW20 show notes 'Masculine Plural' which speak about the toxic stereotypes that mould masculine gender identity. The collection by @alessandro\_michele unfolds today in the Palazzo delle Scintille at 12:30 PM CET. Watch the show live through link in bio. #mfw #AlessandroMichele #RaveLikeYouAreFive*

Attached to these words the following pictures<sup>53</sup>:



<sup>53</sup> Source: [https://www.instagram.com/p/B7TDVc3D5Ye/?utm\\_source=ig\\_embed](https://www.instagram.com/p/B7TDVc3D5Ye/?utm_source=ig_embed)

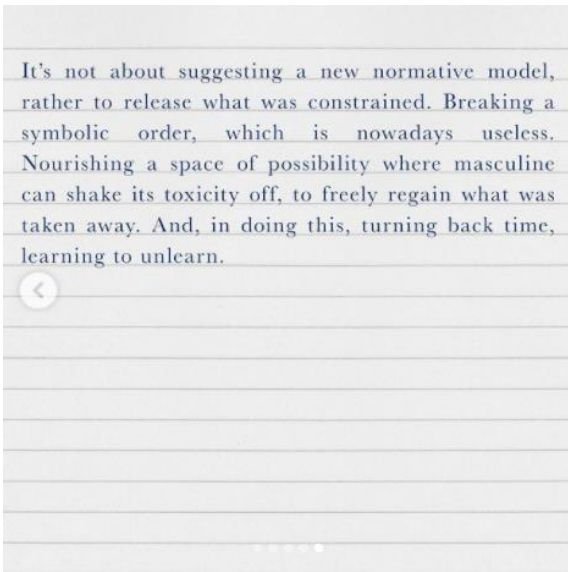
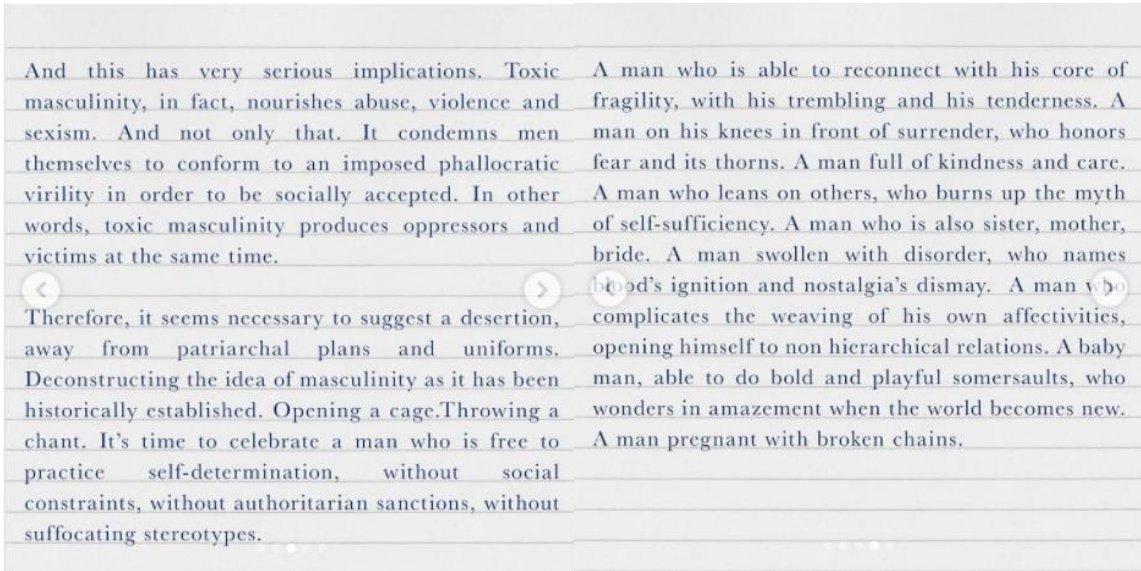


Figure 54 Gucci post on gender fluidity

Conceived as a student's notebook going probably to primary school, it is a throwback to childhood when the teacher, every morning, wanted us to do dictation exercises to learn how to write but also to approach some important topics just like this one. Gucci's message was that everyone should come back to learn from the beginning the idea of masculinity, making a step back against stereotypes and the social ideas of what a man is and must be.

In its communication of this new man, Gucci chose to let the famous singer Harry Styles be the spokesman wearing a long-flounced dress and posing for the American Vogue (figure 55).



*Figure 55 Harry Styles on Vogue America*



*Figure 56 Achille Lauro  
Sanremo 2020*

On the Italian side, Gucci has found a good collaboration with the rapper Achille Lauro (figure 56), who offered his image for provocative clothes supplied by the iconic brand in the “Festival di Sanremo” frame.



To continue riding the wave of coherence, Gucci started a partnership with The Sex Ed podcast for Season 3 (figure 57) talking about sex, health and consciousness with the mission to inspire conversations around sexual wellness and explore the ways sexuality is experienced and expressed<sup>54</sup>.

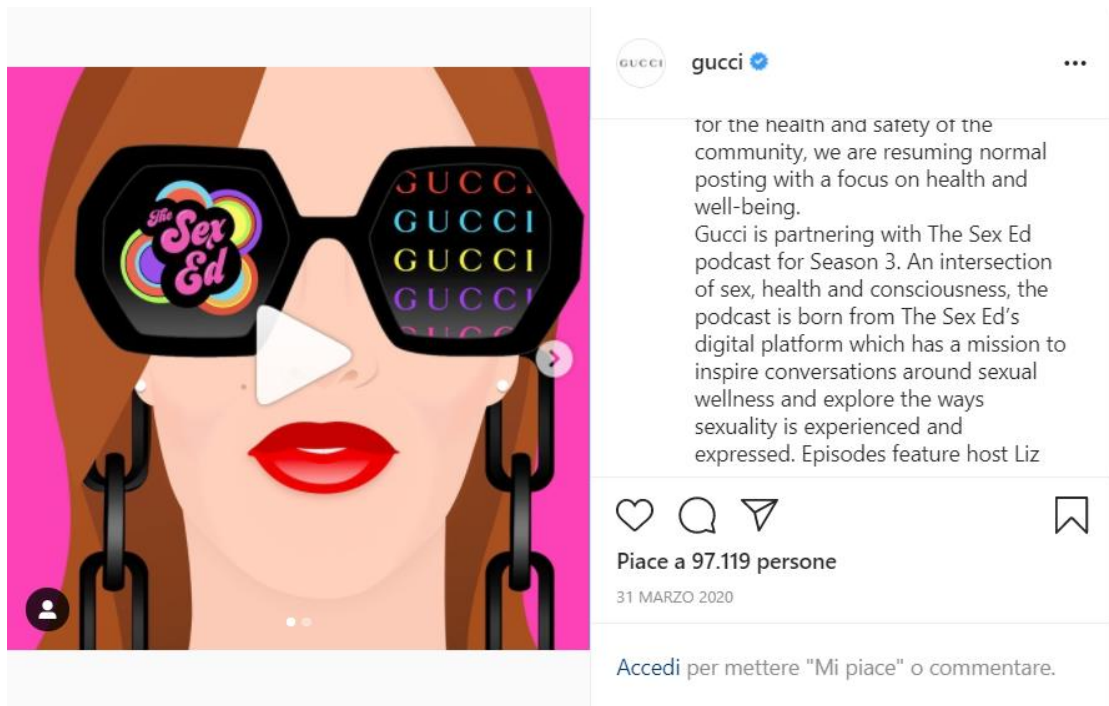


Figure 57 Gucci announcing on Instagram its partnership with The Sex Ed

Making a little step back to 2013, Gucci co-founded a global campaign “Chime for Change” promoting gender equality and during the following years, carried on many initiatives like “Let Girls Dream” or “To Gather Together” up to the more recent #StandWithWomen during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Gucci has investigated how the new Gen Z interprets the idea of “gender” in relation to the concept of “fluidity”. The brand presented a short film titled “The Future is Fluid”. As Gucci explains,

*“It tells a story of blurred lines and borders, a story that lives in the space between – between languages, cultures, time zones, and binaries. One told by the voices of the next generation that are (re)defining our world through a prism of fluidity”<sup>55</sup>.*

In July 2020, Gucci presented the new section on its website entitled “GUCCI MX<sup>56</sup>” created to sustain a non-binary shopping.

<sup>54</sup> Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-Zkxu3iKqz/>

<sup>55</sup> Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFUvLNL7E8Q>

<sup>56</sup> « MX » is a neologism coined at the end of the '70s that was an alternative to Mr. and Mrs addressing people who did not want to express their own gender or who do not recognize themselves in neither of these two.



Putting in place all these valuable actions, Gucci represents a groundbreaking brand in the luxury market. Big steps have been done in the last years concerning this topic, trying to raise as much awareness as possible to guarantee a world free of gender stereotypes<sup>57</sup>.

#### 8) HERMES and HUGO BOSS

Hermes is an independent, family-owned French house, renowned for its artisanship since 1837. Today, the company perpetuates the transmission of exceptional know-how through strong territorial presence<sup>58</sup>.

For what concerns Hermes, there is not concrete evidence about gender fluidity apart from a mention for gender equality as a fundamental principle reported in the 2019 Universal Registration Document<sup>59</sup>.

Along with Hermes there is also another brand that has not implemented yet any type of gender fluid approach apart from stating its support for the LGBTQ community, this is Hugo Boss. Boss and Hugo are two strong and separate brands clearly distinguished by their fashionable style, meeting the same high standards of quality and fit, innovation and sustainability. Hugo Boss is one of the leading companies in the premium segment of the global apparel market. In its website's section "Stories" there is a page dedicated to the support for the LGBTQIA+ community. Even though the brand affirms to strongly support marginalized groups seeking to overcome adversity and oppression, it has not implemented particular actions in favor of this social cause worthy of evidence<sup>60</sup>.

#### 3.2.3 *Semiotic positioning of Valentino*

I previously conducted a brand audit of advertising and brands' practices concerning activism in the LGBTQ issue. As we have seen, brands are engaging in this kind of activism always more, and among them Valentino decided to use an unconventional manner to communicate its ideas, staying coherent with its values and the willingness of the new creative director to give a more contemporary twist to the brand. However, there is not a clear trend among brands regarding how to engage in LGBTQ activism, on the contrary everyone has implemented different actions. Each brand wants to be original in expressing its support for the cause and the community. For sure there are some of them that, despite standing for the cause, have decided to implement a more "low-profile" strategy with respect to others that, on the other hand, have

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<sup>57</sup> Source: <https://www.nssgclub.com/it/pills/24742/gucci-alessandro-michele>

<sup>58</sup> Source: <https://www.hermes.com/us/en/story/271292-contemporary-artisans-since-1837/>

<sup>59</sup> Source: [https://assets-finance.hermes.com/s3fs-public/node/pdf\\_file/2020-07/1595280621/hermesinternational-urd-2019-en.pdf](https://assets-finance.hermes.com/s3fs-public/node/pdf_file/2020-07/1595280621/hermesinternational-urd-2019-en.pdf)

<sup>60</sup> Source: <https://group.hugoboss.com/en/newsroom/stories/pride>

demonstrated their involvement in a more incisive and, most of the times, worthy of notice manner, both from a communication and marketing point of view, and with a strong polarizing effect on society, just like Valentino.

Advertising for luxury is never easy. Many variables have to be taken into account because any of them can determine the success or complete failure of the brand communication strategy, impacting directly brand reputation and consequently brand equity. However, if implemented properly, brand activism could bring consumers to your side and turn them into a profitable customer base.

What consumers search when buying for luxury is the fulfillment of their most hedonic needs that can be built by the brand mythology, promising access to transcendent experiences like beauty, self-determination, freedom, and individuality. In this case, brands are marketing freedom of expression with different nuances according to collection, brand values and beliefs. The decision of Valentino to display a naked body to support the cause is a clear challenge to the binary world. Furthermore, the man presents explicit signs of femininity that break stereotypes of masculinity, such as: silky long blond hair, skinny size with no accentuated muscles, sinuous laying, smooth facial skin, and delicate features. It seems that the photographer of the campaign was inspired by the ancient Greek statues and wanted to transmit a feeling of “back to the origins” in every aspect of the human body representation. We can say that Valentino has been more provocative than many other brands offering a representation of gender fluidity that made people talk a lot. Brands know that people are not fully out of stereotypes and that their tolerance could be really challenged using some representations rather than others. Valentino did not care. Valentino wanted to lead the real change, including all facades of homosexuality, the entire gender spectrum. It took the risks, but it still goes on its way.

#### ***3.2.4 Representation of the LGBTQ in media***

Depending on the country, the media portrays LGBTQ people with varying degrees of tolerance. The LGBTQ group was first associated with a negative connotation, reflecting the cultural prejudice that characterized society at the time. However, since the beginning of the 1990s and continuing now, the LGBTQ community has taken a more active part in defining its culture in order to obtain greater prominence in mainstream media. The positive representation of this group has resulted in a rise in acceptance and support for LGBTQ individuals, as well as the establishment of LGBTQ communities as the norm and the dissemination of knowledge on the subject.

Despite the fact that LGBTQ people are typically indistinguishable from heterosexuals, the media frequently depicts them as physically and behaviorally distinct. Gay males are frequently

portrayed as promiscuous, showy, extravagant, and brazen in stereotypes. Furthermore, portrayals of bisexual and transgender individuals tend to either ignore them entirely or portray them as morally corrupted or psychologically ill. Because of the generalized notion of the contemporary family, which consists of a man and a woman who settle down with clear future objectives of having children, homosexual households are frequently misunderstood. Lesbian and gay characters are practically never protagonists and are typically shown as victims or villains.

Furthermore, to prevent controversy, homosexual individuals are not depicted in child-related content.

Despite stereotyped representations of the LGBTQ community in the media, television series like "Will and Grace" have helped to promote acceptance. Celebrities began to come out at a certain point, providing a compelling cause for the development of LGBT-friendly television series. The contact hypothesis, often known as intergroup contact theory, might explain some of this new media acceptability. People are able to see a more accurate picture of LGBTQ populations as more shows promote homosexual acceptance. Western society has had to open their eyes to the homosexual population as a result of the success of gay television series, music performers, and fashion<sup>61</sup>.

### 3.2.5 *Cultural icons*

An icon is defined as "*a person or thing widely admired especially for having great influence or significance in a particular sphere*"<sup>62</sup>. Through the years, we can remember many iconic figures of the international scenario who have stand in favor of LGBTQ activism and have contributed somehow to changes in society.

Among the most popular icons of the contemporary frame, we should cite for sure Lady Gaga. Identified as bisexual and very active in fighting for LGBTQ rights around the world, she sustained this community since the beginning of her career exploiting her freedom of expression to remind people that she was "Born This Way"<sup>63</sup>. Along with her we can also name Beyoncé, Katy Perry, and Madonna who has been the first woman to receive the "Advocate for Change Award"<sup>64</sup>. On the Italian side, we can find other important names, such as Achille Lauro, known for his eccentric and unpredictable ways of expressing on the stage, Miss Keta with her provocative and divisive song texts, and, going a little back in time, Raffaella Carrà and Renato Zero, undisputed and absolutely disruptive icons of the 60s/70s. during the same years, another noteworthy worldwide icon was David Bowie who disclosed his homosexuality only after two

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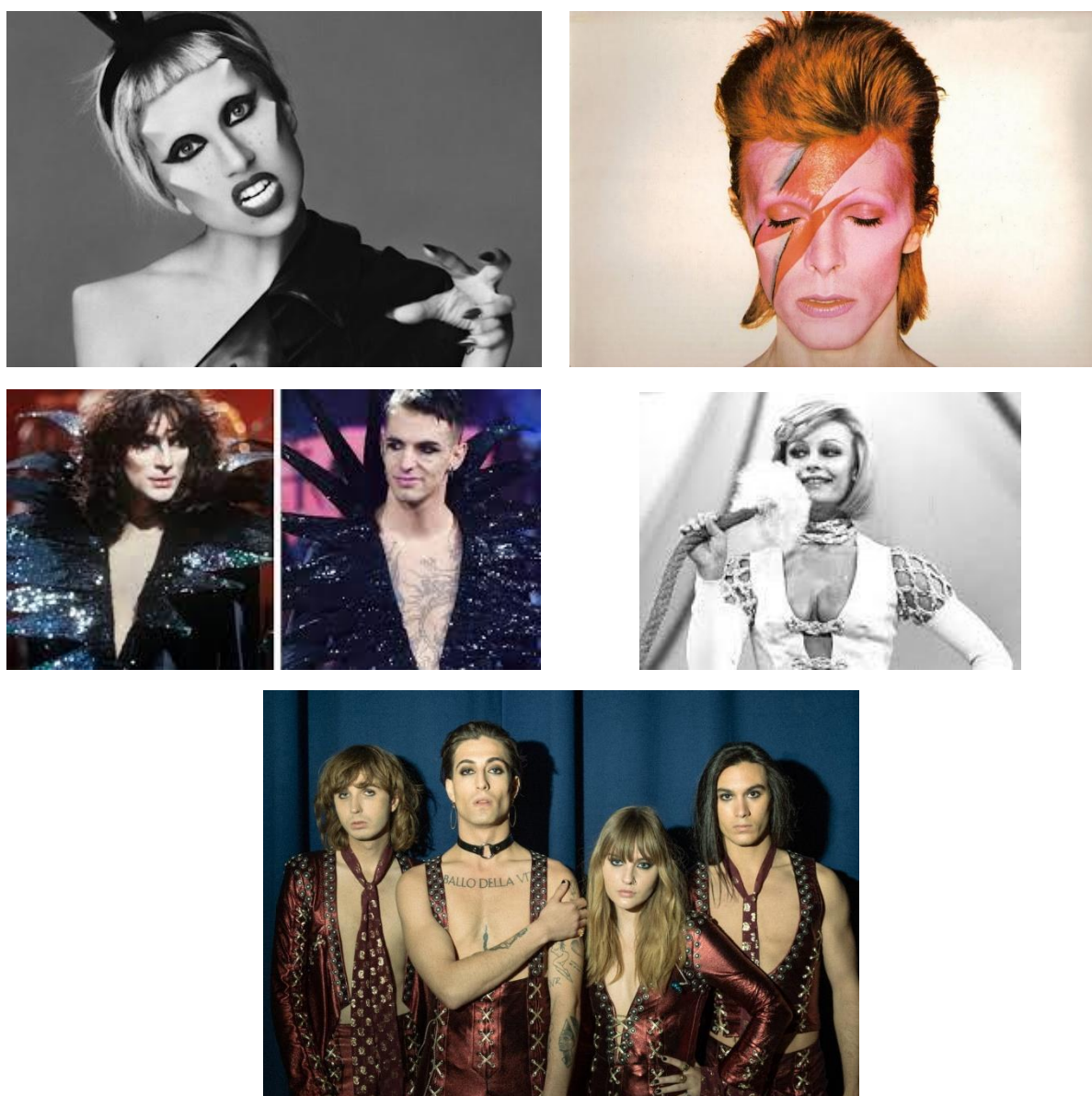
<sup>61</sup> Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Media\\_portrayal\\_of\\_LGBT\\_people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Media_portrayal_of_LGBT_people)

<sup>62</sup> Source: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/icon>

<sup>63</sup> Source: <https://www.cbc.ca/kidsCBC2/the-feed/famous-lgbtq-icons-that-are-active-in-the-lgbtq-community>

<sup>64</sup> Source: <https://www.gay.it/madonna-gay-glaad-award-video>

years of marriage with his first wife, declaring “*I’m gay, and I always have been*”<sup>65</sup>. The rock group Måneskin, which literally revolutionized the approach to rock music during the last year, has emerged on the worldwide stage thanks to their triumph in the Eurovision Contest 2021, winning the first place. They are not only incredibly young and brilliant, but they also aim to introduce new ideals and a disruptive way of being. They represent one of the genderless examples in the music context, communicating either through their song texts and through the stylistic choices in terms of clothing. Their stage costumes are all the same even if it is not an only-men group but there is also a girl among them. Men wear feminine-style clothes as well as the girl wears masculine ones.



*Figure 58 LGBTQ icons, in order: Lady Gaga, David Bowie, Renato Zero, Achille Lauro, Raffaella Carrà, Måneskin*

<sup>65</sup> Source: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/how-david-bowie-became-a-gay-icon-a6806041.html>

### ***3.2.6 History of the gender fluidity in fashion***

Fashion has always represented the mirror of society, walking side by side with contemporary trends. Typically, societal upheaval and changes influence street style and runways, but fashion can also serve as a spokesperson for social issues that need to be heard. When it comes to genderless fashion, we can state that the process of blurring the lines between genders has been long and is currently ongoing.

Designers felt the necessity to develop a style that could encompass both sexes as they evolved in a new manner of expressing themselves as the decades progressed.

The first appearance of a skirt in Italy occurred in the 1910s, and it caused quite a stir when “Il Corriere della Sera” published many articles about women being mocked and verbally assaulted on the streets for wearing clothes designed solely for males. This repulsiveness might be linked to the Victorian philosophy, which was very morally strict. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the respective roles of men and women were strengthened in the social tissue marking important divisions in gender roles. Actually, at the time of ancient Romans garments were completely interchangeable between men and women, only with small variations.

Only after the strict Victorian age the female fashion started to acquire some male elements thanks to a new involvement of women in the working environment due to the outbreak of the First World War which called men to fight at borders and women to replace men at working places. Thus, women needed to wear comfortable clothes suitable to work long shift in factories: the jumpsuit was born to satisfy these needs.

At this point in the history, prominent figures appeared, contributing to the creation of new trends and normalization of new fashions. Coco Chanel is one of these examples, photographed while wearing her lover’s trousers. Male garments found always more space in the women’s wardrobes lighting the spark for a gender fluid fashion.

The word “unisex” was officially born in the 1960s, when a new vision of woman was shaped giving her a masculine though sensual taste.

Although the acquisition of male characteristics in the womenswear has been long and tortuous, it found its way in contrast to the acquisition of female characteristics in the menswear that are still struggling to be accepted.

Pioneer of this new gender fluid tendency in menswear was Giorgio Armani that in the 1970s brought to the runway a new concept of man and woman, letting females to wear male garments and fabrics, while men’s suits were lightened both in shape and material.

In 1984, Jean-Paul Gaultier, following the footprints of Armani, presented the first “Men in skirts”. More recently, Gucci is considered the major spokesman of the genderless fashion. Both in 2015 and 2016, the creative director of Gucci presented gender fluid collections on the Milan catwalk.

This new approach to a genderless fashion becomes always more adopted, at first by street-style and afterwards also by haute couture.

In 2016, Louis Vuitton presented the Spring/Summer womenswear campaign portraying Jaden Smith as testimonial, who will soon become a real icon of gender fluidity. Riding the same wave, Chanel launched a make-up range dedicated to men called “Boy Chanel” promoting a genderless attitude that the Maison has always had since Coco Chanel embraced this ideology. Gender fluidity is not only a trend anymore, but a real movement founded on the freedom of expression. Clothes are the outer expression of our inner state, and everyone wants to feel free to express themselves as he/she better thinks without feeling the oppression of societal stereotypes. Every new season, many other brands decide to realize unisex collections without any distinction between men and women runways.

The breaking down of the boundaries between men’s and women’s fashion marks a definitive turning point in the fashion world. Themes like gender inclusion and gender fluidity are always more on stage in every field, including cinema, where celebrities decide to wear unisex dresses for their public appearances.

What fashion brands are trying to reach is, *in primis*, self-acceptance along with the lost self-esteem through the freedom of expression in the daily clothing, going beyond social labels and status quo<sup>66</sup>.

### **3.2.7 LGBTQ in marketing and advertising**

Marketers have discovered a target group with significant purchasing power in the LGBTQ community. As a result, businesses are increasingly advertising to LGBTQ individuals, and LGBTQ activists frequently utilize ad slogans to promote community beliefs. Because companies are progressively being held accountable not just for the quality of their products and services, but also for their positions on political and social issues, marketing brand messaging may be challenging. This becomes especially important when it comes to LGBTQ advertising. Because the LGBTQ community is such a hot topic, people are more affected in their purchasing decisions. According to a Google Consumer Survey from August 2014, young people (under 34 years old) said they are more inclined to repurchase a product if the firm is LGBTQ-friendly. When it comes to competition, more than half of customers would prefer the brand that promotes equality over the others. Because people's sensitivity to this subject is growing, brands haven't waited to launch marketing efforts that might involve the LGBTQ population<sup>67</sup>.

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<sup>66</sup> Source: <https://www.fashionforbreakfast.it/2019/01/la-moda-del-futuro-e-gender-fluid/>

<sup>67</sup> Source: <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/future-of-marketing/management-and-culture/diversity-and-inclusion/lgbt-advertising-brands-taking-stance-on-issues/>



“Rainbow-washing” refers to a collection of commercial and social actions designed to portray an LGBTQ-friendly reality in order to improve public acceptance.

Despite the growth in LGBTQ inclusion in advertising, there is still a segment of the community that is left out due to the white, homosexual males' dominance over the rest of the population. Many factors should be questioned while portraying the LGBTQ community, the first of which is whether the LGBTQ community is being correctly portrayed and, for the time being, if other members of the community are accepting the LGBTQ community.<sup>68</sup>

Consumer reactions to gay images in advertising were investigated by Eisend and Hermann (2019). They discovered that utilizing homosexual imagery in advertising that appeals to both homosexual and heterosexual customers is effective. However, there are certain dangers to consider while making such an advertising decision. Because of the varied views of consumers, the previous study's findings could not give a clear proposal on how to represent homosexuality in advertising. It's also true that how people react to portrayals of homosexuality is influenced by society's overall acceptance of and openness to homosexuality, which shifts over time, but Eisend and Hermann intended to look for distinct reactions. Thus, their findings show that the net persuasive effect of homosexual and heterosexual imagery, as well as gay male and lesbian advertising, is the same, implying that heterosexual consumers do not react differently to homosexual or heterosexual imagery in ads when differentiated between homosexual and heterosexual consumers. Furthermore, advertising variety might encourage consumers to think about others, eliciting sentiments of social connectedness, empathy, and appreciation for the diversity of commercial images. Furthermore, homosexual customers are more persuaded by homosexual representations than heterosexual consumers.

In general, implicit imagery is proven to function better for gay representations, but homosexual customers prefer explicit imagery, resulting in a win-win advertising strategy for both groups. When it comes to promoting a hedonistic product (i.e. a luxury product), homosexual representations are more effective, connecting gay male consumers with opulent and hedonistic lifestyles and consuming patterns. That might also explain why gay advertising in luxury brand campaigns could be extremely effective (Eisend & Hermann, 2019).

### **3.2.8 *The Brandscape construction***

A cursory analysis of the brand legacy, consumers, and culture in the LGBTQ context helped me define the brand territory in which Valentino implemented its gender fluid campaign.

As we can see from the Brandscape (figure 59), the LGBTQ culture is still a territory with many tensions which reflects its contradictions in the socio-cultural tissue. It represents a highly

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<sup>68</sup> Source: <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2019/07/01/the-3-pitfalls-lgbtq-marketing-only-representing-fraction-the-community>



divisive topic in which Valentino decided to stand from the side of freedom and equality, trying to fight gender barriers creating its own gender fluid point of view in the fashion landscape. Always unconventional in its choices, Valentino wanted to satisfy the needs of those consumers who look for independence and freedom of expression in their everyday lives, reflecting their inner world in their stylistic choices.

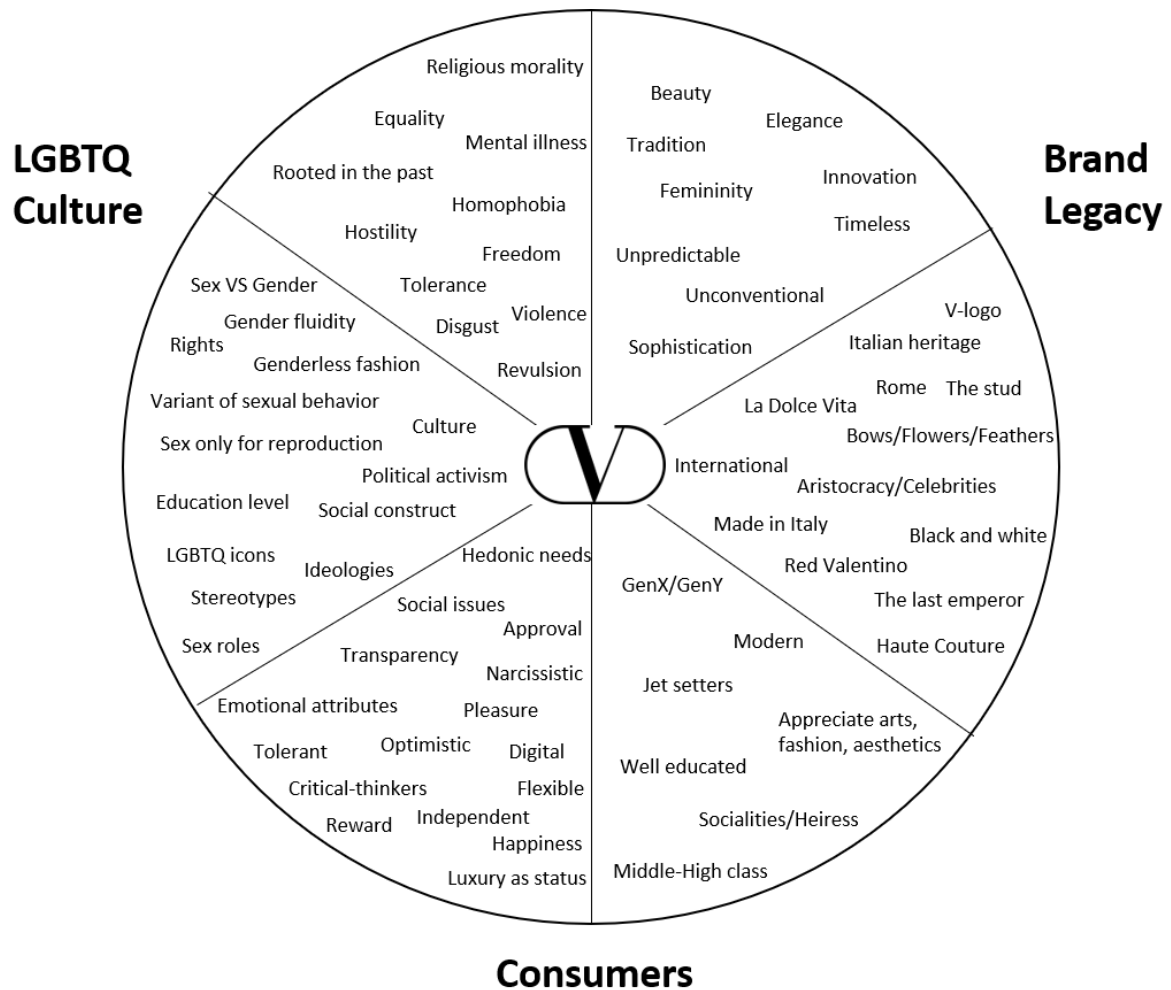


Figure 59 Valentino Brandscape

Everyone is free to be what they want to be, even though many people are still tied to morality and social constructs which contribute to create stereotypes and enclose human beings in sex roles that avoid them to go further in creating a different ideology of sexual behavior conceived only as a variant of the natural human sexual behavior and not as a mental illness or behavioral deviation.

To say it in semiotics words, the world is paradigmatically structured in the binary dimension: binary/non-binary. For *binary* I mean a world in which there is a clear distinction of masculinity and femininity and their respective roles in society with annexed stereotypes. On the other hand, there is a prospect of a *non-binary* world where everything is gender fluid, no distinctions

between genders, and maybe you will not find separated floors for men and women in stores because you will be free to wear how you feel and not how the others expect you to be.

### **3.3 VISUAL SEMIOTICS: ANALYSIS OF VALENTINO'S POST**

In this section, I am going to analyze the visual content of the Valentino's post. As we have seen in the previous section, semiotics is a discipline that studies the functioning of languages, that is those systems which establish relationships between a set of expressions and their contents. There are several different types of languages according to the field, subject or topic we may refer to. Thus, for the following analysis, I will use visual semiotics and deep dive into figurative semiotics to better recognize the hidden meanings of the image, how rich they are, and how they combine with others and furthermore, studying the visual text may help to comprehend how and what they communicate (Polidoro, 2020).

As Fabbri and Marrone (2000, pp. 8-9) clarify, semiotics examines not just written texts, but also all communicative products of any other language (sign, iconic, musical, etc), as well as any other aspect of important reality that may be investigated using semiotics methodology [...]. There are many distinct textual forms in today's media, each with its own language, dimension, communication span, and target audience.

The semiotic method attempts to go beyond a simplistic and naive view of mediatic products to investigate in depth the processes that govern consumption and social circulation of "objects" that are only superficially clear and lacking in complexity.

Every day, we are overwhelmed with a variety of mediatic messages without fully comprehending all of the sophisticated and nuanced logics that underpin them. It's as if we've gone blind in our reading of all the words that surround us, making it extremely difficult for marketers to capture our attention.

Texts are defined as complex and stratified cultural constructs whose individual parts are cohesive and coherent with one another; thus, analyzing a mediatic text entails analyzing a cultural product that goes beyond the idea that the text is just a tidy simple container of signs and verbal-visual messages and that it cannot be viewed as closed, rigid objects separated from the social environment (Peaverini, 2017).

After a brief introduction of visual semiotics and mediatic products, I am going deeper in the analysis in the following paragraph to find meaningful interpretations to the much-discussed picture.

#### ***3.3.1 Figurative analysis of Valentino***

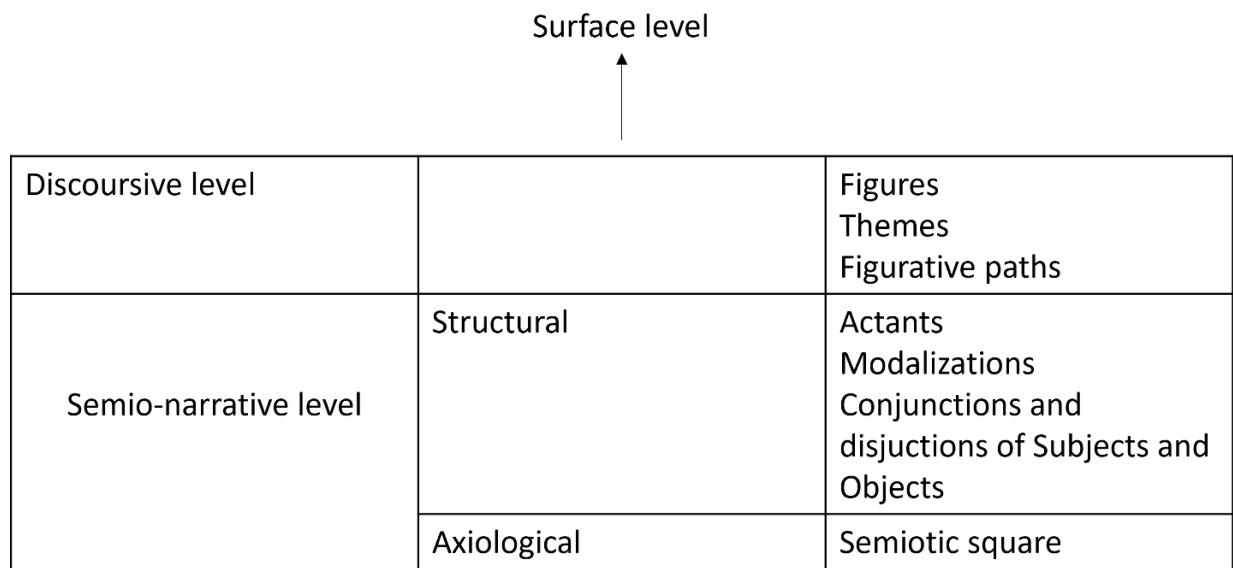
There exist two branches of visual semiotics: figurative semiotics and plastic semiotics. For my analysis I will only use figurative semiotics which is more appropriate for the understanding of

images (i.e. paintings, drawings, photographs etc.) meant as “representations of the world” (Polidoro, 2020).

Images, as tales, narrate stories and I would like to understand the sense of Valentino’s story, trying to figure out whether it is the most concrete representation of deeper meanings.

According to the Greimasian semiotic perspective (Greimas, 1970), there are different levels of depth and rules of semantic transformation that can be identified as:

- Structural/Axiological level
- Semio-narrative level
- Surface/Discursive level



*Figure 60 The generative trajectory*

We put values, such as brand values, at the deepest axiological level of the generative trajectory of meaning (figure 60), organized according to the logic of the semiotic square, that is, through the logical relations of contrariety, contradiction, and implication (figure 61) (Rossolatos, 2015).

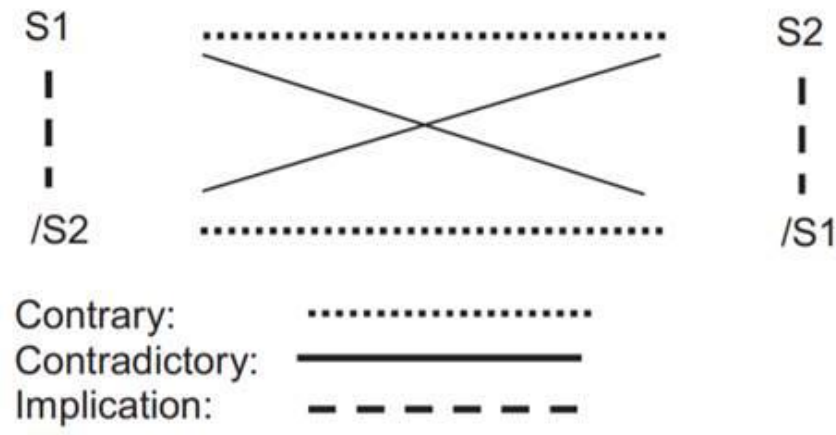


Figure 61 The semiotic square

It is not critical that the signified be present in a text; rather, it is critical that the signified be opposed by another signified. Furthermore, this web of relationships does not end with the simple opposition of one signified to its opposite, but instead gives rise to a more complicated structure known as the semiotic square (Polidoro, 2020).

A narrative syntax and a customized morphology of elements are proposed at the middle level of the trajectory; the syntax comprises the actantial model and the canonical narrative schema. The actantial model is closely connected to the canonical narrative schema, which is founded on the concept that a narrative consists of four phases (figure 62), notwithstanding the surface differences in the tale that differentiate one from the other (Polidoro, 2020):

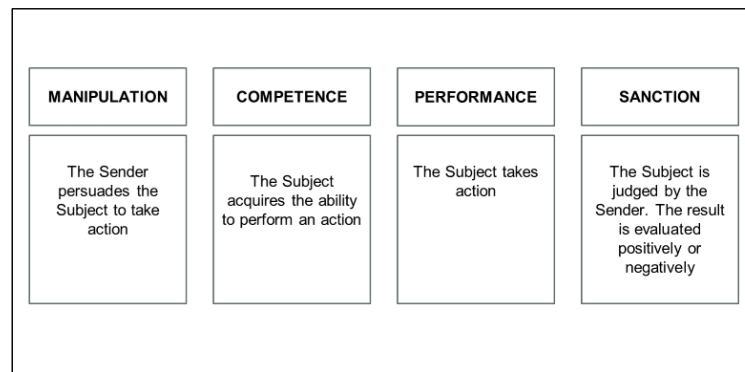


Figure 62 The actantial model

Finally, the story is further concretized at the discursive level by being inscribed in actors, actions, places, and times.

### 3.3.2 The semiotic square of Valentino

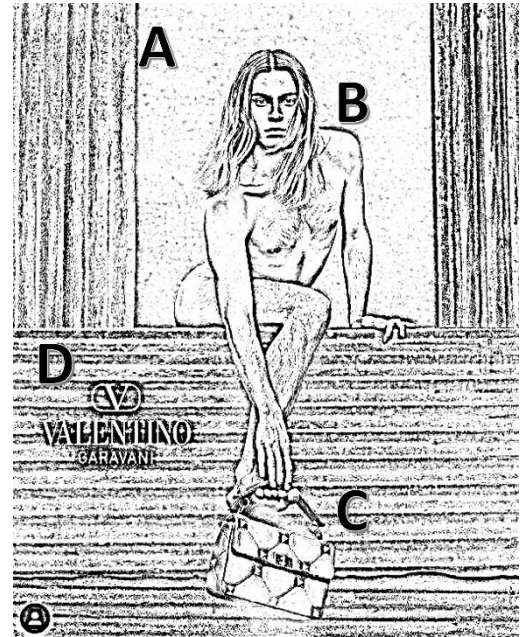
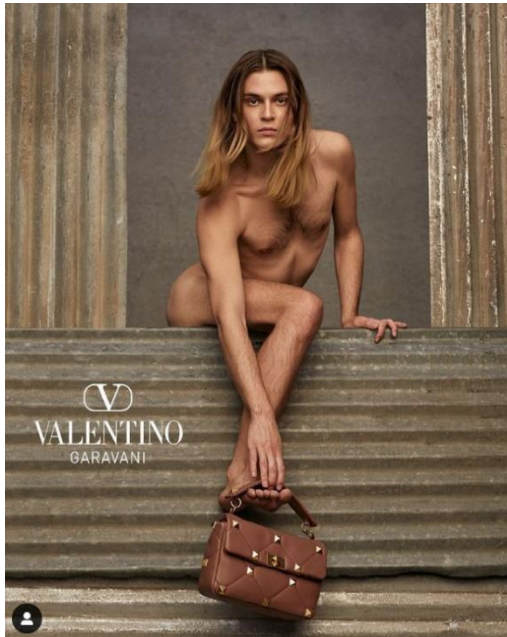


Figure 63 Decomposition of Valentino's picture

Starting from the deepest level of semio-narrative structures, we discover the basic semantic oppositions around which the text acquires meaning, according to Polidoro (2020).

From the background to the foreground, we can individualize four elements: Roman columns (A), the naked man (B), the bag (C), the brand logo (D) (figure 63). We can find a bond between the elements A and C, inasmuch we know that the Valentino's stud is inspired by the Roman architecture. There exists also a connection between A and B. Roman art have been strongly influenced by the Greek one. Nudes were highly appreciated by Romans both in sculptures and paintings, having a decorative function for their "domus". Thus, we have three elements connecting to the ancient Rome that is one of the constituent elements of the Maison's heritage. In addition, we find an opposition between ancient (Roman columns and naked man reminding to Greek-Roman sculptures) and modern (the bag, reinterpretation of an ancient symbol in a modern object). Finally, the element (D), the brand logo, represents the presence of the brand in the image but also a closing point: "You can find all this in Valentino". The logo may serve also as a brand recalling element for consumers and as a medium from/to which transferring meaning. Furthermore, the man is captured in motion, a movement that Ruggero Eugeni (1999) calls "blocked movement": the image represents the movement or action as if it was stopped in a precise moment. When representing movement, you can choose to capture different moments: the initial phase, the intermediate phase, the final phase. In our case, the photographer decided to shoot the intermediate phase, defined as the "durability aspect": we see the man jumping over the laid column on the ground. It can be interpreted as the willingness of the man to get out from the old world (represented metaphorically by the columns) coming into the new one

(represented metaphorically by the bag). Another opposition can be found in the naked body and the bag. We have the thematic opposition between nude/adornment attributable to a more abstract opposition at the semio-narrative level, the one between nature/culture. It seems that the bag represents the mean through which the man can enter the modern culture and break up with stereotypes of the ancient world.

The transformations present in the image can be represented by movements between these poles (figure 64). For example, if we go from S1 (ancient) to Not S1 (not ancient) we have a “negation” that is the denial of the ancient world. Then, moving from Not S1 (not ancient) to S2 (modern) we have an “affirmation” that is an exhortation to pass from the old ideologies about the LGBTQ community made of stereotypes, sex roles, and morality to a modern gender-fluid vision.

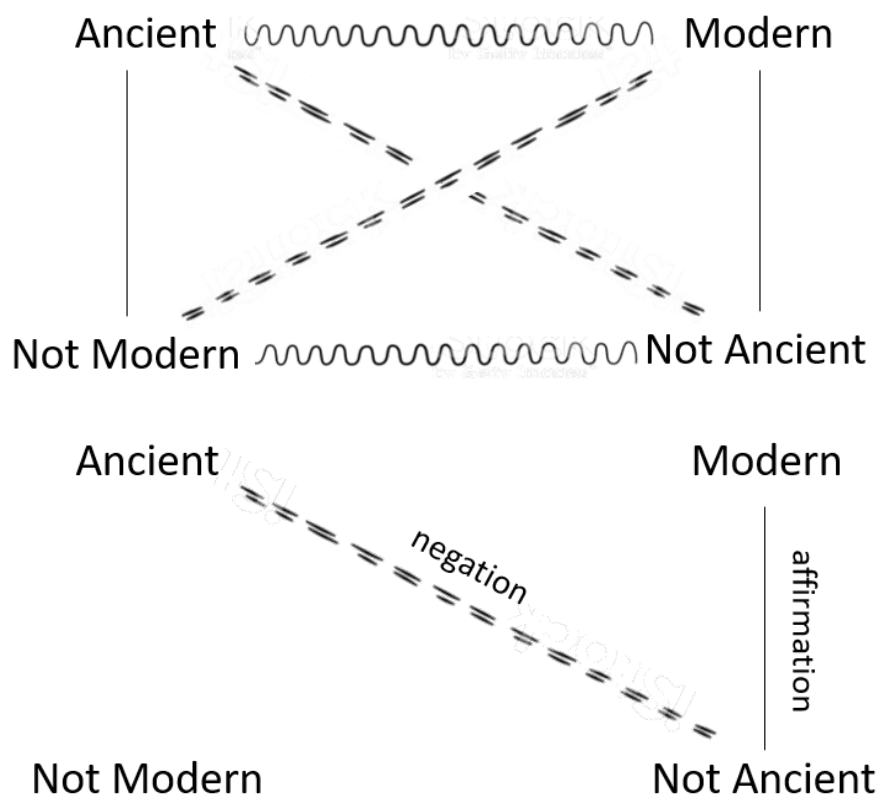


Figure 64 Semiotic square opposition Ancient/Modern

### 3.3.3 The canonical narrative schema

Starting from the canonical narrative schema (figure 62), we can distinguish different phases in which subjects and objects take action. Valentino’s case can be simplified as follows: the Subject (naked man and representative of the LGBTQ community) gets hold of the bag representing, in this case, the valuable object both in terms of intrinsic value (price) and abstract value (freedom of expression). The Sender of this action can be identified into the brand,

Valentino, which promises the fulfillment of aspirational and hedonic values by means of a material object.

### 3.3.4 *The discursive structures*

The last level of the generative trajectory is the one of the discursive structures, in which the abstract semio-narrative structures embody, in concrete, objects and subjects.

The different elements of the discursive level can be grouped in *themes*, that is an ensemble of characters, situations, and objects bound by a coherence and that are used to be represented always together. Every theme will bring with it *thematic roles* (i.e. typical characters) and *figures* (i.e. objects) suitable for that theme.

In the case of Valentino, we could have, for example, a broad thematic area that we can be called “freedom of expression” in which we can have the theme “LGBTQ”. Even though the discursive structures are more concrete than the semio-narrative ones, they do not represent the last phase of the generative trajectory. In fact, texts of different nature can share same steps stated so far but being finally enclosed in different surface levels which correspond to the text we see. In this sense, Greimas allows us to compare, on the same level, texts of different nature, like paintings, photographs, narratives and others (Polidoro, 2020).

For instance, in iconography, the homoeroticism has always been represented by gay men, in feminine poses and in naked bodies. In the ancient Greece and Rome, these men almost always appeared in couples, representing the concept of homoeroticism diffused at that time which was other than scandalous but something very common (figure 65)<sup>69</sup>.

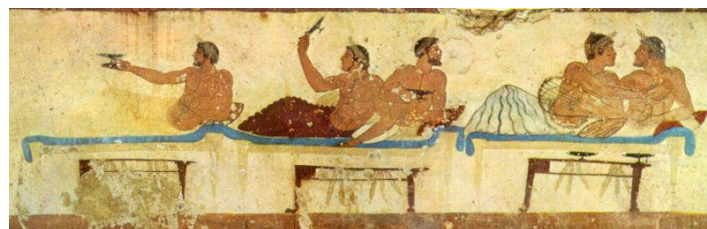
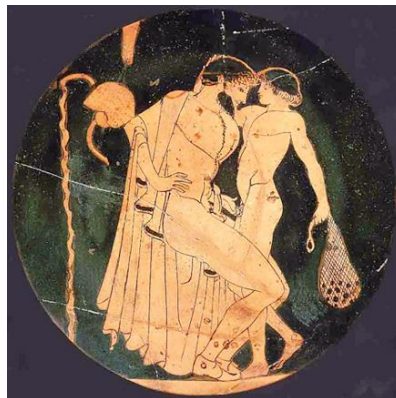


Figure 65 Homoeroticism representations in the ancient Rome

<sup>69</sup> Source: <http://www.luzappy.eu/omosessualita/iconografia.htm>



### 3.3.5 The theory of enunciation in visual semiotics

In linguistics, the enunciation is the act of using any kind of language to produce an utterance in a particular spatio-temporal setting. Then, we can extend this topic to semiotics considering texts like paintings or photographs as *visual utterances* and thus we can speak about *visual enunciation*. The person who produces the utterance is called *enunciator* while the one who receives it is the *enunciatee*. The two subjects together are the *subjects of the enunciation*, while our *utterance* will be the *enunciated discourse* (figure 66).

Enunciative structures can be identified in every story. In particular, enunciative structures can be fundamental to build brand's identity and personality.

For example, in brand communication, the brand itself is portrayed as the enunciator of the advertising message.

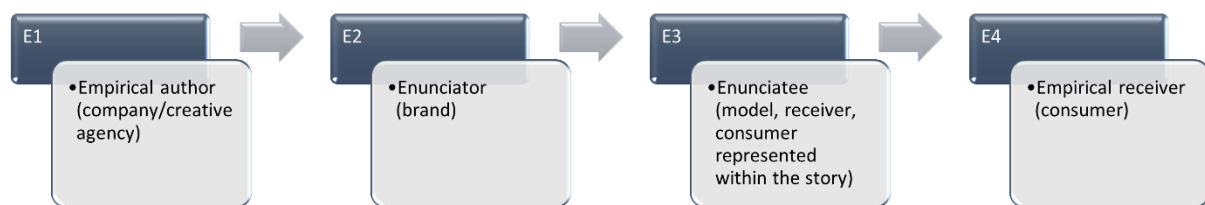


Figure 66 Enunciative structure in brand communication

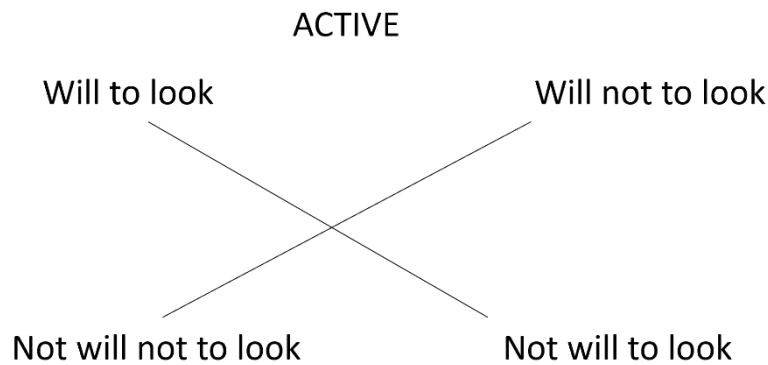
Thus, a brand should be seen not only as a character in an advertisement's narrative but also as a subject that narrates. We have previously seen that in the Valentino's picture, the presence of the brand is clear and explicated in the brand logo embedded in the photo.

When talking about an utterance, we involve spaces, times, and people. Thus, we project in the utterance some spatio-temporal and personal categories. This projection has been called, by the Greimasian theory, *débrayage* which means "detachment". This mechanism can be also used to interpret visual texts. The first to approach *débrayage* in visual semiotics was Schapiro (2002) in an essay of 1973, who found different meanings according to the frontal or in profile representation of figures. The faces in profile appear detached from the observer giving an effect of objectivity, while the faces represented frontally contribute to create a dichotomy I/you in which the spectator (the "you") is not represented, but it is like he was involved. In this case, we will have an engagement effect which is more emotional and immersive.

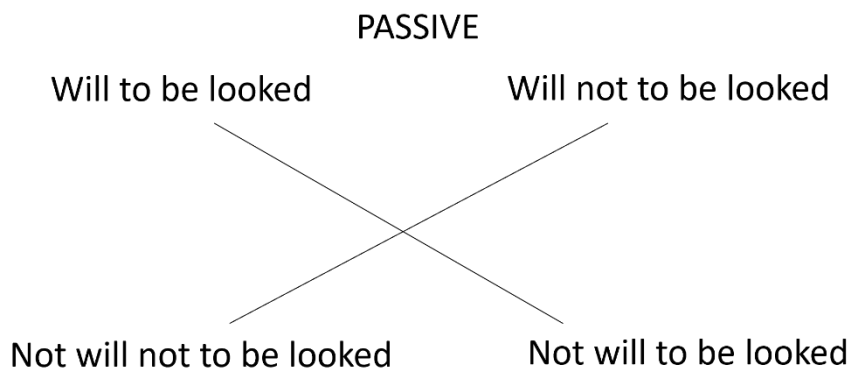
The photographer of Valentino probably wanted to recreate this effect having the man looking frontally to the spectator.

Omar Calabrese (1985b) delved more into the different positions of the gaze that could be found in art and photography. It may be said that the protagonist of the picture can, at the same time, look at the observer (active action) and also be looked by the observer (passive action). This

“looking” can be modalized according to the “will”, which is the character’s willingness to both look at and be looked at by the observer (figures 67 and 68).



*Figure 67 Semiotic square of the active "looking"*



*Figure 68 Semiotic square of the passive "looking"*

This opposition can be better explained using again the semiotic square:

combining in a double-entry table the poles of the two quadrants, we would obtain sixteen different situations, that can be used to define different kinds of portraits. In our case, the subject expresses the “will to be looked” + “will to look”, in fact the subject is portrayed frontally and looks at the spectator and let the spectator look at him back (Polidoro, 2020).

The willingness of the photographer to directly engage the spectator using the visual tools entails the use of the metaphor as a rhetorical figure. The most used rhetorical figures in advertising are metaphor and metonymy. In particular, metaphor links signifiers by means of their shared characteristics, or similarities. With the use of metaphor, the photographer wants to make a comparison between two similar terms, replacing one similar term by another. The advantage of using rhetorical figures is the possibility to communicate more than concepts contributing to the breadth and depth of brand meanings that can be created in advertising. The picture of Valentino uses metaphor to make a comparison between the bag and the gender fluid figure of the man, inviting people, who want to reach that status of freedom giving importance to individuality, to buy the bag, more specifically Valentino. Furthermore, when used for luxury brands’ advertising, the metaphor contributes to create a detachment with the figure to be

admired from a distance. Most of the times the models look directly into the camera, putting the spectator in the position of viewer of a fantastic, inaccessible, and rare world (Oswald, 2012). In addition, the choice of the photographer to portray himself is not by chance but can represent another way to stress the idea of individuality reported in the post's caption.

As we know, posts on Instagram do not come only in the form of visuals but the creator can choose to add also a caption. This text has the function to anchor the connotative meaning of the visual text, selecting only the right sense of the image that the author wanted to convey.

In fact, the post on Maison Valentino is a combination of visual and text (figure 27). The text conveys the clear willingness of the brand to stand for values such as freedom of expression and appreciation for the boundlessness of individuality.

### **3.4 SOCIAL MEDIA LISTENING**

In this paragraph I will conduct a brief social media listening of Maison Valentino with a focus on the Instagram account of the brand.

Social media listening is the process of identifying and assessing what is being said about a company, individual, product or brand on the Internet. Since conversations on social media have become a huge source of data, these data may be used to extract useful insights on the target market and potential customers/users. Monitoring conversations is fundamental to adjust strategy and see what people say, like, suggest about your business<sup>70</sup>.

Valentino is present on many social networks in order to cover a large target, including America and China. We can find the company presence on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Spotify, Snapchat, Pinterest, WeChat, Weibo, Line, Kakao, and xiaohogshu. I will focus my analysis on Instagram because this is the channel on which the Michael Bailey Gates' picture had a larger impact and reactions from the audience.

Valentino keeps fans up to date on the brand's initiatives and entices them with sneak peaks, also knowing how much celebrity endorsements are important to gain more recognition. Its tone of voice conveys formality, modernity with a touch of romanticism<sup>71</sup>.

The following analysis will be based on a time period of six months, starting from March 2021 to September 2021. The data for the analysis has been retrieved from reports of Phlanx and Not Just Analytics of the Maison's Instagram account.

Valentino counts 15.3M followers on Instagram, that can be classified according to the type of audience being:

- 81% (12.4M) Real People
- 2% (306K) Influencers

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<sup>70</sup> Source: <https://searchcustomerexperience.techtargget.com/definition/social-media-listening>

<sup>71</sup> Source: [https://issuu.com/amyhenry9/docs/valentino\\_-\\_compressed](https://issuu.com/amyhenry9/docs/valentino_-_compressed)

- 17% (2.6M) Not Engaging

With an average of:

- 17.1K interactions per post (engagement)
- 17K likes per post
- 133.8 comments per post

The engagement rate, a fundamental metric to measure the level of engagement/interaction with followers generated from created content or a brand campaign<sup>72</sup>, is of 0,25% which is lower than the average for profiles having more than 100.00 followers (1.7% average engagement rate). On the other hand, authentic engagement – the practice of reaching out and attempting to make a sincere and genuine connection with someone on social media through likes, retweets, shares, and most importantly comments and conversations<sup>73</sup> – is of 39.5K interactions per post. Digging deeper in the followers’ demographics (figure 69), we can read from the graphs above

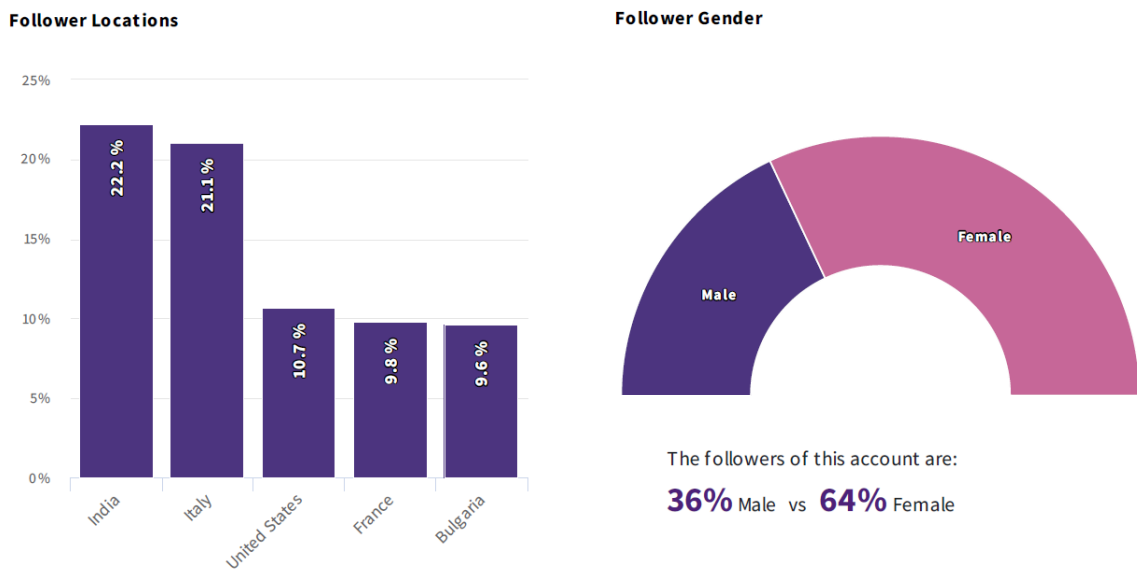


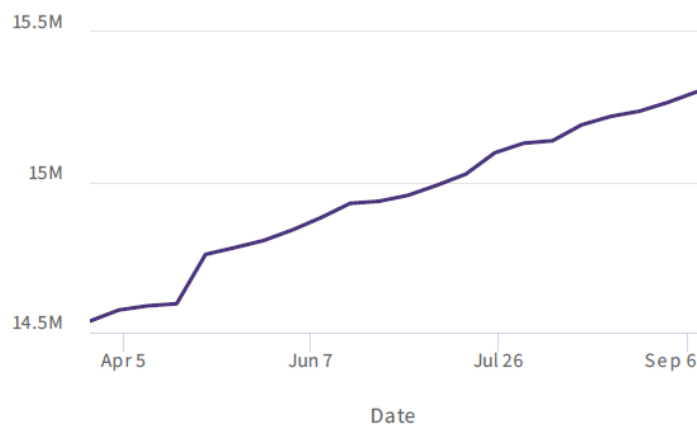
Figure 69 Phlanx 2021: Follower demographics data

that the greatest steak of audience comes from India (22.2%) and Italy (21.1%), followed by the United States (10.7%), France (9.8%), and Bulgaria (9.6%). Furthermore, more than half audience (64%) is made by women VS a 36% of men.

<sup>72</sup> Source: <https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/knowledge/ecommerce-saas/engagement-rate/>

<sup>73</sup> Source: <https://www.gaggleamp.com/what-is-social-media-engagement#:~:text=Authentic%20social%20media%20engagement%20is,mmost%20importantly%20comments%20and%20conversation.>

### Follower Growth Over Time



28 March 2021 - 8 September 2021

Figure 70 Phlanx 2021: Follower Growth

Followers displayed a constant growth in the last six months with an exceptional negative peak in April that could be associated to the posting of the scandalous picture I extensively talked about in the previous paragraphs and that costed a loss of 12 316 followers (figure 70)<sup>74</sup>. Maison Valentino’s posting activity is on a daily basis with an average of 1.82 posts per day.

### Hashtags



Figure 71 Phlanx 2021: Most used hashtags

<sup>74</sup> Source: <https://www.notjustanalytics.com/>

Captions most used



Figure 72 Phlanx 2021: Most used captions by @maisonvalentino

In figures 71 and 72 are reported the most used hashtags and captions on the Maison’s profile considering the last six months.

In figure 73 are represented the top four most engaging posts of the last six months. A first place for Michael Bailey Gates’ picture, counting 234.3K likes and 13.4K comments, which is quite high for the average number of comments of @maisonvalentino (133.8 comments per post), meaning that people had a lot to say about that, but what was the real sentiment of these comments?

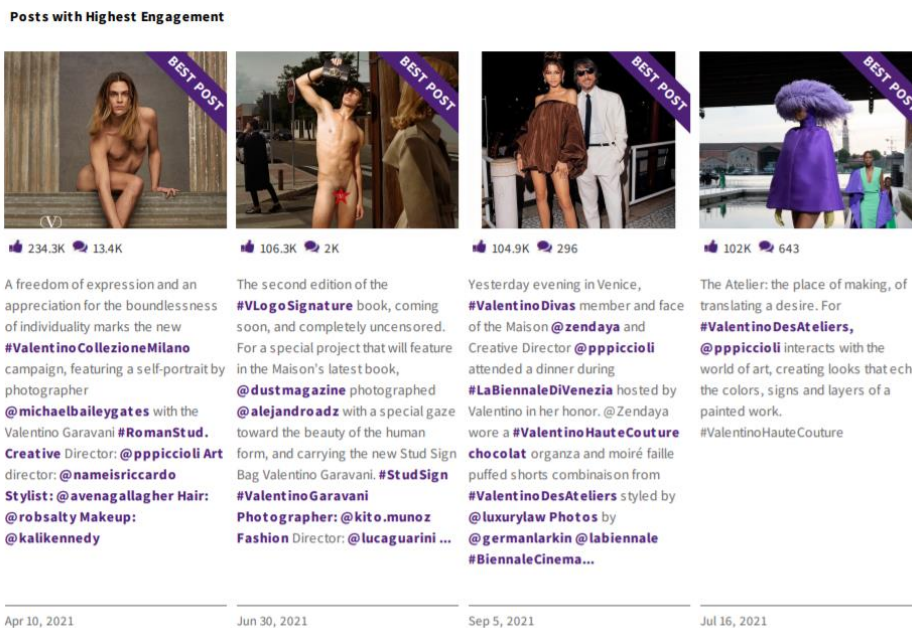


Figure 73 Posts with highest engagement

### 3.4.1 Sentiment analysis

To better comprehend what people think and write about the controversial image, I used a powerful tool, called NVivo, to conduct qualitative research on the post’s comments.



Qualitative research aims at analyzing and interpreting non-numerical data, such as a text or a video or even photographs, and this is just our case.

The first step in my qualitative research was downloading the comments through a software called ExportComments which is able to export social media comments into an Excel file ready for analysis.

The second step consisted in the import of my Excel file, containing in total 10 784 comments (the number of comments downloaded was less than the one that appears on the Instagram page probably because the exported file did not include nested comments and double comments of the same person that may derive from errors of Instagram) into the NVivo software.

A preliminary analysis with the “Word Frequency” tool, gave me back two interesting charts displayed below.



Figure 74 NVivo: Word Cloud

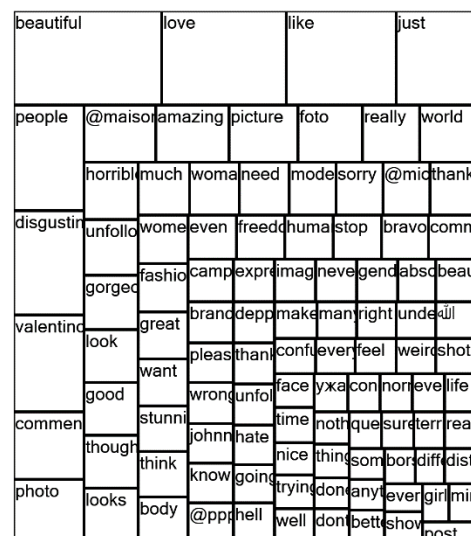


Figure 75 NVivo: Tree Map

These charts are built on the 1000 most frequent words/concepts with at least 4 letters that appear in the comments.

More specifically, in the Word Cloud (figure 74) we can easily identify the most recurrent words which appear bigger than the others, such as: beautiful, love, like, disgusting, Valentino etc. Whereas, the Tree Map (figure 75) shows data in a hierarchical order as a set of nested rectangles of varying sizes. Starting from the most common discussed arguments, the map displays all the other words related to those concepts, becoming smaller going from the left to the right of the outer rectangle.

In a second analysis, I ran a sentiment analysis of comments to understand the overall feelings of users.

Two charts have been produced. The first one (figure 76) shows the segmentation of comments according to sentiment (positive VS negative) but it also talks about the magnitude of positivity and negativity highlighting how much they are positive or negative (very VS moderately).

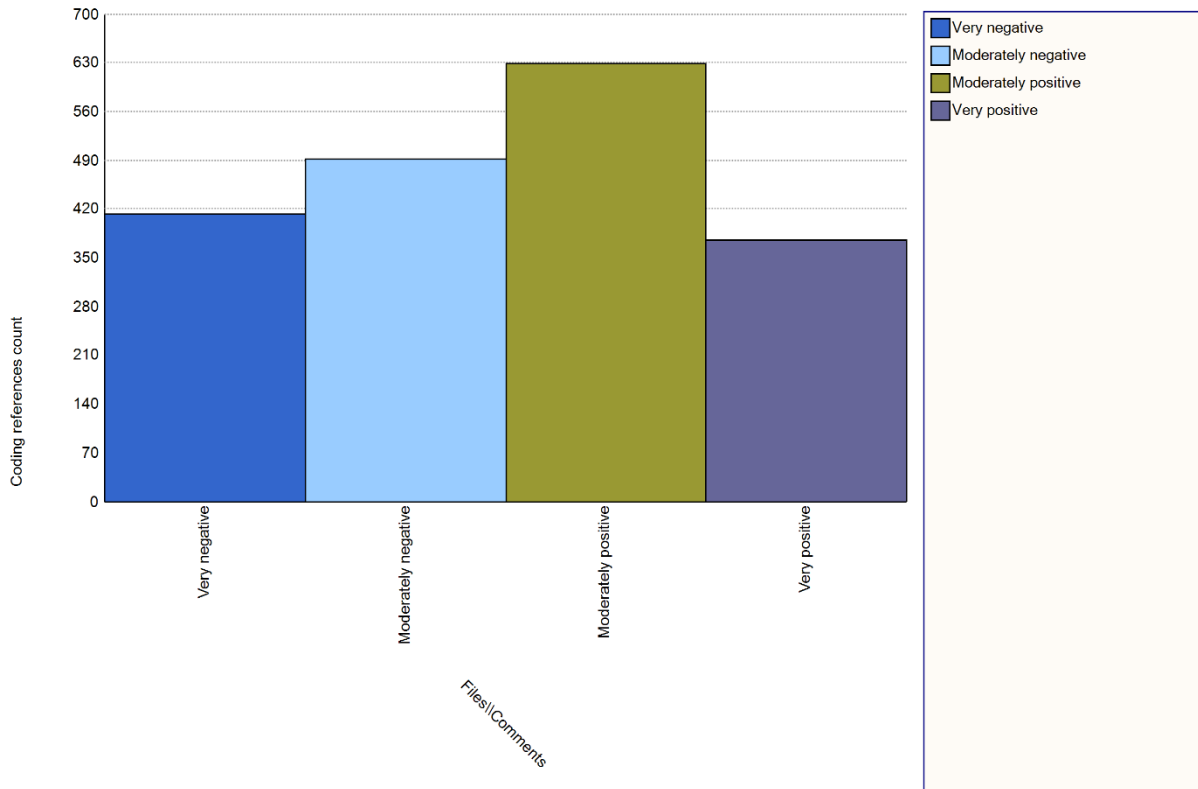


Figure 76 NVivo: Sentiment chart

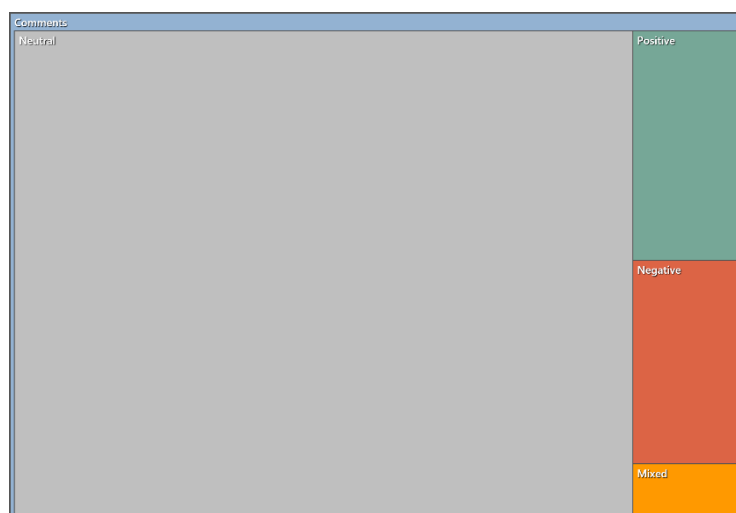


Figure 77 NVivo: Hierarchy Chart Sentiment

The second one (figure 77), instead, displays the hierarchy of sentiment from which we can observe a large quantity of neutral comments (9184), almost equal quantities of positive (761) and negative (675) comments, and a little quantity of mixed ones (164).

For a deeper understanding of the issues raised below the post, I went through all the single comments trying to identify Theme Nodes – recurrent topics in source material – to enrich the analysis and eventually find linkages to semiotic meanings previously identified.

After a careful screening of comments, I could identify six categories of feelings:

- 1) Approval: in which we can find all comments concerning beauty, love, appreciation, amazement and support.
- 2) Disapproval: in which we can find all kinds of insulting, sarcastic sentences, and dislike.
- 3) Criticism: in this category, many topics are concerned such as gender issues, marketing deployment, women discrimination, children safeguard, and the man's exterior aspect.
- 4) Boycotting: this relates to comments in which people threaten the brand to boycott or incite others to not buy Valentino or unfollow the brand.
- 5) Confusion: there is a little steak of people that appeared to be confused by the image and the overall sense that it wanted to convey associated with the brand's values.
- 6) Nostalgia: in this section we can clearly see people expressing concern for a brand that is not the same anymore, suggesting changing creative director or expressing nostalgia for the old management of the brand.

People who approved Valentino's post demonstrated a complete understanding of what Piccioli wanted to communicate and have been able to read the picture from a different point of view. They express all their love and appreciation for the Maison capable of having taken a stand and having encouraged to freedom of expression, fighting gender stereotypes.

One of the users commented:

*"...It is as if a Greek sculpture came to life only to wear the brand bag..."*

It seems that he caught one of the photographer's inspirations referring to the ancient Greek and Roman sculptures.

All those who appreciated the post appeared to be positively astonished, affirming that it was the further proof of Valentino's greatness and capacity to adapt to modern times.

On the other hand, we collocate people who extremely disapproved the picture and the choice of posting such a provocative image. This segment was uncomfortable with the image, suggesting deleting the post and asserting that even freedom of expression has its limits that must not be surpassed. Disapproval comes also from a mere visual aesthetic point of view, according to which the problem is not in the portraying of the man but in the bad aesthetic of the photo. Some argue that the image is unsuitable for the purpose of selling anything since it diverts the consumer's attention away from the product and onto the subject of the image.

Many critics said that using a guy in a female-targeted advertisement was unnecessary, and that the world is heading in the wrong direction since businesses are beginning to mainstream such subjects. Others were irritated by the man's unnatural body position, seeing the entire image as

a transformation of a manly human body into a feminine one. They would have bought the bag instead of unfollowing the brand's page if the model had been a female model. There are also others who criticize the luxury industry as a whole, claiming that companies are "getting sicker" by supporting certain causes and that they may be fashionable and unconventional in a variety of different ways.

According to many, Valentino's support for this freedom of expression turned out to be nothing more than a marketing ploy. People were more concerned with "woke washing" than with an uninterested way of taking a position for a worthy cause as a result of the need to be inclusive by every means.

*"I don't think this photo is aligned with the brand image of Valentino",* one person says. Many individuals appear to be clinging to Valentino Garavani's creative direction, failing to accept Pierpaolo Piccioli's new touch of modernism and comprehend the Maison's new style. We have seen a gradual shift in Valentino's creativity with the arrival of Piccioli, despite the brand's absolute commitment to its heritage. Many times, Piccioli expressed his readiness for a change in Valentino's universe, which many people do not understand yet.

Some refer to the previous creative approach as the "real Valentino," expressing nostalgia for the Emperor's legacy, which was always marked by elegance, refinement, and excellent taste. They believe the original brand has been compromised, and they do not expect Valentino to support such stylistic choices. They call for a return to elegance and tradition, expressing concern against succumbing to the "*cliché*" in order to fit in with the other companies.

*"I feel brands don't respect women anymore. They just want to bush the agenda..."*

Someone claims that brands do not respect women anymore and that they just continue to discriminate them, still putting men in a dominant position with respect to women. They are afraid that men would try to steal the place that women have worked hard to achieve in recent years, affirming to respect roles also in the fashion world.

There are also occasional references to kids' safeguard, expressing the fear that this new world may alter the new generation's reality in an unrecoverable manner.

Confusion is present in the numerous comments. Some users do not understand the purpose, concept, or message of the campaign blaming the management direction of not giving a continuum to this topic, leading to a misinterpretation of the brand's intentions of selling a bag or standing for a worthy cause.

Some boycotting comments appeared on the list too, and sometimes encouraged also other people to not buy or unfollow the brand.

Many were the insulting and sarcastic sentences, such as those that associate the man portrayed in the picture with the cartoon character of Tarzan, both in the aspect and behavior of a wild man.

As we can understand, not everyone appreciated the bold choice of Valentino and many are the unpleasant comments below the picture. Something undoubtedly went wrong with this campaign, to prove that also the 12 316 followers lost due to this publication.

It can be thought that Valentino exposed too much on a topic about which people are still so divided and not ready to complete acceptance. Maybe, Valentino could have followed the footprints of all the other brands, aligning its communication strategy to the ones already existing in the market, but Piccioli decided for the hardest path, the one of not being predictable and not conform to what is becoming mainstream. It could be exactly for these reasons that he chose the unconventional, but it seems that not everybody is ready to see Valentino in this new guise, on the contrary people still stick to the “old Valentino” and want to see it for much longer.

## **CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION**

### **4.1 RESULTS AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

At the end of this research, which endowed me with a greater knowledge and comprehension of the brand activism topic and semiotic subject, I would like to provide some useful explanations and consequences to the research questions that I wanted to investigate: 1) was the Valentino’s campaign appropriate and in line with its brand identity? and 2) why the campaign sparked such hatred and turmoil?

Brands have started to get more involved in socio-political issues, engaging in brand activism. Since brand activism cannot be considered an easy practice to be implemented, previous literature suggested some actions and fundamental values that require to exist and be performed properly. These can be listed: authenticity, transparency, consistency, materiality, leadership, and ethics.

As we have seen, Valentino’s campaign involved in LGBTQ activism, did not turn to be a complete success, maybe because of the lack of synchronization of some of the abovementioned values. What people criticized was the dissonance between the aesthetic of Valentino’s campaign and the brand DNA and heritage. Vredenburg (2020) stated that brand activism could turn into a success as long as company’s mission and values are aligned with the activist marketing and corporate activism.

People are still attached to the old version of Valentino, the one left by the “last Emperor”, the one funded on elegance, femininity, and sophistication. Thus, the mismatch between brand identity and socio-political cause, perceived by the audience in the campaign, was too much.

From the literature, Mandler (1982) affirms that a mild incongruity could be beneficial inasmuch the brand and the cause may lead to more intriguing consumer developments and assessments.

People's notions and beliefs on the homosexual issues are very rooted in the past and human beings do not like it when their beliefs are questioned or attacked because this may generate an imbalance in their own self identities. People, sometimes, become so attached to brands that may consider the brands an extension of their own identities contributing every day to the fulfillment and confirmation of some crucial needs and values that once questioned may lead to very negative reactions.

Valentino did not find the "optimal" incongruence. It is true that the brand message deviated from conventional standards (i.e. binarism) and the company's past reputation in order to create a somewhat imbalance (i.e. undisputed elegance of feminine bodies), but the viewers perceived the divergence threatening (fear for a non-binary world), and the deviation from societal norms was not limited, instead provocative and challenging for cultural values.

Furthermore, this failure may have influenced brand perceptions in a negative manner, leading some followers and fans of the brand to unfollow the page, to not buy the bag (i.e. boycotting), or to not repurchase, losing some loyal or potential customers.

## **4.2 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The current research may serve for marketers and/or businesses as an example of good and bad actions when it comes to LGBTQ activism. As we could understand, semiotics could be an interesting and efficient methodology to use when doing marketing strategy. Significations behind the common surface of things can be deeper than what they seem and also misinterpreted by people. Concerning marketing advertisements, sometimes it is better to keep it simple because not everyone is capable and possess the instruments to read under the surface, trying to catch deeper meanings. Being the internet a vast and heterogeneous space where everybody can say what they think, businesses may prefer a more unequivocal communication to protect their reputation and limit risks.

## **4.3 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Despite the importance and relevance of using semiotics before implementing a marketing strategy and the provision of important instances of some of the most influential luxury brands approaching LGBTQ activism that could serve as benchmarks, the present study implicates also limitations and opportunities for future research.

These limitations could be detected, mainly, in the qualitative analysis conducted with NVivo.



This software is capable to return sentiment analysis conducted on a set of imported data but we have to acknowledge some limits of this tool, being a program that implements auto-coding for analysis. In fact, it is not able to take each single piece of content and rate it on a Likert sentiment scale, but it looks at the sentiment of words in isolation without taking into account the context. Thus, for example, it cannot recognize:

- Sarcasm
- Double negatives
- Slang
- Dialect variations
- Idioms
- Ambiguity

For these reasons, I tried to remedy this lack of accuracy with a manual coding and extraction of Theme Nodes by scanning through the comments.

Furthermore, the software does not recognize emoticons (the data set analyzed was plenty of emoticons expressing love, disgust or appreciation) and comments were not all in the same language. Thus, the results of sentiment analysis could have been a little bit biased returning more neutral comments that the software could not categorize in a clear section.

Future research may be suggested to fill these gaps by, for example, proceeding with a cleaning of the data set (which entails transforming emoticons in words, such as love or disgust), and translating all the comments in the same language (which is a quite long and difficult operation considering the presence of some complex and mostly unknown languages that could be Arabic, Chinese, Japanese etc.) considering also slangs, idioms, and dialect variations.

The analysis could be also enriched with socio-demographic information about users that, actually, are not accessible by people outside the company because of privacy issues, but they could provide a more detailed analysis with a deeper understanding of the target, segmenting results by interesting characteristics, such as: gender, sex, country, and level of education.

## SUMMARY

Brand activism is a new phenomenon in which companies and brands adopt an activist mode and openly express their opinion about a cause or problem (Kotler & Sarkar, 2020). As reported in Kotler and Sarkar's book published in 2020, Wikipedia defines activism as follows:

*“Activism consists of efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to make improvements in society. Forms of activism range from writing letters to newspapers or to politicians, political campaigning, economic activism such as boycotts or preferentially patronizing businesses, rallies, street marches, strikes, sit-ins, and hunger strikes.”*

This practice has a two-fold aim: it can create buzz around the brand enhancing positive behaviors of consumers and lead to customer loyalty (Shivakanth Shetty et. al, 2019) and, at the same time, it may put brands in a position of educators for society, influencing consumer behavior, or as legitimate source of cultural power, having the responsibility to incite societal change (Moorman, 2020).

As long as globalization has extended markets and raised demand for consumer goods and products, developing a brand image through new enticing ways may become critical to maintaining market competitiveness (Capriotti, 2013).

Taking a position has become so crucial for companies that abstention and neutrality no longer work and may even do more harm than good (Korschun and Smith, 2018). There is no longer a choice, but people are demanding companies to take a stand on major social issues because they need companies to be supportive or work with the social cause in order to improve things, due to a generalized distrust in public institutions. In the face of injustices, social and environmental issues, citizens and businesses do not stay apathetic. Instead, people began to actively participate in order to affect change on a larger scale. Most importantly, stakeholders can influence the system through a variety of methods, including voting, demonstrations, petitions, conveying views and attitudes, and, more recently, social media (Fernandes, 2020; Korschun et al., 2020).

Many businesses have already developed a reputation for doing the right thing because they do things that matter to people, but many others are still struggling in the hopes of profiting from increased attention that brand activism may provide. Implementing such a strategy entails matching brand values with the social cause.

Values play a fundamental role in gaining authority and reputation and in order to preserve this reputation, principles such as authenticity, transparency, consistency, materiality, leadership, and ethics must turn into real actions to avoid the perception of using brand activism only as a marketing ploy.

Practicing brand activism may be both beneficial and harmful. Consumers might engage in boycotts to penalize a company or brand for unethical or socially irresponsible behavior or policies (Gardberg & Newburry, 2009). A boycott can have a number of negative consequences for a firm, including decreased sales, cash flow, and stock prices (Farah & Newman, 2009), reputation or brand image, customer attitudes, and purchasing intentions (Farah & Newman, 2009; Klein, Smith, & John, 2004). According to Romani et al. (2015), businesses should work on preventing unfavorable consumer reactions and eventually create successful methods to recover from poor corporate behaviors, such as providing trustworthy explanations and avoiding hatred, bad publicity, and negative WOM.

What people look for the most is authentic brand activism described as “*a purpose- and values-driven approach in which a brand adopts a nonneutral stand on institutionally disputed sociopolitical problems, to achieve social change and marketing success*” according to a study published in 2020 by Vredenburg et al. Stakeholders must have faith in organizations, and becoming a trustworthy company necessitates openness and transparency. People are more likely to accept a company's political stance if they believe in it. Consumers like predictability over unexpected shifts, therefore they look for consistency in the actions of businesses.

Marketers believe that millennials and Gen-Z are the most important and profitable consumer groups defined by a great buying power and a long-life expectancy (Twenge et al., 2008), constituting, nowadays, the largest group of real buyers (Terrell, 2019). As millennials and Generation Z are more likely to seek authentic and culturally relevant brands (Terrell, 2019), honesty and transparency in brand marketing and advertising communication become more important (Bergh & Behrer, 2013) and companies are being pushed to be more socially responsible and act outside of their commercial interests (Steckstor, 2012). According to the Edelman Earned Brand Global Report (2018), new-age customers are more ethical and value-driven, and they are more likely to boycott or switch brands if they are dissatisfied (Shivakanth Shetty et. al, 2019), furthermore they purchase items that express their individuality and establish their identity (Terrell, 2019). In addition, digitalization has led to the formation of a more informed and aware consumer (Parment, 2012) and as a consequence, millennials prefer to buy from a company that supports a cause that is best connected with the brand's ideology and personality (Hong, 2018).

Hydock et al. (2020) explain that consumers are always looking for that relationship that connects their physical and mental self-concept with the brand identity because self-brand similarity can lead to stronger self-brand identification and consequently to more positive attitudes toward the brand, increased purchase intentions, and higher levels of brand advocacy. Usually, consumers do not reward a brand for doing the right thing because it is expected, on the contrary punish brands for not having done the right thing (Mukherjee and Althuisen, 2018).

Previous scholars (Cornwell, Howard-Grenville and Hampel, 2018; Mandler, 1982; Warren and Campbell, 2014) suggest that there might be positive brand equity benefits if the enterprise selects a somewhat "optimally" non-congruous sociopolitical issue. This is because the incongruity leads to deeper processing which may generate a greater reaction (Mandler, 1982). Thus, mild incongruity between the brand and the cause may lead to more intriguing consumer developments and assessments (Mandler, 1982) than perfect congruity. Finding the right imbalance of congruity is not easy, and companies have to be aware about the fact that people don't like it when their beliefs are questioned or attacked; this might lead to a negative reaction since it contradicts their identity or well-being (McGraw and Warren, 2015). Regardless, good outcomes are possible if: 1) the brand activist message deviates from conventional standards and/or the company's past reputation, 2) the viewer views the divergence as nonthreatening, and 3) the brand deviates from a societal norm in a limited, but not excessive manner (Warren and Campbell, 2014; Warren and McGraw, 2015).

Marketers have soon understood that people can develop attachments also to other identities than humans, such as: material goods (Kleine and Baker, 2004; Ball and Tasaki 1992), presents (Mick and DeMoss, 1990), places (Williams et al., 1992), celebrities (Thomson, 2006), social media (Dwivedi et al., 2017), and brands have been recognized to belong to these entities (Percy et al., 2004; Slater, 2000; Keller 2009). Thus, brand attachment, according to Park et al. (2010), indicates *the strength of the tie between a customer and a brand, as evidenced by the perceived ease of accessibility and recognition in the mind of the consumer*. As a result, it's possible to say that this relationship establishes a link between the brand and the self. The brand-self connection reveals *the extent to which consumers believe the brand is relevant to their self-identity, leading eventually to a strong attachment*. The customer develops a sense of oneness with the brand by recognizing it as a part of themselves, forming crucial cognitive associations with it (Park et al., 2010). Consumers view the brand as a reflection of themselves or as important to their own objectives, worries, or future life projects (Mittal, 2006). In this context, brand attachment has been considered as a *type of self-extension which brings the consumers to compare themselves with the brand to see whether this one matches their personality or represents their values* (Kleine & Baker, 2004; Johar and Sirgy, 1991). People like brands that as closely as possible embody their values and symbolic meanings (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994, 239) because they are always striving for an ideal congruence between their self-identity and the objects to which they feel connected. Because strong brand attachments indicate tight links to the self, customers are compelled to keep the emotional bond intact in order to retain their self-concept (Mikulincer et al., 2001). When consumers evaluate business activities for social issues, this desire for self-congruity is likewise pursued when adopting a brand activism approach (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001). Consumers tend to examine the degree

of congruity between their self-concept and a brand's identity when evaluating the brand's advocacy messaging, according to Goldsmith and Yimin (2014).

Consumers who have a strong attachment to a brand participate in proximity maintenance - the willingness to remain near - as well as the readiness to defend and invest in the attachment object (Feeney & Noller, 1996). These individuals will be dedicated to and willing to safeguard and preserve interactions with the brand, ready to forego personal resources in order to sustain a long-term relationship with it (Park et al., 2010). For example, when customers are faced with bad information about a brand, they are more inclined to strive to safeguard that emotional link, giving attachment a mitigating effect (Schmalz et al., 2012). This mitigating effect, however, varies depending on the degree of negativity; for example, deeply connected customers should tolerate unethical brand conduct up to a point (Babin, Griffin, & Boles, 2004; Einwiller et al., 2006). Furthermore, if the reported behavior is excessively immoral, a point will be reached when the brand will no longer be able to contribute to the self-concept (Schmalz et al., 2012). Consumers are more inclined to devote attention, effort, and other resources to social responsibility initiatives if they are passionate about the subject or issue (Hoeffler and Keller 2002; Lafferty and Goldsmith 2005). Issue involvement refers to the *perceived connection between an individual and an issue because of personal interest, commitment, or issue importance to one's own life* (Costley, 1988). The more customers' attention and emotions are involved, the more they will shape how CSR actions are perceived (Bhattacharya et al. 2011). It takes time to develop good brand perceptions. Additionally, as customers become more sophisticated, they want companies to become more involved in social and political problems. On the other hand, brands must remember that if the cause for which they are advocating or promoting is not one that the brand has previously advocated or promoted, or if it does not fit with the brand's identity, customers will respond adversely. Thus, companies must engage customers on both an intellectual and emotional level, rather than focusing just on selling the product, because consumers are continuously striving to belong to and identify with the things they buy (Romaniuk & Sharp, 2003).

Consumers have become co-creators of value in an era defined Value-Centric where marketing, advertising, and brands create a deep connection with their audience through transparency and social responsibility (Kotler, Karatajaya and Setiawan, 2010). This new kind of marketing works by establishing brand integrity (Kotler et al., 2010) through trust and working along with the values communicated in the brand identity and image. In order to do that, brands use a powerful technique called "storytelling" (Eyada, 2020).

Although the media fragmentation has brought consumers on a plethora of different channels through which brands can communicate, companies are managing to figure out how to thrive in this new environment.

The luxury market was the one that most suffered the advent of digital contents because, as most of us know, the fundamental business of premium is quality, heritage, personalization of services and products, and everything that happens before and after the emotional experience of purchasing a luxury item. In some ways, the internet has facilitated the "democratization" of knowledge by enabling anybody to access valuable information at any time and from any location, allowing customers to become more knowledgeable and to plan their purchases before entering stores. In this brand-new environment, where every industry was already adapting to new business models that included digitalization of channels and a new marketing approach, the luxury sector had to find new ways to engage consumers whilst still maintaining a high level of quality while also sharing company information on the digital world. What they were most concerned about was the possibility that becoming digital would generate a bad association with being "cheap" or "limited in quality," because digital is available to everyone, and what is accessible to everyone is not "exclusive" as lux is.

Because of this segmentation, companies should try to develop a strategy which can take into account any possible channel in such a way to integrate communication and intercept the consumer at every touchpoint. Media could be differentiated in three different categories: PAID media, OWNED media, and EARNED media (also referred as POE)<sup>75</sup>. The secret of a good channel mix consists in the development of a strategy which includes all these three types of channels (Venezia, A., & Da Venezia, A., 2016).

Storytelling is what may help in the creation of this valuable and integrated channel strategy. Salmon (2008:38) describes storytelling in the realm of advertising and branding as the "*instrumental use of the narrative*" to "*construct a specific brand image, ascribe values, and develop an emotional relationship with the customer*". Storytelling is the next phase in advertising communication's progression from selling things to selling brands (see also Pérez Latorre 2013:71; Semprini 1992; Rossolatos, 2021). To be deemed a good narrative, storytelling must develop memorable, relevant, and compelling tales with which the customer can readily identify. In general, "original" narratives based on "universal plots" and genre codes are favored since they are more generally recognizable and simpler to comprehend by viewers. Furthermore, these stories are frequently based on cultural myths that have become well-known over time (Fog et al., 2005). Kozloff and Sánchez Moreno (2015) showed how narratology can

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<sup>75</sup> PAID MEDIA: entails the use of paid advertising channels in order to drive traffic and obtain visibility. Examples: print, TV, newspapers, weekly magazines, OOH, social media, direct marketing, browsers...  
OWNED MEDIA: are the media "owned" by the company that is those directly managed. Examples: institutional web site, mobile site, personal app, company blog, the company's accounts on different social networks like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram...  
EARNED MEDIA: are the media "earned" that is those channels in which the company assures a presence thanks to citations, reviews, and users' conversations. Examples: reviews, likes, tweets, shares on social networks... (Venezia, A., & Da Venezia, A., 2016).



be used in advertisements and how they can be analyzed like any other narrative material and semiotics plays an important role in this context.

In the light of what has been said so far, the present study wants to understand why Valentino's campaign has sparked such an outrage, and then look into possible inconsistencies between the brand's identity and values by conducting a semiotic analysis of both the scandalous image and the brand itself, concluding with a qualitative analysis of the brand's campaign post on Instagram.

Starting from the origin of the LGBTQ issue, history narrates that it was June 28, 1969, and it was late at night. When the police raid turned violent in Greenwich Village (a Manhattan area), the homosexual community fought back at the Stonewall Inn. It is widely regarded as the catalyst for the gay liberation movement and the twentieth-century struggle for LGBT rights in the United States. Residents of the Village organized into activist groups in a matter of weeks to claim some spaces for gay men and lesbians to display their sexual orientation without fear of being jailed. To commemorate the one-year anniversary of that terrible night, the first LGBT pride marches were held in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Since then, every June the LGBT community celebrates the "Gay pride" month (Wikipedia, 2021). Different acronyms have been assigned to this community, among them LGBTQ, which stands for lesbians, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (Wikipedia, 2021). In recent years, despite the various difficulties of integration into society, gender diversity has, in some ways, sought to flourish freely. The struggle for rights has never ceased, but great strides forward have been made. In addition to the various pleas of those involved, all those who have championed the cause have also played an important role: these undoubtedly include the brands. There is no longer a clear distinction between homosexual and heterosexual. In particular, this blurred line that separates these two worlds, since they have existed, is becoming more and more invisible to the new Gen Z. The possibility of not having a gender identity, or the non-mandatory need to identify in a limited category in order to perform a well-defined function in society, has profoundly changed the way this new generation views the world (Cristalli, 2021). It is the latest reality that companies, seeking to connect with young consumers, must face and take into account in their decisions and strategies.

In the fashion industry, many brands are experimenting new approaches to eliminate stereotypes. Some examples will be provided below.

When it comes to the fashion industry, especially luxury fashion, queer culture has always existed, and it may be hard to say which came first: "queer culture" or "fashion influence." In any case, the radicalization of this term in modern culture has led to increased messages about gender and sexual orientation politics becoming almost mainstream in the last decade.

Starting from Chanel, in 2013, two models did their catwalk hand in hand because the luxury brand wanted to have a voice in the controversial sociopolitical issue of equal marriage rights in France. The rainbow emblem found its way on the Burberry show of SS18 dedicating its final collection to organizations supporting LGBTQ youth around the world. In 2018, Louis Vuitton debuted with a 650 foot plus runway furnished with a rainbow. The creative director, Virgil Abloh, wanted to put on the show his wishes of diversity and inclusivity with a collection named “Color Theory” and models from all over the world. Gucci, for the FW20, wanted to leave its customers breathless with the new genderless shopping section “Gucci MX”, its main objective was “dissolving lines of the gender divide in the name of self-expression”. Since 2018, Bottega Veneta started to offer many pieces of garment defined gender fluid. On its side, Dolce and Gabbana elicited its support to The Trevor Project with a post shared on its main social media accounts in 2020. As written by the brand, it is “[...the world’s largest suicide prevention and crisis intervention organization for lesbians, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer & questioning (LBTQ) young people.]” In addition, the campaign “Love is Love” was supported by a video with images inspired by the 1990s, meaning that the brand was supporting equality from its very start. "How can brands engage in this activism without appearing fake-interested to the cause?". Brands need to consider how their ads fit into their broader brand strategy. If LGBTQ advertising is perceived as opportunistic or a mere about-face, the company could face negative public reactions that could damage the brand. Therefore, authenticity is crucial. It is possible to address controversial issues as long as your communications and actions are timely, but most importantly, do not pressure people to believe in something that is not true. A reputable, credible and consistent brand, on the other hand, can make a big impact. Instead of following trends, the suggestion for businesses is to create their own story and be consistent with what they say and do, no matter what their values and beliefs are (Cincik, 2019; Langer, 2021).

The world of Valentino is built upon unique codes, constituting the brand DNA. These signs are distinct and completely recognizable by consumers who have had some experiences with the brand. The brand’s identity, then, is embodied in the logo, in the Red Valentino color, in the stud and in the personality of the former creative director, Valentino Garavani. All these codes are used to create a distinguishable communication strategy which Valentino spreads through different channels.

Pierpaolo Piccioli, the only creative director of the Maison since 2016, is pursuing a brand codes’ resignification that can be noticed in different aspects, for example in the casting of new and different beauty models (which entails also the inclusion of gender fluid images) and in the decision of taking a break from the Parisian spots preferring the industrial city of Milan for his shows.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of April, Valentino posted a picture on social media to promote the Roman Stud bag. The shot was taken by the photographer Michael Baileys Gates and it is as self-portrait, naked, only dressed in the Roman Stud bag from the Valentino Garavani collection. Incredibly, this photo has unleashed the inappropriate comments of many haters, both on the company account and on the photographer's personal profile who was forced to close private his account for few days. The picture was the result of the inner world of the photographer but also the desire of the Creative Director to give a shift to his brand toward a more gender fluid vision. Behind this shot there is the obvious wish to break the rules and the stereotypes of gender in which society is stuck. This campaign enters in those actions Piccioli is carrying on redesigning aesthetic canons with the attempt to blur the border between masculinity and femininity, enhancing any kind of beauty and approaching to a more gender fluid idea.

In fact, brands supply not just product quality but also, and perhaps most importantly, societal ideals that become embedded in things, allowing individuals to disconnect from the materiality of their belongings and form connections with the imaginaries and values associated with those possessions. As a result, items are expected to serve a secondary purpose in addition to their primary one, becoming textual representations of their brands. In this sense, every product – from advertisements to physical products – becomes a text to be scanned, read, and interpreted in a cultural context and environment, and can conceal interesting social, psychological, and anthropological connections to the world we live in (Rossolatos, 2015).

In structural semiotics, linguistic theories are applied to non-linguistic systems including visual media, public space, consumer insights, and culture. To make sense in a particular context, structural semiotics relies on language notions such as the code, system, and sign binarism (Oswald, 2015). Because of the adaptation of linguistic theory to the study of nonverbal signs and symbols that acquire different meanings depending on the culture and context in which they are used, this discipline can become an important tool for managing brands' communication strategies, inasmuch brands have value for the firm and for investors to the extent that consumers associate the brand with meaning or “semiotic” value (Oswald, 2012). Semiotics in advertising helps marketers to not only analyze brands more deeply, but also to discover new uncharted territories in the market to compete in and to rethink brand tactics where fallacies may have hampered brand communication effectiveness. In this semiotic context, brands are sign systems which possess three fundamental characteristics:

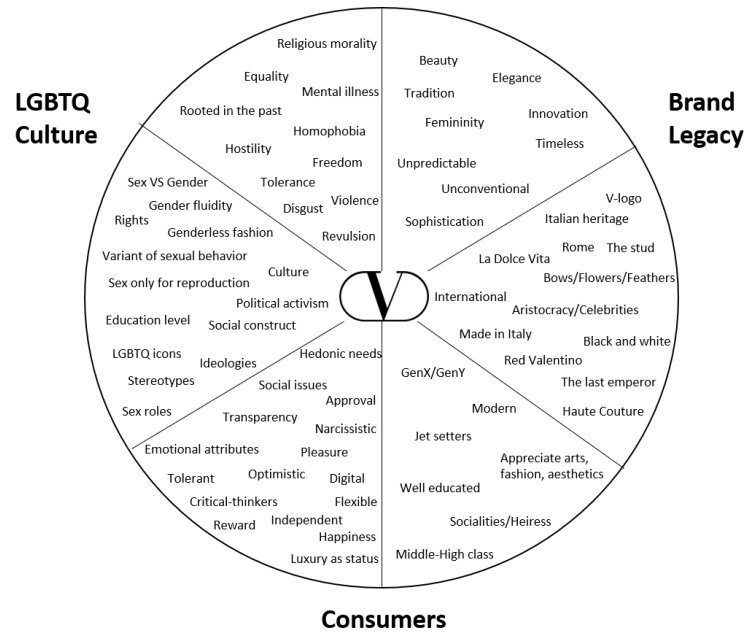
- 1) Create imaginary or symbolic linkages in consumers' minds
- 2) Differentiate themselves from competitors
- 3) Add measurable value (brand equity) to their product offerings

A fundamental part, in semiotics, is played by codes that are necessary for tracing meanings in logical and obvious patterns inferred from data sets such as consumer interviews, advertising,

popular culture, retail sites, or a product category (Oswald, 2015). Understanding the binary structure of discourse and signs is essential to the application of semiotics. The concept of sign may be expressed in a variety of ways, but according to Saussure's ideas, its meaning is dialectical in nature, and the key to understanding signs is binary analysis. What must be kept in mind is that all the possible binary associations are ruled by social convention and thus these relationships are considered dynamic according to the context in which they are used. Texts, rituals, and designs are merely tiny components in larger systems in marketing semiotics, such as a collection of advertising, package designs, or service sites (Oswald, 2015). As a result, they are part of a larger symphony of elements that work together to generate a certain meaning. All of these elements combine to create the "Consumer Brandscape," a summary of the brand, consumer, and cultural environment. To use Aaker's words, the goal of the Consumer Brandscape is to align all brand functions around a core brand identity or message, envisioning the brand as a "system." According to Aaker (1996), in terms of brand messaging and mission, there must always be congruence between product, organization, and symbols. If just one of them fails to support the others, it may seriously affect brand equity.

Using these principles as a foundation, I constructed a Consumer Brandscape for Maison Valentino in order to define the present terrain in which the brand manages every element of its operations. I gathered and analyzed information on brand history, customer insights, and target culture along with a competitive brand audit in order to understand the semiotic positioning of Valentino with respect to its competitors that implemented strategies in LGBTQ activism. I conducted also a cultural sweep to have a better understanding of the brand environment for trends and popular culture on the LGBTQ topic. From the brand audit resulted that there is not a clear trend among brands regarding how to engage in LGBTQ activism, on the contrary everyone has implemented different actions. Each brand wants to be original in expressing its support for the cause and the community. Some of them have decided to implement a more "low-profile" strategy with respect to others that, on the other hand, have demonstrated their involvement in a more incisive and, most of the times, worthy of notice manner, both from a communication and marketing point of view, and with a strong polarizing effect on society, just like Valentino. The decision of Valentino to display a naked body to support the cause is a clear challenge to the binary world. Furthermore, the man presents explicit signs of femininity that break stereotypes of masculinity, such as: silky long blond hair, skinny size with no accentuated muscles, sinuous laying, smooth facial skin, and delicate features. We can say that Valentino has been more provocative than many other brands offering a representation of gender fluidity that made people talk a lot. Brands know that people are not fully out of stereotypes and that their tolerance could be really challenged using some representations rather than others.

Valentino did not care, but wanted to lead the real change, including all facades of homosexuality, the entire gender spectrum. It took the risks, but it still goes on its way. All the aforementioned aspects that constitute the Brandscape can be summarized in the following figure that can be considered a nice recap of the brand legacy, consumers, and LGBTQ culture.



A visual semiotic analysis has been also conducted using figurative semiotics that is particularly appropriate for the understanding of images (i.e. paintings, drawings, photographs etc.) meant as “representations of the world” (Polidoro, 2020).

Taking as reference the generative trajectory of Greimas (1970), I discovered the basic semantic oppositions of the image posted by Valentino. The image is constituted by four elements: Roman columns (A), the naked man (B), the bag (C), the brand logo (D) (figure 63). We can find a bond between the elements A and C, inasmuch we know that the Valentino’s stud is inspired by the Roman architecture. There exists also a connection between A and B. Roman art have been strongly influenced by the Greek one. Nudes were highly appreciated by Romans both in sculptures and paintings, having a decorative function for their “*domus*”. Thus, we have three elements connecting to the ancient Rome that is one of the constituent elements of the Maison’s heritage. In addition, we find an opposition between ancient (Roman columns and naked man reminding to Greek-Roman sculptures) and modern (the bag, reinterpretation of an ancient symbol in a modern object). Finally, the element (D), the brand logo, represents the presence of the brand in the image but also a closing point: “You can find all this in Valentino”. The logo may serve also as a brand recalling element for consumers and as a medium from/to which transferring meaning. Another opposition can be found in the naked body and the bag. We have the thematic opposition between nude/adornment attributable to a more abstract

opposition at the semio-narrative level, the one between nature/culture. It seems that the bag represents the mean through which the man can enter the modern culture and break up with stereotypes of the ancient world.

The transformations present in the image can be represented by movements between the poles of a semiotic square (figure 64). For example, if we go from S1 (ancient) to Not S1 (not ancient) we have a “negation” that is the denial of the ancient world. Then, moving from Not S1 (not ancient) to S2 (modern) we have an “affirmation” that is an exhortation to pass from the old ideologies about the LGBTQ community made of stereotypes, sex roles, and morality to a modern gender-fluid idea.

For what concerns the canonical schema, we can distinguish different phases in which subjects and objects take action. Valentino’s case can be simplified as follows:

the Subject (naked man and representative of the LGBTQ community) gets hold of the bag representing, in this case, the valuable object both in terms of intrinsic value (price) and abstract value (freedom of expression). The Sender of this action can be identified into the brand, Valentino, which promises the fulfillment of aspirational and hedonic values by means of a material object.

The last level of the generative trajectory is the one of the discursive structures, in which the abstract semio-narrative structures embody, in concrete, objects and subjects. In the case of Valentino, we could have, for example, a broad thematic area that can be called “freedom of expression” in which we can have the theme “LGBTQ”.

Furthermore, every story has an enunciative structure. In particular, enunciative structures can be fundamental to build brand’s identity and personality. For example, in brand communication, the brand itself is portrayed as the enunciator of the advertising message. We have previously seen that in the Valentino’s picture, the presence of the brand is clear and explicated in the brand logo embedded in the photo.

The projection of some spatio-temporal and personal categories in the utterance is called *débrayage* which means “detachment” (Greimas, 1970). This approach in semiotics can help us to identify different meanings in visuals according to the frontal or in profile representation of figures. The faces in profile appear detached from the observer giving an effect of objectivity, while the faces represented frontally contribute to create a dichotomy I/you in which the spectator (the “you”) is not represented, but it is like he was involved. In this case, we will have an engagement effect which is more emotional and immersive. The photographer of Valentino probably wanted to recreate this effect having the man looking frontally to the spectator. It may be said that the protagonist of the picture can, at the same time, look at the observer (active action) and also be looked by the observer (passive action). This “looking” can be modalized



according to the “will”, which is the character’s willingness to both look at and be looked at by the observer (figures 67 and 68).

The willingness of the photographer to directly engage the spectator using the visual tools entails the use of the metaphor as a rhetorical figure that leads to a comparison between two similar terms, replacing one term by another. The picture of Valentino uses metaphor to make a comparison between the bag and the gender fluid figure of the man, inviting people, who want to reach that status of freedom giving importance to individuality, to buy the bag, more specifically Valentino. Furthermore, when used for luxury brands’ advertising, the metaphor contributes to create a detachment with the figure to be admired from a distance. Most of the times the models look directly into the camera, putting the spectator in the position of viewer of a fantastic, inaccessible, and rare world (Oswald, 2012). In addition, the choice of the photographer to portray himself is not by chance but can represent another way to stress the idea of individuality reported also in the post’s caption.

The caption below the picture acquires a meaning in semiotic serving as an anchoring tool for the connotative meaning of the visual text, providing the right sense of the image that the author wanted to convey: freedom of expression and appreciation for the boundlessness of individuality.

A social media listening of the Maison’s account along with a sentiment analysis of the comments below the post gave me a more complete vision on the fact. Valentino is present on many social media through which the brand keeps fans up to date on initiatives and entices them with sneak peaks, using a formal, modern, and romantic tone of voice. Its audience is made mainly by women (64%) that displays a constant growth of followers apart from a negative peak (-12 316), during the last six months, on the day the scandalous picture was posted.

Valentino has an active profile with an average of 1.82 posts per day. Among the top four most engaging posts of the last six months, there is the Michael Bailey Gates’ picture counting 234.3K likes and 13.4K comments, which is quite high for the average number of comments receiving the page (133.8 comments per post), meaning that people had a lot to say about that. In order to understand the real sentiment of comments, I conducted a qualitative analysis with the NVivo software. The Word Cloud (figure 74) chart revealed the 1000 most frequent words/concepts with at least 4 letters that appear in the comments, such as: beautiful, love, like, disgusting, Valentino etc. Whereas, the Tree Map (figure 75) shows data in a hierarchical order as a set of nested rectangles of varying sizes. Starting from the most common discussed arguments, the map displays all the other words related to those concepts, becoming smaller going from the left to the right of the outer rectangle.

The sentiment analysis showed the segmentation of comments according to sentiment (positive VS negative) but it also tells about the magnitude of positivity and negativity highlighting how much they are positive or negative (very VS moderately). Instead, the hierarchy of sentiment displays a large quantity of neutral comments (9184), almost equal quantities of positive (761) and negative (675) comments, and a little quantity of mixed ones (164).

For a deeper understanding of the issues raised below the post, I went through all the single comments trying to identify Theme Nodes – recurrent topics in source material – to enrich the analysis and eventually find linkages to semiotic meanings previously identified.

After a careful screening of comments, I could identify six categories of feelings:

- 1) Approval: in which we can find all comments concerning beauty, love, appreciation, amazement and support.
- 2) Disapproval: in which we can find all kinds of insulting, sarcastic sentences, and dislike.
- 3) Criticism: in this category, many topics are concerned such as gender issues, marketing deployment, women discrimination, children safeguard, and the man's exterior aspect.
- 4) Boycotting: this relates to comments in which people threaten the brand to boycott or incite others to not buy Valentino or unfollow the brand.
- 5) Confusion: there is a little steak of people that appeared to be confused by the image and the overall sense that it wanted to convey associated with the brand's values.
- 6) Nostalgia: in this section we can clearly see people expressing concern for a brand that is not the same anymore, suggesting to change creative director or expressing nostalgia for the old management of the brand.

At the end of this research, which endowed me with a greater knowledge and comprehension of the brand activism topic and semiotic subject, I would like to provide some useful explanations and consequences to the research questions that I wanted to investigate: 1) was the Valentino's campaign appropriate and in line with its brand identity? and 2) why the campaign sparked such hatred and turmoil?

As we have seen, Valentino's campaign involved in LGBTQ activism, did not turn to be a complete success, maybe because of the lack of synchronization of some of the abovementioned values. What people criticized was the dissonance between the aesthetic of Valentino's campaign and the brand DNA and heritage. Vredenburg (2020) stated that brand activism could turn into a success as long as company's mission and values are aligned with the activist marketing and corporate activism.

People are still attached to the old version of Valentino, the one left by the "last Emperor", the one funded on elegance, femininity, and sophistication. Thus, the mismatch between brand identity and socio-political cause, perceived by the audience in the campaign, was too much.

From the literature, Mandler (1982) affirms that a mild incongruity could be beneficial inasmuch the brand and the cause may lead to more intriguing consumer developments and assessments. Valentino, apparently, did not find the “optimal” incongruence and people felt their beliefs threatened. Furthermore, this failure may have influenced brand perceptions in a negative way, leading some followers and fans of the brand to unfollow the page, to not buy the bag (i.e. boycotting), or to not repurchase, losing some loyal or potential customers.

The current research may serve for marketers and/or businesses as an example of good and bad actions when it comes to LGBTQ activism. As we could understand, semiotics can be an interesting and efficient methodology to use when doing marketing strategy. Significations behind the common surface of things can be deeper than what they seem and also easily misinterpreted by people. Sometimes it is better to keep it simple, concerning marketing advertisements, because not everyone is capable and possess the instruments to read under the surface, trying to catch deeper meanings. Being the internet a vast and heterogeneous space where everybody can say what they think, businesses may prefer a more unequivocal communication to protect their reputation and limit risks.

This research implicates also some limitations because the software used to conduct sentiment analysis is not able to take each single piece of content and rate it on a Likert sentiment scale, but it looks at the sentiment of words in isolation without taking into account the context. Thus, for example, it cannot recognize:

- Sarcasm
- Double negatives
- Slang
- Dialect variations
- Idioms
- Ambiguity

Furthermore, the software does not distinguish emoticons (the data set analyzed was plenty of emoticons expressing love, disgust or appreciation) and, moreover, comments were not all in the same language. Thus, the results of sentiment analysis could have been a little biased, returning more neutral comments that the software could not categorize in a clear section.

Future research may be suggested to fill these gaps by, for example, doing a cleaning of the data set (which entails transforming emoticons in words, such as love or disgust), and translating all the comments in the same language (which is a quite long and difficult operation considering the presence of some complex and mostly unknown languages that could be Arabic, Chinese, Japanese etc.) considering also slangs, idioms, and dialect variations.

The analysis could be also enriched with socio-demographic information about users that, actually, cannot be accessible by people outside the company because of privacy issues, but it

could provide a more detailed analysis with a deeper understanding of the target, segmenting results by interesting characteristics, such as: gender, sex, country, and level of education.

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