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*Upcycling and consumer behavior  
in the luxury industry*

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ACADEMIC YEAR 2024/2025

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## **Introduction**

In recent years, sustainability has emerged as one of the main drivers of transformation in the fashion industry, and in particular in the luxury sector. No longer relegated to an ancillary value, it now represents a strategic and cultural lever that profoundly influences the production, communication and value choices of brands. Within this changing scenario, upcycling – i.e. the creative reuse of existing materials and products to give them a new life with greater aesthetic and symbolic value – is one of the most innovative and promising practices. It makes it possible to combine craftsmanship, respect for the environment and cultural narration, contributing to the definition of a new paradigm of responsible luxury.

At the same time, we are witnessing a profound change in consumer behavior, increasingly oriented towards conscious, ethical choices that are attentive to the social and environmental impact of the goods purchased. In particular, the younger generations – Millennials and Gen Z – demonstrate a growing propensity for products that combine exclusivity and sustainability, placing great value on uniqueness, transparency and traceability. This evolution in values has prompted many luxury brands to review their strategies, integrating circular economy practices, such as upcycling, and developing new ways of relating to the consumer.

This thesis aims to analyze the phenomenon of upcycling in the luxury sector and to explore the dynamics that link this practice to contemporary consumer behavior. In the first chapter, the theoretical and conceptual framework of sustainability is outlined, with particular attention to the context of the luxury industry and the evolution of sustainable marketing. The second chapter explores the concept of upcycling, its differences from other circular practices, the role of craftsmanship and heritage, and analyzes some significant cases in the fashion scene. Finally, the third chapter presents the case study of the Gucci brand, examining its sustainable strategies, initiatives related to upcycling and the impact perceived by consumers through a qualitative research methodology.

The ultimate goal is to understand how upcycling can represent not only a response to the need for sustainability, but also a distinctive factor in the construction of brand identity and consumer loyalty within the luxury industry.

# CHAPTER I

## Sustainability, CSR and consumer change

*SUMMARY: 1.1 Sustainability: an evolving concept – 1.2 Sustainability in the luxury market – 1.3 CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) and sustainability – 1.4 Consumer change: a more sustainability-conscious public*

### 1.1 Sustainability: a constantly evolving concept

#### 1.1.1 Definition and dimensions of sustainability: environmental, economic and social

The concept of sustainability, as we know it today, is the result of a long historical, cultural and scientific journey that has profoundly transformed its meanings and areas of application. Initially born as a technical notion, used in circumscribed contexts such as forest management, it has gradually expanded to become a real guiding principle for contemporary governance, capable of guiding political, economic and social choices at a global level.

Its roots lie in the eighteenth century, in the context of German forestry, where the term *Nachhaltigkeit* – which can be translated as "sustainability" – was used to indicate a rational and prudent management of forest resources<sup>1</sup>. The basic idea was simple but powerful: only what it was naturally able to regenerate should be taken from the forest, so as not to compromise its ability to produce wood for future generations. Although this concept was limited to the forest sector alone, it already introduced a far-sighted vision of the relationship

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<sup>1</sup> Grober, U. (2007). *Deep roots – A conceptual history of 'sustainable development' (Nachhaltigkeit)*. In "Sustainable development: Meaning, history, principles, pillars, and implications for human action", p. 10.

between man and nature, based on respect for natural cycles and awareness of ecological limits.

The real conceptual leap, however, occurred in the twentieth century, with the growing awareness of the environmental and social impacts of economic development. A key milestone in this process was the publication of the famous *Our Common Future* report in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission<sup>2</sup>. In this document, sustainable development is defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". This definition, now universally recognized, introduces a new intergenerational perspective, emphasizing the link between current choices and future well-being.

Starting from this vision, an integrated approach to sustainability has emerged, based on the so-called "three pillars" model – environmental, economic and social – also known as *the triple bottom line*<sup>3</sup>. This model recognises that to ensure truly sustainable development, it is not enough to protect the environment: it is also necessary to create lasting economic well-being and build inclusive, equitable and cohesive societies<sup>4</sup>.

### **The environmental dimension: protecting the Earth's vital systems**

Of the three dimensions of sustainability, the environmental dimension is probably the most immediately perceptible, as it concerns concrete phenomena that are increasingly evident in our daily lives: from rising global temperatures to droughts, from floods to widespread pollution, from biodiversity loss to uncontrolled deforestation.

Environmental sustainability is based on the idea that nature is not an infinite resource from which to draw without limits, but a complex, fragile and interconnected system, in which each element plays a fundamental role in the overall balance. Natural ecosystems, in fact, not

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<sup>2</sup> WCED (1987). *Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Purvis, B., Mao, Y., & Robinson, D. (2019). *Three pillars of sustainability: in search of conceptual origins*, *Sustainability Science*, 14(3), p. 681.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 682–683.

only provide material goods – such as food, water and raw materials – but also guarantee essential services for human life, such as air purification, climate regulation, crop pollination and protection against natural disasters.

Promoting environmental sustainability therefore means adopting policies and behaviors that reduce the impact of human activities on ecosystems<sup>5</sup>. This includes, for example, combating pollution, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, making efficient use of energy resources, transitioning to renewable sources, safeguarding biodiversity and protecting natural habitats. But it also means developing a new cultural paradigm, capable of questioning the myth of unlimited growth and recognizing the biophysical limits of our planet.

An ecologically sustainable society is a society that manages to combine progress and environmental protection, that knows how to innovate without destroying, and that recognizes in the balance with nature not an obstacle to development, but an essential condition for collective well-being and for the survival of future generations.

### **The economic dimension: lasting well-being and responsibility for choices**

We often tend to think that economic sustainability is limited to the growth of the Gross Domestic Product. In reality, it has a much deeper and more articulated meaning: it refers to the ability of an economic system to generate prosperity over time, ensuring a fair distribution of resources, promoting efficiency in production processes and taking into account the environmental and social costs associated with economic activities<sup>6</sup>.

One of the central aspects in this perspective is the recognition of natural capital as an integral part of economic capital. Forests, seas, fertile soils, clean air: all these resources are not simply "assets" to be used, but real assets to be preserved. Their destruction or degradation represents an economic loss, not just an environmental one.

To ensure genuine economic sustainability, it is necessary to adopt new development models that go beyond the linear logic of "take, produce, consume and dispose". In this sense,

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<sup>5</sup> Trudel, R. (2018). *Sustainability and CO2 Emissions: A Critical Examination*. *Journal of Environmental Economics*, 22(4), 345-367.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 684.



concepts such as the circular economy – which aims at the reuse, recycling and enhancement of materials – the green economy – aimed at reducing the environmental impact of production activities – and the blue economy – focused on the sustainable management of marine resources – offer concrete tools to build a more resilient, inclusive and regenerative economy<sup>7</sup>.

### **The social dimension: equity, inclusion and justice for all**

Social sustainability is perhaps the most multifaceted and least visible dimension, but no less important. It concerns people's quality of life and the way in which societies distribute opportunities, resources and rights.

Being socially sustainable means ensuring that everyone – regardless of gender, ethnicity, social class or place of birth – has access to decent living conditions, health, education, security, democratic participation and the protection of their fundamental rights.

One of the central aspects is social justice, which is not limited to economic redistribution, but also includes the elimination of structural and cultural barriers that prevent many individuals and communities from fully realizing themselves. Poverty, discrimination, marginalisation and lack of opportunities are not only injustices: they are also factors that undermine social cohesion and undermine the long-term stability of societies.

An unequal society is also a society that is more fragile, more prone to conflict and more vulnerable to environmental and economic shocks. For this reason, social sustainability is inextricably linked to the other two dimensions: there can be no true sustainability if a part of the population is excluded, ignored or left behind<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 685–686.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 685–686.

### **An interconnected system to be rethought together**

Ultimately, sustainability is not a goal to be achieved once and for all, but a dynamic, constantly evolving process that requires balance, foresight and responsibility. The three dimensions – environmental, economic and social – are not watertight compartments: they influence each other and must be addressed in an integrated way.

Adopting a holistic approach to sustainability means abandoning simplistic and partial solutions, to embrace a complex vision that is more adherent to reality. It means recognizing that every choice – individual or collective – has consequences that go beyond the present, that affect other people, other places, and above all the future of the next generations.

Sustainability, ultimately, is a new compass to orient us in an increasingly interconnected, fragile and uncertain world. It is an invitation to rethink the way we live, produce and coexist, in the awareness that only through the balance between the environmental, economic and social dimensions will we be able to build a fairer, safer and more resilient future for all.

#### **1.1.2 Sustainability in marketing: advantages and challenges**

Over the last few years, the growing sensitivity towards environmental, social and economic issues has had a profound impact not only on public policies and business strategies, but also on the way in which companies communicate, tell their stories and build relationships with their audience. In this transformation scenario, marketing — which has always been considered the main tool for promoting products and brands — has also had to rethink, evolving from an approach traditionally oriented towards immediate profit towards a more ethical, transparent and long-term vision.

Integrating sustainability principles into marketing is no longer a simple option or reputational choice. It has now become a strategic necessity, in response to a combination of new and more stringent regulations, a rapidly changing cultural environment and, above all, a transformation in consumer values and expectations. Today, in fact, sustainability is perceived as an essential element of corporate identity, as well as a determining factor in

defining the **value proposition** towards the market. A sustainable brand is not only more "attractive": it is also considered more reliable, consistent and trustworthy.

### **The competitive advantages of sustainability-oriented marketing**

Taking a sustainable approach to marketing means paving the way for a number of concrete benefits. Companies that know how to authentically communicate their environmental and social commitment are able to stand out in an increasingly crowded market, significantly improving brand reputation and strengthening customer loyalty.

The concept of competitive advantage is central to understanding the effectiveness of a sustainable approach in marketing. As Porter<sup>9</sup> (1985) points out, competitive advantage is built through the ability of a firm to differentiate itself or reduce costs in a sustainable way, so as to obtain a privileged position in the market. This vision is accompanied by that of Barney<sup>10</sup> (1991), according to which lasting competitive advantage derives from the availability of strategic resources that are precious, rare, difficult to imitate and organized effectively. In this context, sustainability — if integrated into the company's culture and strategy — can be a distinctive resource, capable of strengthening the company's reputation, loyalty and resilience.

According to a systematic review of the literature conducted by Todeschini et al. (2023), sustainable marketing practices not only positively influence brand perception, but also incentivize more responsible purchasing behavior. Consumers tend to reward companies that are transparent, committed to concrete actions, and are more inclined to promote them spontaneously through positive word-of-mouth — an effect that is particularly evident in high-impact industries, such as fast *fashion*<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Porter, M.E. (1985). *Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance*. New York: Free Press.

<sup>10</sup> Barney, J. (1991). Firm Resources and Sustained Competitive Advantage. *Journal of Management*, 17(1), 99–120

<sup>11</sup> Todeschini, B. V., Pizzi, G., D'Adamo, I., & Kravchenko, M. (2023). Decoding sustainable drivers: A systematic literature review on sustainability-induced consumer behaviour in the fast fashion industry, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 414, 137725, p. 9.

Sustainability, from this point of view, is not just an ethical imperative or a regulatory obligation, but is configured as a real strategic positioning lever. Companies that are able to coherently tell their values, their vision and their real commitment to change, create a deeper connection with the public, capable of strengthening the emotional capital of the brand and positively affecting *brand equity*<sup>12</sup>.

### **The challenges of sustainable marketing: greenwashing and accessibility**

However, the path to truly sustainable marketing is not without its obstacles. One of the most serious pitfalls is the phenomenon of greenwashing, i.e. the tendency of some companies to present themselves as environmentally or socially responsible, without these declarations being matched by concrete or verifiable actions. In many cases, this drift arises from superficial or opportunistic communication choices, which risk undermining consumer trust, damaging not only the individual brand, but also the credibility of the entire sustainable marketing ecosystem<sup>13</sup>.

Scholars, including Todeschini et al., warn that if greenwashing is not decisively curbed, it could trigger a boomerang effect: consumers, increasingly informed and critical, could become wary even of truly virtuous companies<sup>14</sup>. To prevent this risk, it is essential that companies adopt a holistic approach to sustainability, integrating it into all phases of the product life cycle, from suppliers to distribution, and making themselves available for independent and transparent verification.

Another non-negligible challenge concerns the trade-off between sustainability and affordability, particularly in sectors where the business model is based on large volumes and low prices, such as *fast fashion*. In these contexts, adopting sustainable practices requires significant investments in innovation, materials, ethical supply chains and logistics, but it also involves a broader rethinking of the very concept of consumption.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

Some brands are trying to address this challenge through alternative models such as the circular economy, proposing initiatives such as recycling materials, reusing clothes, production on demand or selling second-hand garments. These approaches make it possible to combine sustainability and competitiveness, offering new solutions that meet the needs of the market without sacrificing the positive impact on the environment<sup>15</sup>.

### **Virtuous examples: when marketing becomes a culture of change**

Several brands have been able to transform sustainability into a pillar of their identity, creating campaigns that have become emblematic of good practices in marketing:

- Patagonia, in 2011, launched the "*Don't Buy This Jacket*" campaign, a provocative invitation to consumers to reflect on their purchasing behavior. The initiative, which urged people not to buy the product unless strictly necessary, aimed to raise awareness against impulsive consumption and promote a more conscious and responsible approach to the environment. Far from penalizing sales, the campaign strengthened the ethical identity of the brand, increasing customer trust and loyalty<sup>16</sup>.
- IKEA, with the "People & Planet Positive" program, has integrated sustainability into its communication strategy and commercial proposal through concrete actions such as the use of recycled and renewable materials, energy efficiency in stores, and the introduction of products designed to reduce environmental impact. In addition, it has promoted educational campaigns aimed at consumers to encourage them to make more informed choices, for example by reducing waste, adopting solutions for domestic energy savings and favoring a more sustainable lifestyle.<sup>17</sup>tag.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 15–17.

<sup>16</sup> New York Times, 2011, "Don't Buy This Jacket," Patagonia Advertising Campaign. Available on: <https://www.patagonia.com>

<sup>17</sup> IKEA. (2022). People & Planet Positive Strategy. IKEA Sustainability Report.

- **Stella McCartney**, a pioneer in ethical fashion, has promoted campaigns that blend luxury and social responsibility, such as the collaboration with the Victoria and Albert Museum to raise awareness of circular fashion<sup>18</sup>.

These examples show how sustainable marketing is not limited to "telling" sustainability, but can become an engine of social transformation, stimulating a change in mentality and contributing to the spread of new cultural paradigms.

### **Marketing that educates, engages and transforms**

In conclusion, talking about sustainable marketing today means going beyond the classic vision of marketing as a mere commercial lever. It means recognizing its educational function, capable of influencing consumer behavior, stimulating critical reflection and generating shared value.

Sustainability can no longer be relegated to an ancillary or communicative dimension: it must be rooted in the company's mission, its values and its governance. Only in this way can marketing become a credible and powerful tool for building authentic relationships, promoting a regenerative economy and contributing to a more equitable, inclusive and conscious future.

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<sup>18</sup> Stella McCartney Ltd. (2023). Sustainability at Stella McCartney. Available on: <https://www.stellamccartney.com>.

## 1.2 Sustainability in the luxury market

### 1.2.2 Environmental impact in the luxury industry

In recent years, even the world of luxury — historically perceived as distant from ethical or environmental considerations — has begun to question its social and environmental responsibility in depth. This transformation is not the result of a passing fad, but of a structural evolution of the very concept of luxury, which is progressively moving away from the idea of pure status symbol to embrace new values such as authenticity, transparency and responsibility.

Today, sustainability represents a strategic lever for high-end brands, useful not only to respond to increasingly stringent regulations or the demands of civil society, but above all to renew the relationship between brand and consumer, making it deeper, more aware and based on mutual trust<sup>19</sup>.

One of the main drivers of this change is the emergence of a new, informed and attentive generation of customers, who no longer choose solely on the basis of name or perceived quality, but who carefully consider the social and environmental impact of products. According to research by McKinsey & Company (2022), more than 70% of luxury consumers say they are willing to pay a higher price to buy sustainably produced items. This means that these people favor brands that use traceable, responsibly sourced materials and guarantee ethical working conditions throughout the entire production chain. In practice, they actively choose to reward companies committed to sustainability, even at a higher cost, recognizing added value in the ethical and environmental principles incorporated in the products.<sup>20</sup> tag.

This trend has stimulated a real internal revolution, pushing the most visionary companies to adopt strategies based on transparency, traceability and the use of innovative materials, such

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<sup>19</sup> Beverland, M. (2021). Branding the Authentic: The Role of Sustainability in Luxury Brand Strategy. *Journal of Business Research*, 125, 712-720.

<sup>20</sup> McKinsey & Company (2022). *The State of Fashion: Luxury Edition*.

as biodegradable fibers, regenerated fabrics and alternative leathers of vegetable origin. In this way, sustainability is no longer just a label to be displayed, but a concrete element integrated into the creative and production process.

Among the most cutting-edge groups are companies such as Kering, LVMH, Burberry and Stella McCartney, which have developed holistic approaches to sustainability, capable of combining technological innovation, responsible resource management and attention to human capital.

Particularly interesting is the case of Kering, which has introduced the Environmental Profit & Loss account (EP&L), a pioneering tool designed to measure environmental impact along the entire value chain. This model makes it possible not only to quantify CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and resource consumption, but also to attribute an economic value to environmental damage, making sustainability not only visible, but also comparable and manageable in terms of performance<sup>21</sup>.

These tools also represent a turning point on a cultural level: thanks to clearer and more shared metrics, it is possible to transform sustainability into a concrete element of strategic management, abandoning a purely symbolic or reputational vision.

### **Circular economy and new luxury narratives**

Another area in which interesting innovations can be observed is that of the circular economy, which in the luxury sector takes on refined and tailor-made forms. Here, circularity is not limited to the recycling of materials, but translates into creative practices such as the reuse of iconic garments, sartorial regeneration, the redesign of accessories, or the use of recycled materials of the highest quality.

Emblematic in this sense is the "Gucci Off The Grid" initiative, a collection entirely made with recycled, organic or renewable materials, designed to raise public awareness of the importance of more careful and environmentally friendly consumption<sup>22</sup>. Burberry has also

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<sup>21</sup> Kering (2021). Sustainable strategies in the luxury business to increase efficiency in reducing carbon footprint, pp. 8–10.

<sup>22</sup> Gucci (2020). Gucci Off The Grid Collection. Available on: [www.gucci.com](http://www.gucci.com).



embarked on a similar path with the "ReBurberry Edit" project, which involves the use of certified materials, eco-friendly packaging and a narrative consistent with the values of responsibility and innovation<sup>23</sup>.

These initiatives show that, even in a sector linked to tradition such as luxury, it is possible to innovate without losing exclusivity and symbolic value. On the contrary, the adoption of sustainable practices reinforces the cultural and aspirational dimension of the product, making it even more desirable.

### **The challenges of the sustainable transition in luxury**

Despite progress, the path to full sustainability is not without obstacles. Companies have to face complex challenges, linked to the need to reconcile innovation and tradition, craftsmanship and industrialization, uniqueness and replicability. The long times of artisanal production, the delicacy of the precious materials, the protection of the brand's know-how and distinctive processes are all factors that make it more difficult to adopt completely sustainable models.

In addition, the risk of greenwashing remains, which has already been addressed by other sectors: misleading, superficial or unverified environmental communications, which can have a lasting negative effect, jeopardizing public trust and damaging the entire luxury industry.

To counter these risks and consolidate their reputations, many houses are working in collaboration with independent organizations, certification bodies and academic institutions, with the aim of defining common, verifiable and transparent standards. One of the most significant experiences in this regard is represented by the Fashion Pact, an international alliance promoted by Kering and signed by over 60 fashion and luxury companies, with the aim of reducing emissions, protecting biodiversity and limiting the impact on the oceans<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Burberry (2021). ReBurberry Edit – Our Sustainability Journey. Disponibile su: [www.burberryplc.com](http://www.burberryplc.com).

<sup>24</sup> The Fashion Pact (2020). Progress Report. Available on: [www.thefashionpact.org](http://www.thefashionpact.org).

### **A new paradigm of sustainable luxury**

Ultimately, sustainability does not represent a brake or a compromise for luxury, but a new vision of excellence, where beauty, uniqueness and prestige are enriched with meaning. Increasingly, brands that adopt sustainable practices are not only responding to the needs of an evolving market, but driving a profound cultural transformation, contributing to the construction of a more ethical, conscious and future-oriented industry.

Sustainable luxury is thus configured as a new and powerful narrative, in which elegance is combined with responsibility and desirability is intertwined with respect for the environment and people. In this perspective, sustainability becomes an integral part of the brand identity, generating authentic and lasting value — not only for those who buy, but also for the world in which we live.

#### **1.2.2 Why sustainability has become a priority in the luxury sector**

In the current landscape of the luxury industry, sustainability is no longer an accessory value or a façade communication strategy, but has established itself as a central element of companies' strategic and operational choices. Luxury, once linked exclusively to symbols of status and desirability, is redefining itself in response to new cultural, environmental and regulatory needs that place responsibility and transparency at the center.

This transformation is the result of a convergence of global dynamics: on the one hand, changing consumer preferences, on the other, a stricter regulatory environment, to which are added the pioneering actions of some key players in the sector. In this new scenario, the adoption of sustainable practices is no longer a choice, but an essential condition for remaining competitive and culturally relevant<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Vogue Business. "Why is sustainability overlooked in fashion company earnings?" Pubblicato il 3 aprile 2025.

Disponibile su: <https://www.voguebusiness.com/story/sustainability/why-is-sustainability-overlooked-in-fashion-company-earnings>

## **New consumer expectations**

One of the main drivers of sustainable transition in the luxury sector is the radical change in consumer behaviors and values. The new generations — in particular Millennials and Gen Z — are redefining the concept of luxury, combining artisanal quality and product uniqueness with aspects related to ethics, environmental sustainability and social responsibility.

Numerous studies on consumer behavior, such as those by White et al.<sup>26</sup> and Dangelico & Vocalelli<sup>27</sup>, highlight how the drivers of sustainable consumption include sensitivity to the environment, identification with brand values and the perception of a positive impact linked to purchase. However, the propensity to buy sustainable products is often accompanied by a more careful and rational evaluation, which also considers the price, quality and perceived consistency of the company.

In this scenario, sustainable luxury consumers are not just idealistic young "greens": they are individuals with a high level of education, strong ethical awareness, and economic availability such as to allow choices consistent with their values. These consumers do not just buy a product for its aesthetics or notoriety, but they want to know where it came from, how it was made, with what materials and in what conditions. The desire for transparency and traceability concerns all stages of the value chain: from the selection of raw materials to packaging, from distribution to communication.

To respond to this growing need, companies are called upon to review their internal processes, adopt authentic languages, make information accessible and align their practices with declared values. Otherwise, they risk losing trust and relevance among an increasingly demanding and aware public.

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<sup>26</sup> White, K., Habib, R., & Hardisty, D.J. (2019). How to SHIFT consumer behaviors to be more sustainable: A literature review and guiding framework. *Journal of Marketing*, 83(3), 22–49.

<sup>27</sup> Dangelico, R.M., & Vocalelli, D. (2017). "Green Marketing": An analysis of definitions, dimensions, and relationships with stakeholders. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 26(4), 457–475.

## **The role of regulations and institutions**

In addition to market pressures, luxury companies find themselves operating in an increasingly complex and rigorous regulatory environment. International bodies and national governments are implementing regulations that impose high standards of social and environmental responsibility.

In particular, the European Union has introduced significant legislative instruments, such as the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD). These directives aim to make the work of companies more transparent, promoting the so-called "double materiality": that is, the assessment of the company's impact on the climate, but also of the impact that climate change has on the company itself. This approach requires a deep integration of ESG (environmental, social and governance) criteria into business strategies, pushing luxury companies to act with greater foresight and consistency than in the past.

## **Cutting-edge practices and inspiring models**

Some players in the sector have distinguished themselves for having adopted forward-looking and measurable approaches to sustainability, setting themselves as virtuous examples for the entire industry. Among these, Kering stands out, which has developed the Environmental Profit & Loss (EP&L), an innovative tool that makes it possible to quantify in monetary terms the environmental impact generated throughout the production chain.

The EP&L does not just measure CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, but considers six key parameters: greenhouse gases, air pollution, water pollution, water consumption, waste generation and land use. By monetizing these impacts, Kering is able to accurately identify critical areas and take strategic action to reduce its carbon footprint<sup>28</sup>. This approach provides a tangible competitive advantage, because it transforms sustainability into an integrated management tool, and not just a statement of intent.

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<sup>28</sup> Kering. "Our EP&L." Available on: <https://www.kering.com/it/sostenibilita/misurare-il-nostro-impatto/il-nostro-ep-l/>

## **Measuring biodiversity**

Despite clear progress, measuring the impact on biodiversity is still an open challenge. Complex and articulated global supply chains make it difficult to accurately and systematically detect the effect of production activities on natural ecosystems. Yet, this is an increasingly crucial dimension, especially for a sector that makes extensive use of valuable natural resources and sensitive territories.

On this front too, companies such as Kering are investing in ambitious programs, aimed at promoting regenerative practices along supply chains, with the aim of achieving a net positive impact on biodiversity by 2025<sup>29</sup>. The approach is no longer just defensive or compensatory, but proactive and transformative: protecting biodiversity thus becomes a strategic priority

The growing focus on sustainability, if approached with seriousness and strategic vision, can be much more than an obligation. It is a real opportunity for renewal, capable of generating long-term value, strengthening brand positioning and retaining an increasingly attentive and selective clientele.

Companies that will be able to translate the principles of sustainability into concrete, measurable and verifiable actions will also be those able to orient the future of luxury towards a more conscious, equitable and regenerative dimension. In this scenario, ethics is no longer a constraint, but a new form of excellence, capable of elevating the intrinsic value of the product and the prestige of the brand.

### **1.2.3 Changing demand: increasingly aware consumers**

In recent years, the relationship between consumers and fashion has undergone a radical transformation, which goes far beyond the simple dynamics of style or price. More and more

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<sup>29</sup> Vogue Business. "LVMH, Kering and a big new challenge: Biodiversity." Published on September 3, 2021. Available on: <https://www.voguebusiness.com/sustainability/lvmh-kering-and-a-big-new-challenge-biodiversity>

people, especially among the new generations, are developing a deep sensitivity towards what is "behind" the clothes they wear. It is no longer just a matter of choosing a garment because it is beautiful or convenient, but of asking more complex questions, which concern the origin, the materials, the working conditions in the production chains, the environmental and social impact of the production process.

This new awareness reflects a cultural paradigm shift: fashion is no longer seen only as an expression of aesthetics or status, but also as a powerful vehicle through which to express values, belongings and ethical choices. For many young people, buying a sustainable garment is not simply an act of consumption, but a real declaration of intent, a form of daily activism, silent but incisive.

According to a study conducted by Manfredi (2022), an increasing number of young people belonging to Generation Z are willing to pay a higher price for clothing that meets environmental and social criteria<sup>30</sup>. This figure should not be read only in economic terms, but as a sign of a redefinition of priorities: the "value" of a product is no longer measured only in terms of brands or trends, but includes intangible elements such as respect for the environment, the well-being of workers and corporate transparency.

Yet, despite these declarations of intent and the growing attention to sustainability issues, in practice purchasing choices do not always align with the declared principles. A recent survey published by the *New York Post* showed that many young people, while claiming to be environmentally conscious, continue to buy regularly from fast fashion brands such as Shein or Temu<sup>31</sup>. These brands offer a particularly attractive offer: constantly updated collections, ultra-competitive prices, garments perfectly aligned with the trends of the moment. It is easy, therefore, to fall into temptation, especially if you have limited economic resources or if you live in a social context in which "being fashionable" still has an important weight.

Price, in fact, represents one of the main barriers to the adoption of truly sustainable consumer behaviors. Research conducted by Opeepl on more than 2,500 young Europeans revealed that

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<sup>30</sup> Manfredi, A. (2022). *Exploring the perceptions and motivations of Gen Z and Millennials toward sustainable clothing*.

<sup>31</sup> New York Post. (2024, 3 maggio). *Gen Zers are 'addicted' to fast fashion shopping – despite claiming to care about the environment*. Recuperato da: <https://nypost.com>

more than half of respondents consider sustainable products to be too expensive<sup>32</sup>. This gap between aspirations and economic possibilities highlights a fundamental issue: as long as ethical fashion remains a privilege accessible only to those who can afford it, it will be difficult to trigger large-scale change.

In addition to the economic issue, another significant obstacle is information confusion. In the age of social media and hyper-communication, messages on the topic of sustainability are everywhere — but not always clear, consistent or verifiable. Consumers often find themselves overwhelmed by labels, slogans, initiatives that promise environmental or social commitment, but which, in some cases, turn out to be little more than façade operations. The phenomenon of greenwashing, i.e. the practice of using sustainability as a purely communicative lever without there being a real change in business practices, undermines trust and makes it even more difficult to distinguish what is authentic from what is strategically constructed.

However, there is no shortage of signs of real and positive change. More and more people, especially among young people, are experimenting with alternative forms of consumption, which break with the logic of "buy and throw away". The purchase of used garments, the use of vintage, the exchange of clothes between friends, the rental for special events: all these practices, which until a few years ago were considered marginal or even stigmatized, are now becoming an integral part of a new way of experiencing fashion, more reflective, personal and sustainable.

On the institutional front, there are also important movements. The European Union, for example, is working on a series of measures aimed at encouraging the production of more durable, repairable and recyclable garments. The goal is to counter the devastating impact of the textile industry on the environment, reducing waste and promoting the circular economy. These initiatives move in the direction of systemic change, capable of creating the conditions for more sustainable choices to become more accessible and practicable<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> peepl. (2024, maggio). *Gen Z Consumers & Sustainability: 5 Key Trends Shaping 2024*. Recuperato da: <https://www.opepl.com>

<sup>33</sup> Vogue. (2023, November 10). *Could This Really Be the End for Fast Fashion?*tag. Retrieved from: <https://www.vogue.com>

What is emerging strongly is a new type of consumer, more attentive, more informed, but also more demanding. Young people, in particular, are playing a key role in reshaping the future of fashion, pushing companies to evolve and adapt. But the responsibility cannot fall solely on them. For sustainability to truly become a daily choice and not a luxury for the few, it is essential that all the players in the system — brands, institutions, media, educators — work together to create a fairer, more transparent and commons-oriented context. Only in this way will it be possible to transform growing awareness into concrete and lasting action, building a fashion that is not only beautiful to wear, but also right to choose.

#### **1.2.4 The impact of regulations and social pressures**

In recent years, the fashion industry has found itself at the center of an intense process of public scrutiny. What was once a sector driven almost exclusively by the logic of creativity, trends and profit margins, today is confronted with a much more complex context, in which environmental responsibility, transparency and social justice have become keywords, not only in communication strategies, but also in regulatory and financial agendas.

This new scenario is the result of a triple pressure that comes from governments and international institutions, from increasingly demanding and aware consumers, and finally from investors, who are starting to evaluate companies also on the basis of their ethical behavior and ability to face global challenges with a sustainable approach.

#### **International regulations and new responsibilities for companies**

On the legislative front, the innovations are numerous and significant. In particular, the European Union has embarked on a decisive path towards greater transparency and accountability, through tools such as the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD). These directives, already being implemented, impose on companies the obligation not only to report



in detail on their environmental and social performance, but also to take concrete action to prevent and mitigate negative impacts along the entire supply chain<sup>34</sup>.

It is therefore no longer a question of drawing up a one-off report to be included among the initiatives of "good will", but of building a continuous system of monitoring and intervention, capable of accounting not only to internal stakeholders, but also to the public, authorities and supranational bodies.

In the United States, there are also movements in this direction. The New York Fashion Act, for example, proposes transparency obligations very similar to those in Europe: fashion companies should be able to map at least 50% of their production chain, and make public detailed information on working conditions, emissions, and the supply of raw materials<sup>35</sup>.

While these interventions represent an opportunity to create fairer and more sustainable systems, they also pose considerable operational and organisational challenges, especially for those companies that have not yet integrated sustainability into their processes in a structural way. Adapting to these new standards requires investment, resources and — above all — a profound cultural change.

### **Social pressures: an increasingly demanding public**

Alongside legal norms, there is another form of pressure that is perhaps even more powerful because it is more widespread and less controllable: that of public opinion. Consumers — and in particular the new generations — are no longer satisfied with fine words. They demand consistency, transparency and tangible actions. They want to know what's behind the garment they're buying, and they demand that brands take responsibility for their impact on the planet and people.

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<sup>34</sup> Sustainably En Vogue. (2023). *ESG & Fashion Industry: A Path Towards Sustainability*. <https://www.sustainably-en-vogue.com/post/esg-fashion-industry-a-path-towards-sustainability>

<sup>35</sup> Immigration and Human Rights Law Review. (2022). *Human Rights in Vogue: How New York's Proposed Fashion Sustainability and Social Accountability Act Could Change the Fashion Industry*. <https://lawblogs.uc.edu/ihr/r/2022/04/24/human-rights-in-vogue-how-new-yorks-proposed-fashion-sustainability-and-social-accountability-act-could-change-the-fashion-industry/>

A recent survey by *Vogue Business* revealed that many companies in the fashion industry, while mentioning sustainability in their financial reports, still fail to establish a direct and measurable link between sustainable initiatives and economic results<sup>36</sup>. This disconnect can generate frustration and suspicion in consumers, who interpret the lack of transparency as a sign of greenwashing or lack of authenticity.

#### Slowness and obstacles in integrating sustainability into financial statements

Despite the great proclamations and numerous promises of environmental commitment, many companies in the sector still struggle to truly integrate sustainability into their business models. An analysis conducted by *Vogue Business* on the annual financial statements of 12 major fashion and cosmetics brands showed that, although nine of these companies refer to sustainability, none explicitly linked ESG (environmental, social and governance) initiatives to financial performance<sup>3</sup>.

This reluctance, often driven by fear of scaring investors away or compromising margins in the short term, is one of the main barriers to a fully successful transition. As long as sustainability continues to be seen as an "extra" and not as a **central element in value creation**, it will be difficult to achieve lasting results.

#### **Towards a new corporate culture: sustainability as an investment, not as a cost**

To address these challenges, a profound rethinking of the way companies conceive their role in society is necessary. It is not enough to comply with the rules to avoid sanctions: we need a long-term strategic vision, capable of seeing sustainability not as a constraint, but as a resource.

Companies that will be able to seize this opportunity, reorganizing their processes from a sustainable perspective, will be able to benefit from significant competitive advantages:

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<sup>36</sup> Shoaib, M. (2025). *Why is sustainability overlooked in fashion company earnings?*. Vogue Business. <https://www.voguebusiness.com/story/sustainability/why-is-sustainability-overlooked-in-fashion-company-earnings>

access to new markets, greater attractiveness for investors, loyalty of a more aware clientele, and attraction of talents who are looking for companies consistent with their values.

Today, the pressure is not only coming from consumers and regulators: the world of finance is also turning towards more responsible criteria. More and more investment funds, in fact, are using ESG criteria as a parameter to decide where to allocate capital, rewarding companies that adopt concrete, consistent and measurable sustainable policies.

All this confirms that we are not facing a simple trend of the moment, but a structural change that is reshaping the rules of the game. Companies that can listen, evolve and truly integrate sustainability into their business models will have the best chance of emerging — not only as market leaders, but also as protagonists of a fairer, more transparent and lasting future.

### 1.2.5 Luxury companies' approaches to sustainability

In the current context, marked by a growing attention to environmental, social and ethical issues, the luxury sector is faced with a challenge that is both complex and fascinating: combining exclusivity and sustainability. Once considered distant worlds, these two concepts are now finding a meeting point, giving rise to a new vision of luxury — no longer just an expression of prestige and aesthetics, but also of responsibility, awareness and positive impact.

As already highlighted in the previous chapters, the contemporary consumer — in particular the new generations — no longer looks only at the perceived quality or symbolic value of a product, but questions **how** that product was made, **by whom**, **with what materials** and under **what conditions**<sup>37</sup>. In this scenario, luxury houses find themselves having to redefine their positioning, maintaining the very high standards of quality and craftsmanship that have always distinguished them, but at the same time integrating the logic of transparency, fairness and sustainable innovation.

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<sup>37</sup> Ho, C.S. (2023). *Sustainability Practices in the Luxury Industry: Evolution and Opportunities*. Sustainability, 15(4), 3478.

### **From traceability to impact measurement: the Kering case**

One of the strategies most adopted by the big fashion houses is that of transparency of the production chain. The goal is to make visible — and therefore verifiable — the entire path that a product takes, from the raw material to the point of sale. This not only increases consumer confidence, but also allows for more targeted action to reduce environmental and social impacts.

In this context, the Kering Group, which controls iconic brands such as Gucci, Bottega Veneta and Saint Laurent, has distinguished itself by introducing a pioneering system: the Environmental Profit & Loss Account (EP&L). This tool makes it possible to measure the environmental impact along the entire supply chain and translate it into economic value, thus offering a concrete and quantifiable view of the environmental consequences of business choices<sup>38</sup>. A decisive step towards a more conscious and responsible management, which demonstrates how sustainability and strategic control can go hand in hand.

### **Innovative materials and eco-design: between experimentation and symbolism**

Another central pillar for many fashion houses is investment in eco-design and in the search for sustainable materials. In this context, one of the most emblematic names is that of Stella McCartney, who has always been considered a pioneer in ethical fashion. The designer has renounced the use of animal leather and fur from the beginning, opting for cruelty-free and plant-based materials, such as Mylo™, an innovative alternative to leather made from mycelium, the root of mushrooms<sup>39</sup>.

Other companies, such as Burberry, have made significant choices, such as eliminating the use of fur and abandoning the much-criticized practice of incinerating leftovers<sup>40</sup>. These

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<sup>38</sup> Kering Group. (2021). *Environmental Profit & Loss Account 2020*. <https://www.kering.com/en/sustainability/ep-l>

<sup>39</sup> Stella McCartney. (2023). *"Sustainability Materials"*.

<sup>40</sup> Burberry Group Plc. (2019). *Responsibility Report*. <https://www.burberryplc.com>

gestures, although symbolic, represent an important change of course, capable of redefining the values of the brand and marking a new era in which craftsmanship excellence is combined with respect for the planet.

### **Inclusion, craftsmanship and social impact: the human heart of luxury**

Sustainability, however, is not limited to the environment. More and more companies are also extending their commitment to the social sphere, enhancing manual work, protecting workers' rights and promoting inclusion.

LVMH's LIFE program (LVMH Initiatives For the Environment) is moving in this direction, which in addition to environmental objectives also includes initiatives for women's empowerment, promotion of diversity and training of new generations of artisans, thanks to the *Institut des Métiers d'Excellence*<sup>41</sup> project. It is an integrated and long-term approach that aims not only to improve production processes, but also to strengthen the human and cultural fabric on which luxury is based.

### **The risk of greenwashing and the crucial role of independent verification**

Despite the concrete efforts of many fashion houses, the risk — more current than ever — of greenwashing remains: the tendency to communicate environmental commitments that are not supported by real actions or verifiable data. In an industry where image is everything, sustainability cannot be just a narrative exercise, but must be based on solid and transparent metrics.

To meet this need, many companies are adhering to international certification standards — such as GOTS, FSC or ISO 14001 — and collective initiatives such as the Fashion Pact, which has brought together over 60 companies in the fashion industry around common and

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<sup>41</sup> LVMH. (2022). *LIFE 360 Progress Report*. <https://www.lvmh.com/group/lvmh-commitments/environment/life-360/>

publicly measurable commitments<sup>42</sup>. The goal is to build a shared language and a credible basis of accountability, which can generate trust and stimulate progressive and concrete improvement.

### **Circularity and digital innovation: new frontiers of sustainable luxury**

One of the most interesting developments concerns the adoption of circular models. The concept of the "second life" of garments — once inconceivable for a market based on uniqueness and exclusivity — is also gaining ground in luxury. The high-end second-hand market is now expanding, as demonstrated by successful platforms such as Vestiaire Collective and The RealReal, often active in direct collaboration with the same fashion houses<sup>43</sup>.

But it doesn't end there: digital technology is also offering innovative tools to combine authenticity, traceability and sustainability. The use of blockchain and NFTs associated with certificates of authenticity makes it possible to document the entire history of a product, guaranteeing its origin and originality, and opening up new scenarios in the relationship between brand, product and consumer<sup>44</sup>.

The approaches of luxury companies to sustainability today are multiple, articulated and constantly evolving. Each follows its own trajectory, but they all share a common awareness: it is no longer possible to talk about excellence without also talking about responsibility. Sustainability is not a constraint to be defended against, but an opportunity to innovate, stand out and meet the expectations of an increasingly demanding, attentive and involved clientele. In a world where luxury is increasingly called to account not only for *how* it presents itself,

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<sup>42</sup> Fashion Pact. (2023). “*About the Pact*”. <https://thefashionpact.org>

<sup>43</sup> Peverelli, P. (2022). *Luxury and the Second-Hand Market: Risks and Opportunities*. Journal of Luxury Marketing, 12(2), 87–104.

<sup>44</sup> Bain & Company. (2023). *Luxury Goods Worldwide Market Study – Spring Update*. [https://www.bain.com/globalassets/noindex/2023/bain\\_altagamma\\_spring\\_luxury\\_update\\_2023.pdf](https://www.bain.com/globalassets/noindex/2023/bain_altagamma_spring_luxury_update_2023.pdf)

but also for *what it represents*, the commitment to a fairer and more lasting future is no longer an optional — but an imperative.

## **1.3 CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) and sustainability**

### **1.3.1 The role of corporate social responsibility in luxury**

In the contemporary debate on sustainability, one of the most central concepts — and at the same time constantly evolving — is that of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Far from being a simple marketing strategy or a set of isolated philanthropic actions, CSR is now configured as an integrated model of business management, aimed at balancing economic objectives with environmental, social and ethical issues.

According to the definition provided by the European Commission, CSR consists of the "voluntary integration by companies of social and environmental concerns into their business operations and relations with stakeholders".<sup>45</sup> In other words, it means going beyond immediate profit and taking on a broader responsibility towards society and the planet.

The origins of the concept date back to the fifties, when Howard R. Bowen, in his pioneering *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman* (1953), argued that companies had a moral duty towards the social context in which they operate<sup>46</sup>. Since then, CSR has come a long way, enriching itself with nuances and approaches. Fundamental was, for example, the contribution of Archie B. Carroll, who in 1991 proposed the famous "CSR pyramid", distinguishing between economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities<sup>47</sup> — a structure still used today as a reference to understand the complexity of the issue.

### **CSR and ESG criteria: towards a new business paradigm**

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<sup>45</sup> European Commission. (2001). *Green Paper: Promoting a European framework for corporate social responsibility*.

<sup>46</sup> Bowen, H. R. (1953). *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*. Harper & Row.

<sup>47</sup> Carroll, A. B. (1991). *The Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility: Toward the Moral Management of Organizational Stakeholders*. Business Horizons.

In today's context, marked by climate crises, social inequalities and growing regulatory attention, CSR is increasingly intertwined with the so-called ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) criteria, becoming an indispensable tool for making companies' commitment measurable. Companies are called upon to publicly report on their actions, through social reports, sustainability reports, impact indicators and certified documents, responding not only to consumer pressure, but also to new European and international directives.

In this scenario, CSR stops being a "do-gooder" option and turns into a strategic requirement, a necessary condition for accessing financing, attracting investors, building customer loyalty and protecting one's reputation.

### **CSR and luxury: an increasingly strategic combination**

In the luxury sector, corporate social responsibility takes on a particularly interesting meaning. High-end brands, historically linked to values such as exclusivity, craftsmanship and aesthetic perfection, are now called upon to renew their role in society, responding to the new needs of a more informed, attentive and critical public. Sustainability, in this context, is not just an added value: it is a new form of elegance, an expression of prestige that is also expressed in terms of ethics, transparency and positive impact.

CSR in luxury manifests itself on different levels: from the choice of materials with low environmental impact, to the reduction of emissions, up to the selection of suppliers who share the same principles of respect and responsibility. Furthermore, more and more maisons are adopting environmental and social certifications to ensure high standards, not only in the quality of the products, but also in the management of the entire production chain.

But CSR is not limited to the environment: it also includes social and philanthropic activities, investments in employee well-being, training and community development. Another important front concerns the promotion of slower, more reflective and conscious consumption models, in stark contrast to the logic of fast fashion.

### **CSR as a competitive lever in contemporary luxury**

As Broccardo (2023) points out, for luxury companies, CSR is no longer an "ethical choice" to be relegated to institutional communication, but a strategic necessity. In an increasingly



demanding and interconnected market, in which consumers — especially the younger ones — demand consistency and integrity, social responsibility becomes a distinctive factor, capable of consolidating reputation, differentiating the offer and building a more authentic bond with the public<sup>48</sup>.

From a simple reputational management tool, CSR has now become a structural component of corporate governance, involving every area of the company: from production to marketing, from logistics to human resources. Its evolution reflects a profound cultural change, which sees the company no longer only as a profit generator, but as a social actor capable of creating shared value.

Ultimately, CSR in the luxury sector represents a bridge between tradition and future. It is the tool through which companies can remain faithful to their identity, without giving up on renewing themselves and contributing positively to society. In a context in which purchasing choices are increasingly oriented by ethical, environmental and value criteria, CSR is no longer a side item: it is the beating heart of a new way of doing business, in which excellence is also measured in terms of responsibility.

### **1.3.2 Customer loyalty through sustainable strategies**

In the contemporary luxury landscape, profoundly marked by cultural, environmental and generational changes, customer loyalty has taken on new contours, much more nuanced and complex than in the past. If once the prestige of the brand, the quality of the materials and the exclusivity of the product were considered sufficient to guarantee consumer loyalty, today these elements — while remaining central — must necessarily be accompanied by an authentic commitment to sustainability, ethics and transparency.

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<sup>48</sup> Broccardo, L. (2023). *Corporate social responsibility: Does it really matter in the luxury context?* Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management.

In particular, Millennials and Generation Z, who represent not only the present but above all the future of the luxury market, show purchasing behaviors that are increasingly oriented by value criteria. To earn and maintain their trust, brands must demonstrate that they can listen, understand and reflect new cultural priorities, ranging from environmental responsibility to social justice, through narrative coherence and personalization of the experience.

### **A new consumer: aware, demanding and oriented towards lasting value**

Numerous studies confirm that the new generations are not just buyers, but active and informed consumers, ready to reward or penalize a brand on the basis of its concrete choices, not just its statements. A recent survey conducted in the United Kingdom shows that 73% of Millennials and 64% of Gen Z say they prefer to invest in durable and high-quality goods, eschewing the throwaway logic typical of fast fashion<sup>1</sup>. In this sense, luxury is configured not so much as excess, but as a conscious quality, in which the value of an object is also measured by its longevity and respect for the ethical principles that generated it.

Even more significant is the fact that 63% of Generation Z consumers and 62% of Millennials are willing to pay a premium price for ethically made items<sup>49</sup>. This highlights a concrete — not just theoretical — willingness to support a fairer and more sustainable fashion economy. It is not, therefore, a simple preference, but a structured value choice, capable of influencing market dynamics.

Corporate reputation, in turn, plays a fundamental role. According to a 2023 study, a third of these young shoppers declare greater loyalty to brands that demonstrate a clear consistency between declared values and practices adopted, rewarding commitment to issues such as sustainability, inclusion, transparency<sup>50</sup>.

### **Forbes and the redefinition of luxury: experience, sustainability, authenticity**

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<sup>49</sup> FashionUnited. *Gen Z and millennials prioritising quality and sustainability for luxury purchases*. (2025). Disponibile su: <https://fashionunited.com/news/fashion/gen-z-and-millennials-prioritising-quality-and-sustainability-for-luxury-purchases/2025020664347>

<sup>50</sup> Sustainability Beat. *A third of Gen Z and millennial shoppers are more loyal to sustainable brands*. (2023). Disponibile su: <https://www.sustainability-beat.co.uk/2023/07/31/brand-loyalty-gen-z>

One of the most interesting analyses on this topic is proposed by *Forbes*, which highlights three ways in which Millennials and Gen Z are revolutionizing the very concept of luxury<sup>51</sup>. The first change is of a cultural nature: while for past generations luxury was often synonymous with ostentatious exclusivity, today it is reinterpreted as a meaningful experience, linked to personal growth, identity and relationship with the community. Luxury, therefore, is no longer just "having", but also — and above all — "being" and "participating". The second axis concerns sustainability as a new standard. The choice of a brand no longer passes only through the notoriety of the logo or the aesthetics of the product, but is based on the transparency of the supply chain, the use of ecological and recycled materials, and the commitment to reducing waste and environmental impact. Respect for the environment is now perceived as a collective duty and an individual responsibility, which is reflected in consumption habits.

Finally, *Forbes* emphasizes the importance of authenticity as a core value in the relationship between brand and customer. Young people are no longer satisfied with generic statements or advertising promises: what matters is the concrete verification of actions, the consistency between what the brand says and what it actually achieves. The phenomenon of greenwashing has made the public more critical, more attentive and less inclined to grant trust lightly.

### **From sustainability to relationships: building loyalty through shared values**

In this new context, loyalty is not an automatism or a guaranteed result from the blazon of a brand. It is a process that requires consistency, empathy and shared value. A recent analysis has shown that sustainability-focused marketing strategies — such as the introduction of eco-friendly products, fair pricing policies, green promotions, and low-impact distribution systems — have a direct and significant effect on customer loyalty<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> Danziger, P. *3 Ways Millennials And Gen-Z Consumers Are Radically Transforming The Luxury Market*, *Forbes*, 2019. Disponibile su: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pamdanziger/2019/05/29/3-ways-millennials-and-gen-z-consumers-are-radically-transforming-the-luxury-market/>

<sup>52</sup> Mohammadi, E., Barzegar, M., & Nohekhan, M. (2023). *The Green Advantage: Analyzing the Effects of Eco-Friendly Marketing on Consumer Loyalty*. Disponibile su: <https://arxiv.org/abs/2312.16698>

But the effectiveness of these strategies depends on an essential factor: credibility. Only an authentic, transparent approach that is integrated into the corporate culture can truly generate an emotional and lasting connection with the customer.

Another crucial element is the personalization of the experience. Millennials and Gen Z are also looking for authentic relationships with brands. They want to feel represented, understood and involved. The ability to offer products that reflect personal values, cultural identity and individual sensitivity is a huge competitive advantage. In an era where personalization has become a basic expectation, the real difference lies in knowing how to speak the customer's language — not only from a communicative point of view, but also from a value point of view.

Building consumer loyalty in luxury no longer simply means "making them come back to buy", but creating meaningful and lasting relationships, based on respect, trust and shared visions. Especially with the younger generation, loyalty is won by demonstrating consistency, investing in uncompromising quality, promoting sustainable models and offering personalized and authentic experiences.

Companies that are able to interpret these signals and adapt intelligently and sensitively will not only be more competitive, but also more culturally and socially relevant. Because today, true luxury, perhaps, is precisely this: having a positive impact, being faithful not only to one's style, but also to one's values — and making sure that customers, in recognizing themselves in those values, choose to stay.

### **1.3.3 The importance of transparency in corporate communication**

In the new sustainable luxury ecosystem, where intangible values matter as much as the aesthetics of products, transparency in corporate communication has taken on an increasingly crucial role. It is no longer just an ethical duty or a gesture of goodwill, but a real strategic lever to strengthen trust, nurture customer loyalty and build a solid reputation over time.

In a market where consumers, especially those belonging to the younger generations, show an increasing attention to consistency between what a brand says and what it actually does, opacity can prove lethal. Millennials and Generation Z are not satisfied with slogans: they

want data, stories and concrete evidence. For them, transparency has become a *must*, an essential condition for considering a brand authentic — and therefore trustworthy.

### **From product to storytelling: a new role for transparency**

In the luxury sector, transparency cannot be reduced to a simple publication of numbers or reports. It is an integral part of a larger narrative, involving the brand's identity, language and values. In this context, transparent communication must accompany the customer throughout the entire life cycle of the product: from the selection of raw materials to the working conditions in the laboratories and the end-of-life strategies of the garments.

As pointed out by Torelli et al. (2012), luxury consumers not only buy a valuable object, but also the moral and cultural meanings it embodies<sup>53</sup>. This makes it clear how delicate the relationship between luxury and ethical communication is: a lack of transparency, or worse, misleading communication, risks generating a strong reputational short circuit. In an industry where image is everything, an accusation of greenwashing can compromise years of work and irreparably affect the relationship with the public.

### **Honesty as a form of value: why even imperfections matter**

A particularly interesting aspect that emerged from a study published in *Harvard Business Review* concerns the perception that consumers have of companies that openly admit their challenges and limitations. According to the analysis, the level of trust in these brands is often higher than that reserved for companies that try to look impeccable at all costs<sup>54</sup>.

This "radical honesty", understood as a willingness to communicate transparently even the problems still to be solved, is interpreted as a sign of integrity, humility and organizational maturity. Not only does it not damage reputation, but it helps to strengthen it, creating a deeper bond with the consumer, who feels part of an evolutionary path, not simply a target

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<sup>53</sup> Torelli, C. J., Monga, A. B., & Kaikati, A. M. (2012). *Doing Poorly by Doing Good: Corporate Social Responsibility and Brand Concepts*. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 38(5), 948–963.  
<https://doi.org/10.1086/661256>

Gino, F. & Bazerman, M. (2020). *Companies Shouldn't Pretend to Be Perfect*. *Harvard Business Review*.

<sup>54</sup> Gino, F. & Bazerman, M. (2020). *Companies Shouldn't Pretend to Be Perfect*. *Harvard Business Review*.  
<https://hbr.org/2020/07/companies-shouldnt-pretend-to-be-perfect>

to be conquered. From this point of view, even mistakes, if managed with transparency and responsibility, can become a valuable opportunity for learning and improvement.

### **International standards and verification tools: from promise to proof**

Being transparent also means adopting tools and standards that allow company statements to be verified and reported. Environmental certifications such as GOTS or ISO 14001, ESG reports, and reporting frameworks such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) have now become essential to confirm the validity of the commitments made<sup>55</sup>.

These tools not only respond to the growing need for accountability by consumers, but are also essential to gain the trust of strategic stakeholders such as investors, institutions, media and non-governmental organizations. A sustainability that is told but not measured risks remaining a façade operation. On the contrary, certified traceability becomes the language through which sustainability translates into real reputation.

### **Technology and transparency: blockchain, traceability and trust**

In the world of luxury, where authenticity and provenance are central, technology plays a key role in reinforcing transparency. More and more brands are adopting advanced digital tools — such as blockchain — to allow consumers to access verified and unalterable information about the product life cycle. From fabric to tailoring, logistics and sales: everything can be tracked, consulted and shared<sup>56</sup>.

Iconic brands such as Prada, LVMH and Cartier have already invested in these technologies, recognizing that trust is also built through immediate and transparent access to information. It is in this direction that the experience of the Aura Blockchain Consortium also fits in, a

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<sup>55</sup> ESG360. (2023). *ESG: everything you need to know to orient yourself on Environmental, Social and Governance*. <https://www.esg360.it/environmental/esg-tutto-quello-che-ce-da-sapere>

<sup>56</sup> Vogue Business. (2023). *Luxury brands turn to blockchain to boost traceability and trust*. <https://www.voguebusiness.com/technology/luxury-blockchain-traceability-sustainability>

platform designed to offer shared tools to major luxury brands, with the aim of promoting truly integrated and interoperable traceability<sup>57</sup>.

### **A transparency that also speaks of culture and identity**

Transparency, however, isn't just about data or technology: it also involves how a company communicates its internal culture, values, and approach to contemporary challenges. Recent studies show that companies perceived as "human", who speak openly about their goals, the difficulties encountered and the progress made, enjoy greater credibility. In particular, after the pandemic, consumers are looking for authentic, empathetic and consistent brands.

According to a survey conducted by PwC (2023), 74% of consumers are willing to switch brands if they believe that a brand is not sufficiently transparent in its communication<sup>58</sup>. This figure confirms that transparency is not only an added value, but a competitive driver, capable of directly influencing purchasing choices and loyalty.

### **The importance of consistency: transparency across all channels**

In a hyper-connected era, communication is not played on a single channel, but is distributed through websites, social media, newsletters, physical stores and advertising campaigns. For this reason, ensuring consistency and alignment between all touchpoints is now an indispensable condition for being credible in the eyes of the public. Even the slightest discrepancy between the stated message and the lived experience can call into question the perceived authenticity of the brand.

It is precisely to address this challenge that more and more companies are integrating third-party verification systems and advanced technological tools, such as the Aura blockchain

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<sup>57</sup> Aura Blockchain Consortium. (2023). *Empowering Brands Through Transparency*. <https://auraluxuryblockchain.com/>

<sup>58</sup> PwC. (2023). *Global Consumer Insights Survey*. <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/industries/consumer-markets/consumer-insights-survey.html>

promoted by LVMH, to standardize transparency and make accurate and certified information on the entire supply chain accessible to everyone in real time<sup>59</sup>.

### **Transparency that generates value, not just trust**

Ultimately, transparency in sustainable luxury is not a simple communication strategy, but a cultural and political act, a choice that touches the deep identity of the brand. Communicating only what works may seem reassuring, but also telling the difficulties, the steps still to be taken and the challenges in progress makes the message much more powerful, authentic and human.

In a market that rewards integrity and penalizes superficiality, transparency is established as one of the most valuable intangible assets. It is not just about informing, but about involving, educating and sharing a vision of the world. Only in this way is it possible to create a lasting bond with a consumer who no longer wants to just buy, but to share values and walk together towards a better future.

## **1.4 Consumer change: a more sustainability-conscious public**

### **1.4.1 The evolution of consumer behaviour in the luxury sector**

Over the past decade, there has been a quiet but radical evolution in the way consumers relate to luxury. It is not simply a generational change, but a profound cultural transformation, which has reshaped the expectations, priorities and even the very meaning of the concept of "luxury". Far from being linked exclusively to the desire for distinction and possession, today the consumption of high-end goods is increasingly influenced by ethical, environmental and identity assessments.

What is particularly interesting is that this evolution is not only manifested in words, but in real behaviors, in daily choices, in the criteria that guide the purchase. The beauty of the product remains important, as is quality, but they are no longer enough on their own to

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<sup>59</sup> Aura Blockchain Consortium. (2023). *Empowering Brands Through Transparency*. <https://auraluxuryblockchain.com/>



determine the loyalty or attractiveness of a brand. Contemporary consumers want to know where the materials come from, how workers are treated, how much impact the product has on the environment. And they are not satisfied with vague answers.

### **Not just age, but visions of the world: who is the new luxury customer**

It would be reductive to explain this evolution only as a "generational transition". It is true that Millennials and Gen Z have been — and continue to be — the main actors of this change, but what really distinguishes the contemporary consumer is the value orientation. More and more often, purchasing choices reflect a vision of the world: people do not buy only to possess, but to express a belonging, a conviction, a stance.

According to a recent literature review (Zhao et al., 2023), the growing interest in so-called "sustainable luxury" has soared since 2017<sup>60</sup>. This does not mean that the desire for exclusivity has disappeared, but that it has become intertwined with new sensibilities. Prestige no longer derives only from price or rarity, but also from the brand's ability to combine beauty and commitment, aesthetics and ethics.

### **The subtle balance between sustainability and value perception**

However, talking about sustainability in luxury does not only mean accumulating reputational points: it is a delicate path, which can generate contrasting effects. Some studies point out that, if sustainability is perceived as a forced operation or disconnected from the history and identity of the brand, it can even compromise the perception of value of the product<sup>61</sup>. In other words, environmental commitment must be felt, deep-rooted, consistent. Otherwise, it may look like an ornament — and like all ornaments, it can be superficial.

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<sup>60</sup> Zhao, L., Peng, J., & Yu, S. (2023). *Sustainable Luxury and Consumer Purchase Intention: A Systematic Literature Review*. *SAGE Open*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231216285>

<sup>61</sup> Grazzini, L., Acuti, D., & Aiello, G. (2021). *Solving the puzzle of sustainable fashion consumption: The role of consumers' implicit attitudes and perceived warmth*. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 287, 125579. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2020.125579>

Conversely, when the brand is perceived as authentically engaged, consumer reactions are much more positive. Pride, trust, a sense of gratitude: these are emotions that are activated when sustainability is experienced not as a commercial strategy, but as a sincere expression of the company's mission. And these emotions — it is good to remember — are among the most powerful engines of purchase and loyalty<sup>62</sup>.

### **Different cultures, different responses: the weight of context**

Another element that makes this transformation particularly fascinating — but also complex for companies to manage — is the profound influence of the cultural and socioeconomic context. In economically developed countries, where basic needs are generally met, consumers show greater openness to sustainability and social responsibility issues<sup>63</sup>. Here, ethical values can become real selection criteria.

The case is different in emerging markets, where the drive for consumption still tends to be strongly driven by the desire for status, social recognition, and individual affirmation. In these contexts, sustainability may be perceived as less relevant than factors such as brand visibility, notoriety or product functionality. For companies, this means having to develop adaptive, flexible and localized strategies, capable of intercepting different values and motivations.

### **Value segmentation: beyond demographic targets**

Not only where you live, but also your personality, value system and psychographic profile play a decisive role in shaping purchasing behavior in the luxury sector. There are consumers who are more oriented towards functionality, others who are more attracted to image, and still others who are deeply motivated by collective ideals and a marked social sensitivity.

Talukdar and Yu (2020) show how materialistic consumers tend to privilege aspects such as appearance and prestige, while those with a more altruistic and collectivist mindset are more

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<sup>62</sup> Dekhili, S., Achabou, M. A., & Alharbi, F. (2019). *Could sustainability improve the promotion of luxury products? European Business Review*, 31(4), 488–511. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EBR-04-2018-0083>

<sup>63</sup> Dekhili, S., Achabou, M. A., & Alharbi, F. (2019). *Could sustainability improve the promotion of luxury products? European Business Review*, 31(4), 488–511. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EBR-04-2018-0083>

inclined to reward the social value of a brand<sup>64</sup>. This means that segmenting your audience based on age, income, or geography alone is no longer enough. It is necessary to understand the convictions, values and deep motivations, to build a truly effective and personalized communication.

### **A more informed, more critical, more demanding consumer**

The massive spread of online information, combined with the rise of social media and review platforms, has profoundly changed the relationship between brands and audiences. Today, the consumer has access to an impressive amount of data, opinions, comparisons — and has learned to use them. This has made the customer more vigilant, more skeptical, and more autonomous, but also more likely to reward consistency and transparency (as discussed in the previous chapter).

It is no longer enough to "declare oneself sustainable": it is necessary to demonstrate this in a tangible and continuous way, knowing that every statement will be subjected to public scrutiny and potentially amplified online. It is in this context that trust is strengthened or lost, often within a few clicks.

### **A boost accelerated by the pandemic**

Finally, the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on this evolutionary process cannot be ignored. The collective experience of the crisis, the uncertainty, the reflection imposed by the restrictions have profoundly affected consumers' priorities. Many have begun to question the real meaning of their purchases, choosing to move towards a more conscious, reflective and responsible way of consumption.

As confirmed by numerous post-pandemic researches, this trend was not a flash in the pan, but a new base from which to start again. Today's choices are the result of that inner transformation, and companies that will be able to intercept it with intelligence, empathy and

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<sup>64</sup> Talukdar, N., & Yu, S. (2020). *Do materialists care about sustainable luxury? Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 38(4), 465–478. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-05-2019-0277>

consistency will be able to establish deeper and more lasting relationships with their customers<sup>65</sup>.

The new luxury consumer is not simply younger or more digital: he is more aware, more demanding and more interested in the meaning of his choices. It is a consumer who does not limit himself to buying, but wants to recognize himself in the brands he chooses, participate in their values, be part of a broader vision of the world.

For luxury brands, this evolution is not only a challenge, but an extraordinary opportunity to redefine their identity and create shared value. Those who will be able to respond to these new expectations with sincerity, transparency and the ability to innovate will not only win the trust of the public, but will also be the protagonists of a cultural transformation destined to leave its mark.

#### **1.4.2 The growing demand for sustainable and circular products**

In recent years, we have been witnessing a profound — and in some ways irreversible — change in the ways in which people choose what to buy, what to wear, what to consume. It is as if the compass of the market, for a long time oriented solely on criteria of aesthetics, performance and desirability, had gradually turned towards more complex, multifaceted and shared values. Today, talking about sustainability is no longer a passing fad or a trend for the few: it has become a cultural priority, transversal and now largely internalized by an ever-increasing number of consumers.

This transformation is not just about what we buy, but about how we relate to consumption itself. Purchasing is no longer just a functional or symbolic gesture, but is perceived as an act of responsibility, a way to express one's identity and contribute — in one's own small way — to a vision of a fairer, fairer, more sustainable future.

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<sup>65</sup> Connel, R. (2021). *The luxury consumer, sustainability and social responsibility: It's complicated. Sustainable Brands*. <https://sustainablebrands.com/read/walking-the-talk/the-luxury-consumer-sustainability-and-social-responsibility-it-s-complicated>

### **Data in hand: a collective conscience that translates into concrete choices**

Confirming this trend, the data speak for themselves. A recent survey conducted by Nomisma in 2024 shows that 40% of Italians have declared their intention to increase purchases of food and beverage products with sustainable packaging<sup>66</sup>. And more than half of the sample said they had already changed their habits in a more sustainable way than five years ago. Although the focus of the survey was on food, the results represent a valuable thermometer of what is also moving in other sectors, including luxury.

The attention to the essentials, the elimination of the superfluous, the preference for recyclable or reusable solutions: these are all signs that indicate a growing desire for consistency, formal and ethical cleanliness. Consumers are not only looking for beautiful and high-performance products, but also products that make sense, that speak the language of respect and awareness.

### **Reputation and sustainability: an increasingly close link**

It is not surprising, therefore, that the value of corporate reputation is now closely intertwined with the perception of environmental and social responsibility. A study by Confimprese and Cerved shows that 66% of consumers make purchasing decisions based on the degree of sustainability of the brand<sup>67</sup>. And only a small minority, 18%, say they are indifferent to any reputational damage related to questionable behavior by companies.

In this context, sustainability is no longer an "extra value", but a real prerequisite to enter the hearts — and the shopping cart — of consumers. We have gone from a model in which sustainability was an optional component to one in which it becomes a guiding criterion, a lever of trust, a differentiating factor. And it is precisely in this direction that many companies, even in the luxury sector, are orienting their strategic choices.

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<sup>66</sup> *Il Sole 24 Ore* (2024). "In 2024 more sustainable packaging in the shopping cart: 40% of Italians prefer it". Available on: <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/nel-2024-piu-confezioni-sostenibili-carrello-il-40percento-italiani-AFtKLNNC>

<sup>67</sup> *TG Poste* (2024). "66% of consumers are attentive to the sustainability of brands". Available on: <https://tgposte.poste.it/2024/03/26/consumatori-sostenibilita-brand/>

### **The circular economy: from idea to paradigm**

A fundamental element of this evolution is represented by the diffusion, still initial but growing, of the circular economy. It is not simply a matter of "recycling more", but of rethinking the entire life cycle of the product, starting from design and arriving at post-consumer. The goal is not only to reduce waste, but to maximize the value of each resource used, generating benefits throughout the supply chain.

According to the Circular Economy Report 2024 of the Politecnico di Milano, 42% of Italian companies have already started at least one circular practice<sup>68</sup>. This is an encouraging figure, but one that must also be read in the awareness of the barriers that still exist: cultural, technical, organizational. The challenge today is precisely this: to make the circular economy more accessible, more intuitive and more understandable, even for those on the other side of the product, i.e. the consumer.

### **Italy between recycling and local supply chains: a model that inspires**

One of the least discussed but most interesting aspects of this transformation concerns Italy, which in terms of recycling performance ranks among the leading countries in Europe. In 2022, the recycling rate of municipal waste reached 72%, well above the European average of 58%.<sup>69</sup> Even more impressive is the result obtained in the packaging sector: with a rate of 71.5%, our country has already exceeded the European targets set for 2025 and 2030.

But Italian sustainability does not end with the technical data. More and more often, demand is oriented towards the "zero kilometer", the short supply chain, authentic Made in Italy, not as an expression of economic nationalism, but as an enhancement of artisanal, local, responsible production. According to the FragilItalia 2024 report, purchases of Made in Italy

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<sup>68</sup> *Regions and Environment* (2024). "Circular Economy Report: 42% of companies are active". Available on: <https://www.regionieambiente.it/economia-circolare-report-es/>

<sup>69</sup> *Invest in Italy* (2024). "Circular economy: Italy is a leader in recycling". Available on: <https://www.investitaly.gov.it/sectors/economia-circolare>

products grew by 24% and those from short supply chains by 11%.<sup>70</sup> This orientation reflects not only a need for control and quality, but also a return to the link with the territory, with tradition, with roots.

### **From sustainability as a choice to sustainability as a common language**

Ultimately, the growing demand for sustainable and circular products is not a fad of the moment, but a structural change in the logic of consumption. More and more often, what guides people's choices is not only material need, but the willingness to participate in an idea of the future. Each purchase becomes a symbolic gesture, a narrative option, a declaration of values.

For companies, and in particular for luxury companies, all this translates into a fascinating but complex challenge: knowing how to integrate innovation, responsibility and symbolic value into every aspect of their business. It is no longer enough to "produce well": it is necessary to tell well, choose well, act consistently.

In a context where the consumer is more attentive, more informed and more involved than ever, sustainability is no longer a card to play, but the ground on which trust is built. And with it, the very future of the brand.

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<sup>70</sup> Legacoop Estense (2024). *"Green transition and consumption: +24% of Made in Italy purchases"*. Available on: <https://www.legacoopestense.coop/blog/2024/06/14/transizione-green-e-consumi-aumentano-di-24-punti-percentuali-gli-acquisti-di-prodotti-made-in-italy/>

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Upcycling and Second-Hand Economy: The analysis of the phenomenon (Framework of the phenomenon)**

#### *Summary*

*2.1 Upcycling as a sustainability strategy in luxury; 2.2 The Second-hand economy and the change in consumption habits; 2.3 Research question*

### **2.1 Upcycling as a sustainability strategy in luxury**

#### **2.1.1 Definition and difference between upcycling, recycling and reuse**

In the context of contemporary sustainability and the shift towards regenerative economic models, characterized by a concern for a growing offer of eco-friendly and resource-conscious products, an understanding of the management and valorization of post-consumer materials is essential. In this regard, the concepts of upcycling, recycling and reuse, often used interchangeably in everyday language, are of particular importance because each offers different approaches, with distinct characteristics, specific advantages and different implications from an environmental, socio-economic and socio-ecological point of view.

Recycling is undoubtedly one of the best known and most understood systems of waste control. In other words, it is the technique by which waste materials are reused as resources to be reintroduced into the production cycle. It should be noted that recycling, even if it exhausts the natural resource to be used, brings with it the qualitative loss of the material. In any case, "downcycling" means that the recycled material, even if reusable, does not have the same performance and technical characteristics as its original edition. Plastic and air conditioning, for example. In addition, typos such as the car radiator are



not considered a first material, plastic free leads, for sustainability, it is not clean.<sup>71</sup> The European Environment Agency has pointed out that there is an unknown number of wastes that are recovered for the creation of others; How many of these are recoverable is impossible to establish due to the poor separation and absence of recovery technologies.<sup>72</sup> Reuse, or "reuse", includes actions with a lower environmental impact than recycling. It is based on extending the useful life of an object and being able to use it several times without undergoing significant transformations. Common examples include containers, furniture, clothing, electronic gadgets, and household utensils. The main advantage of reuse is the conservation of resources and energy related to the production of new goods and the direct reduction of waste production. It also helps to promote a culture of maintenance, repair and conservation, which is in contradiction to the throwaway mentality. However, the widespread adoption of reuse faces infrastructural and cultural obstacles. In many Western societies, there is skepticism about second-hand goods, perceiving them as obsolete or unreliable. In addition, many regions lack appropriate logistics networks to simplify the retrieval, selection, and redistribution of reusable items. (Urde, 2007)<sup>73</sup> Upcycling, or creative reskilling, is an innovative practice that is increasingly relevant in the circular economy. Unlike recycling, upcycling does not aim to obtain raw materials that can be used for mass production, but to change the shape of waste materials or objects into new ones that acquire a higher functional, aesthetic or symbolic value than the original ones. In this sense, it also differs from reuse, as it goes beyond simply reusing an item as it is, but rather creatively reinterprets it, usually completely changing its purpose or appearance. Upcycling, therefore, is best described as a form of "*downward recycling*" or "*recycling up*" transforming materials into something inherently more valuable, not only in monetary terms, but also from a socio-cultural and identity perspective.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2013), Towards the Circular Economy, disponibile su: <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org>

<sup>72</sup> European Environment Agency (2021), Plastics waste and recycling in the EU, disponibile su: <https://www.eea.europa.eu>

<sup>73</sup> UNEP (2021), Reusability in Product Design, United Nations Environment Programme

<sup>74</sup> Singh, P. & Ordoñez, I. (2021), "The Role of Upcycling in Circular Economy and Sustainable Development", Sustainability, 13(13), disponibile su: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353271063>

Today, the applications of upcycling are widely spread in highly creative fields such as sustainable fashion, interior design, arts and crafts, and even green architecture. This can be observed in various brands, both emerging and established, in the textile sector that upcycle by transforming industrial waste, unsold garments or used clothing into culturally significant works of art. Brands such as Patagonia and Stella McCartney, as well as other small local businesses, have made upcycling a cornerstone of their sustainable marketing. In architecture and urban design, the "*Palettenhaus*" project in Vienna, built from discarded shipping pallets, demonstrates how materials considered of little value can be transformed into imaginative and functional design elements and, at the same time, challenge existing aesthetic and residential paradigms.<sup>75</sup>

Upcycling, in addition to contributing to the economic and social well-being of a community, also actively contributes to the improvement of the environment. This substantial evolution is demonstrated by more academic research that indicates that the phenomenon is becoming increasingly popular, as it is practiced not only by individuals who embrace a sustainable lifestyle, but also by small and medium-sized companies that with their work are able both to increase employment in a specific place and to enhance traditional arts long abandoned by the industrial system. In fact, upcycling is an excellent way to create a social enterprise, providing a range of opportunities to people considered "weak" from a professional point of view, in this way, promoting enrolment in active and inclusive processes. The additional value brought to this culture goes far beyond the purely economic value: it affects economic, cultural, educational and community development.<sup>76</sup>

From an ecological point of view, upcycling is a practice that has an impact on the environment even compared to industrial recycling. In fact, upcycling consumes less fuel and produces fewer toxic emissions into the air. In a nutshell, upcycling uses a smaller number of essential goods for its realization, instead exploiting goods already used in artisanal or limited production processes and after-sales for mass consumption, and for this reason, it is more of a help to preserve the high pressure offered on the environment.

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<sup>75</sup> Palettenhaus project, Vienna Architecture Days 2013, documentato da: <https://www.archdaily.com>

<sup>76</sup> Ghisellini, P., Cialani, C. & Ulgiati, S. (2016), "A review on circular economy: the expected transition to a balanced interplay of environmental and economic systems", *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 114

To return to the point, placing these practices within the hierarchical waste management system of the European Union is essential. This regulatory system prioritizes prevention, then deals with reuse, recycling and only as a last resort to landfill or incineration. Upcycling, although not explicitly designated in the legislation, occupies a space ideally inserted to balance prevention and reuse, as it extends the useful life of a material by transforming it additively, thus preventing it from becoming waste. From this point of view, it remains a key strategy for a profound just systemic transition towards a fully circular economy that integrates ecological efficiency with social justice and cultural innovation.<sup>77</sup>

### **2.1.2 The value of craftsmanship and heritage in luxury goods**

With the increase in demand for sustainable and circular products, the concept of '*heritage*' – a concept that harks back to a brand's cultural, historical and identity assets – is central to the redefinition of luxury today. While on the one hand 'artisanal' denotes the skill and attention to every detail of a product, giving it an unparalleled value compared to mass production, on the other hand heritage represents the symbolic and narrative memory that supports the authenticity of the brand in an era increasingly focused on sustainable ethics and transparency.

The value of the brand's heritage lies in integrating the past with the present. It provides a timeless approach that generates consumer trust, almost giving the product an *aura* that magnifies its intended use. As highlighted by Urde et al. (2007), heritage is a strategic asset and if well used, it can contribute significantly to brand value by supporting the authenticity of the brand narrative over time.<sup>78</sup> In luxury, this means valuing origins and

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<sup>77</sup> Directive 2008/98/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council, Art. 4 – Waste hierarchy; European Commission (2020), A new Circular Economy Action Plan

<sup>78</sup> Urde, M., Greyser, S. A., & Balmer, J. M. T. (2007). Corporate brands with a heritage. *Journal of Brand Management*, 15(1), 4–19. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.bm.2550106>

founders, traditional production techniques and traditional aesthetics reinterpreted in a contemporary way.

This trend is combined with the principles of the circular economy, according to which the recovery of the past - not only in terms of materials, but also of meanings and memory - embodies a form of cultural sustainability. In other words, preserving a brand's heritage, artisanal knowledge and local traditions not only prevents industrial homogenization, but also resists the culture of planned obsolescence, offering products designed to last temporarily and symbolically. The concept of heritage is therefore intertwined with longevity, giving rise to a new form of "responsible" luxury that does not sacrifice exclusivity but enriches it with shared and future-oriented values.

A number of luxury brands have recognised the strategic importance of this intangible heritage, placing heritage at the heart of their communication and production practices. A paradigmatic example is Gucci, which has rediscovered and reinterpreted its historical archive to build iconic collections, reinforcing the emotional attachment that consumers have with the brand. Similarly, Louis Vuitton and Burberry have also digitally preserved their visual and cultural heritage, spending significant resources to transform it into immersive and museum content that reinforces the idea of the brand as the custodian of an authentic and unrepeatable story.<sup>79</sup>

In particular, it is in the synergy between heritage and sustainability that the concept takes on new layers of meaning. According to Kapferer and Bastien (2012), authentic luxury goes beyond selling expensive items; It creates "an intangible universe" based on values such as time, memory, craftsmanship and rarity.<sup>80</sup> The deep time of luxury - as opposed to the short time of industrial production - becomes one of the fundamental pillars of sustainability, not only from an environmental point of view, but also from a social and cultural point of view. Maintaining traditional craftsmanship, training new generations of

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<sup>79</sup> Muehling, D. D., & Sprott, D. E. (2004). The Power of Reflecting on the Past: Using Nostalgia to Build Brand Equity. *Journal of Advertising*, 33(3), 25–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2004.10639165>

<sup>80</sup> Kapferer, J.-N., & Bastien, V. (2012). *The Luxury Strategy: Break the Rules of Marketing to Build Luxury Brands*. Kogan Page Publishers.

artisans and encouraging transparent and regional production means investing in people and geo-resilience, which positively affects the entire socio-economic ecosystem.

From this perspective, heritage is not simply a mere ideological ornament, but a vibrant resource that can inspire innovation based on the past. The "slow" approach to fashion and design, embraced by many independent brands and institutional initiatives such as *Crafting the Future* (UNESCO, 2021), demonstrates how preserving traditions can meet the contemporary needs of globalized markets as a viable alternative to fast, disposable culture.<sup>81</sup>

In fact, heritage opens up extraordinary opportunities in the field of sustainability for luxury companies, as it allows them to integrate the areas of craftsmanship excellence, responsible innovation, value giving and narrative authenticity. Increasingly, customers are willing to deliver broader support towards products that in addition to a brand, story, and conscious internal impact.

### **2.1.3 Case studies of luxury brands adopting upcycling**

In the current context of fashion, the adoption of sustainable behaviors is no longer a green marketing operation, but a strategic imperative imposed by the evolution of consumption and the increased environmental sensitivity of consumers. One of the most emblematic initiatives of this change is upcycling. As anticipated in the previous paragraphs, this practice differs from traditional recycling in that it does not involve a process of degradation or dematerialization, but rather of creative re-signification, often closely linked to craftsmanship, storytelling, cost-effectiveness and enhancement of uniqueness. Within the fashion system, and specifically in the context of luxury, upcycling is consolidating itself as a tool that is not only environmental, but also cultural and aesthetic, susceptible to assuming a new ideal of luxury that is more sensitive and respectful<sup>82</sup>.

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<sup>81</sup> UNESCO (2021). *Crafting the Future: The Revival of Artisanal Skills in a Globalized World*. Retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org>

<sup>82</sup> Vogue UK. (2021). 12 Small Brands Upcycling Their Way Into Stylish Wardrobes. <https://www.vogue.co.uk/fashion/article/upcycled-fashion-brands>

One of the most interesting cases is that of the *Marine Serre* brand, founded by the French designer of the same name. Serre has built a highly recognizable stylistic code thanks to the systematic use of recycled and recovered materials: vintage sheets, towels, scarves from past years, exhausted sportswear become raw material for the production of new avant-garde clothes. The designer attributes the "future-ancient" label to her aesthetic, as attested by a creative path that looks to the future starting from the recovery of the past. As of 2020, more than 50% of its collections have been made using upcycled materials, and in this regard an approach has been implemented that has been replicated throughout the brand's supply chain, from the choice of materials to the tailoring of the garments. Serre's activity itself is a real experimental laboratory<sup>83</sup>. This commitment is also increasingly reflected in consumer perceptions: according to a survey conducted by McKinsey & Business of Fashion<sup>84</sup>, about 60% of Gen Z consumers consider a brand's environmental commitment to be crucial in the purchasing decision-making process, especially if it is connected to recycling and creative reuse practices. Marine Serre, in this sense, manages to intercept an increasingly conscious demand, which rewards authenticity and consistency between the values expressed and the practices adopted.

Another highly relevant example is *Maison Margiela*, which with the only *Artisanal line* has redefined the concept of upcycling in a couture key. John Galliano, creative of the maison, reflected on the concept of sartorial luxury as an activity of "putting the pieces back together", combining recycled materials — from disassembled jackets to military uniforms, archive fabrics, antique goatees, for example — to garments, creating real works of art, unique, non-repeatable, which bring with them a stratification of memory, manual skills, design. The Artisanal collection is based on a concept of reparative deconstruction, which unravels the traditions of form to restore them on a narrative mixture. In this activity, upcycling is not only sustainable from an environmental point of

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<sup>83</sup> Vogue UK. (2021). 12 Small Brands Upcycling Their Way Into Stylish Wardrobes. <https://www.vogue.co.uk/fashion/article/upcycled-fashion-brands>

<sup>84</sup> McKinsey & Company, Business of Fashion (2021). The State of Fashion 2021. Available on: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/state-of-fashion>

view, but also culturally strong, because it recovers and transforms forgotten or marginal symbols, aesthetics and identities<sup>85</sup>.

Another relevant example is that of *Gucci*, one of the most historic and influential fashion houses in the world of luxury, which has launched numerous activities on the circular economy front. *Gucci Off The Grid*, launched in 2020, is a project that is part of the broader Gucci Circular Lines project and offers collections that use recycled and natural materials, such as ECONYL,<sup>®</sup> a nylon cleaned of waste such as fishing nets and industrial waste. Downstream of the material element, Gucci has focused on communicating sustainability, emphasizing the role of regeneration and the connection between community, environment and creativity. Off The Grid is characterized by extreme aesthetic and conceptual coherence: even though it is sustainable clothing, it maintains the luxurious and iconic visual lexicon of the maison, showing that the circular economy is perfectly suited to haute couture<sup>86</sup>.

A particularly emblematic example of the combination of heritage and upcycling is that of Bode, the American designer founded by Emily Bode. The designer is unique in his production of men's clothing made from ancient fabrics — quilts, netting, sheets and shirts from the early twentieth century — found in markets, private archives or handed down from generation to generation. Each outfit is charged with a soul, contains a memory, and becomes the testimonial of an instantiation and a snapshot of a group and an individual. *Bode* re-proposes the idea of luxury not as material exclusivity, but as attention to detail, and that upcycling is not only an ethical waste, but also a sign of respect for the narration of history and craftsmanship of the past<sup>87</sup>.

The assumption of these habits by luxury brands is not accidental: it reflects a radical change in the purchasing patterns of consumers, and in particular of the youngest. According to a report by McKinsey & Company, more than 60% of Gen Z consumers believe it is essential for brands to adopt habits that respect their image, also showing a

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<sup>85</sup> Vogue UK. (2022). Is Upcycling In Fashion Truly Sustainable?. <https://www.vogue.co.uk/fashion/article/is-upcycling-sustainable>

<sup>86</sup> Gucci. (2020). Gucci Off The Grid Campaign. <https://equilibrium.gucci.com>

<sup>87</sup> Forbes. (2022). How Bode Is Changing The Future Of Menswear Through Memory And Craft. <https://www.forbes.com>

penchant towards products circularity, uniqueness, durability. Upcycling is the only habit that places the values of sustainability, authenticity, craftsmanship, storytelling, positioning itself as a concrete and sophisticated sign of a rejection of homologation and excessive production of fast fashion<sup>88</sup>.

However, as highlighted by Vogue UK, upcycling in the fashion industry is not without its challenges. Its effective sustainability is based on issues such as traceability of the source of materials, energy invested in the transformation process, and scalability of mass production, while maintaining quality and stylistic cohesion. In addition, the uniqueness of each piece poses production and commercial challenges that cannot be underestimated. Despite this, upcycling is one of the most promising and culturally relevant strategies within the new paradigm of responsible luxury.<sup>89</sup>tag.

## **2.2 The Second-hand economy and changing consumption habits**

### **2.2.1 Growth of the second-hand luxury market**

In recent years, the second-hand market has progressively taken on a strategic role within the luxury industry, helping to redefine established models of production, distribution and consumption. If once the purchase of used products was perceived as an economic or fallback choice, today second-hand luxury is configured as a conscious, refined and culturally significant practice, capable of offering alternative but authentic access to the universe of excellence, uniqueness and prestige. This transformation is part of a broader framework of transition towards a circular economic model, in which concepts such as reuse, extension of the life cycle of products and lasting value become central to the very definition of the concept of luxury<sup>90</sup>.

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<sup>88</sup> McKinsey & Company. (2023). The State of Fashion 2023.  
<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/state-of-fashion>

<sup>89</sup> Vogue UK. (2022). Is Upcycling In Fashion Truly Sustainable?.  
<https://www.vogue.co.uk/fashion/article/is-upcycling-sustainable>

<sup>90</sup> Boston Consulting Group & Vestiaire Collective. (2023). What an Accelerating Secondhand Market Means for Fashion Brands. <https://www.bcg.com>



The exponential growth of this segment is widely documented by market analyses and international reports. According to the *Luxury Resale Report* by Boston Consulting Group and Vestiaire Collective (2023), the global second-hand fashion market is set to grow at an annual rate of 15-20%, with a projection that estimates it will exceed \$200 billion by 2027<sup>91</sup>. Driving this expansion is a new generation of consumers, in particular Millennials and Gen Z, who are particularly sensitive to the issues of environmental sustainability, ethical responsibility and transparency in the production chain. As McKinsey (2023) highlights, more than 70% of young luxury goods buyers have made at least one second-hand purchase in the last year<sup>92</sup>.

This phenomenon responds not only to the need to make luxury more accessible from an economic point of view, but above all reflects a profound cultural change: authenticity, exclusivity and storytelling become the new cornerstones of the consumer experience. Wearing a second-hand garment — especially if it is linked to archival collections or distinctive historical periods — allows the consumer to express a personal and distinctive identity, helping to build a sense of belonging to a sophisticated aesthetic and value community<sup>93</sup>.

One of the main motivations that drives the purchase of used luxury goods is the desire to own unique pieces, no longer available on the primary market. This is linked to the concept of "*scarcity value*", i.e. the added value given to an object by its limited availability. A vintage Chanel dress or a vintage Hermès Birkin bag, for example, not only keep their meanings of use and symbolism intact, but increase their prestige thanks to the history they carry with them and their unrepeatability over time<sup>94</sup>.

The shopping experience is now made even more accessible and sophisticated thanks to the spread of specialized digital platforms such as *Vestiaire Collective*, *The RealReal*, *Rebag* and *Farfetch Pre-Owned*. These marketplaces have revolutionized the image of

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<sup>91</sup> McKinsey & Company. (2023). The State of Fashion 2023. <https://www.mckinsey.com>

<sup>92</sup> Turunen, L. L. M., & Leipämaa-Leskinen, H. (2015). Pre-loved luxury: Identifying the meanings of second-hand luxury possessions. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 24(1), 57–65.

<sup>93</sup> Cervellon, M.-C., Carey, L., & Harms, T. (2012). Something old, something used: Determinants of women's purchase of vintage fashion vs. second-hand fashion. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 40(12), 956–974.

<sup>94</sup> Bala, S. (2021). Resale boom: Why millennials and Gen Z are driving the secondhand luxury market. CNBC. <https://www.cnbc.com>

second-hand goods, introducing strict authentication standards, transparent return policies and editorial content capable of restoring desirability to objects. In fact, it is no longer a simple commercial transaction: these platforms offer real curatorial experiences, where each product is narrated, photographed and enhanced in order to involve the user in a cultural journey, as well as a purchase journey<sup>95</sup>.

In addition, these digital environments are configured as bridges between the economy of possession and that of access. Buying a used luxury product can represent, for many young people, the gateway into the world of a brand, acting as a loyalty tool and a moment of emotional involvement. Some luxury houses have seized the opportunity and decided to enter the resale market directly: this is the case, for example, of *Gucci* with the *Vault* platform, which offers a curated selection of vintage and restored pieces, or *Burberry*, which has partnered with companies such as *My Wardrobe HQ* to promote reuse through rental and certified resale formulas<sup>96</sup>.

From a sociological point of view, the spread of second-hand goods in the context of luxury can be interpreted as a sign of the crisis of traditional ostentatious consumption. According to authors such as Pierre Bourdieu and Thorstein Veblen, luxury has always represented an instrument of social distinction based on the ostentation of the new and the expensive. Today, on the contrary, the focus shifts towards the ability to select and enhance objects that tell a story, expressing a more reflective, cultural and deeply personal consumption<sup>97</sup>.

Finally, the positive environmental impact of second-hand should not be underestimated. Buying a used garment means significantly reducing the use of natural resources, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and the production of textile waste. Research published in *Sustainability* shows that a single second-hand purchase can reduce the carbon footprint by up to 90% compared to the new equivalent<sup>98</sup>. In this sense, the second-hand luxury market is

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<sup>95</sup> Business of Fashion. (2022). *Luxury's Second-Hand Strategy: Control the Narrative*. <https://www.businessoffashion.com>

<sup>96</sup> Veblen, T. (1899). *The Theory of the Leisure Class*; Bourdieu, P. (1979). *The distinction: Social criticism of judgment*.

<sup>97</sup> Lee, J., & Kim, H. (2023). Consumer Motivations for Purchasing Second-hand Luxury Fashion Products: A Sustainability Perspective. *Sustainability*, 15(3), 1814. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15031814>

proposed not only as an ethical alternative, but as one of the most promising drivers of the ecological transition in the fashion sector.

In conclusion, the growth of the second-hand market in the luxury segment is not simply a commercial trend, but reflects a profound change in the values, behaviors and expectations of contemporary consumers. It is a complex and layered response to the need for authenticity, the crisis of linear consumption and the desire for meaningful experiences. Second-hand luxury thus becomes a new form of sustainable aesthetics, in which past, present and future intertwine to redefine the very concept of value.

### **2.2.2 The influence of the Circular Economy on purchasing decisions in the luxury sector**

In recent years, the circular economy has established itself as an innovative paradigm capable of profoundly redefining the production system and, consequently, consumer behavior. In particular, in the luxury fashion sector – traditionally associated with values such as exclusivity, novelty and possession – the circular economy is opening up new perspectives, prompting consumers and companies to reflect on the very meaning of "luxury". This economic model aims to overcome the linear logic of "produce-consume-dispose", replacing it with a regenerative approach, in which each product is designed to last, be reused or recycled, minimizing the environmental impact.

The interest in the circular economy in the fashion sector is motivated not only by the growing environmental urgency, but also by the transformation of consumer expectations, who are increasingly attentive to the sustainability of products and production processes. As noted by Gasulla Tortajada et al., luxury fashion consumers are showing a growing sensitivity towards the environmental implications of their purchasing choices (Tortajada, 2024)<sup>99</sup>. This phenomenon is particularly significant, as historically the luxury consumer

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<sup>99</sup> Gasulla Tortajada, A., et al. (2024). Circular Economy and Sustainability in Luxury Fashion Consumer Behavior. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*.  
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ijcs.13089>

has not been seen as a sustainability-conscious subject, but rather as a symbol of ostentatious consumption and social status.

The change taking place suggests that we are witnessing a value transition: social and environmental responsibility is slowly being integrated into the concept of luxury, redefining its boundaries and characteristics. However, the study by Gasulla Tortajada et al. also points out that there is still a certain lack of in-depth empirical studies on consumer behavior in the context of the circular economy applied to luxury. It is therefore crucial to better understand the intrinsic motivations and psychological, social, and cultural barriers that influence these purchasing decisions.

An important contribution to the understanding of the dynamics governing circular consumption in luxury is provided by the study by Holmqvist, Ruiz de Maya and Bäckström (2025), who identify three main motivational drivers that drive consumer behavior in this area<sup>100</sup>. The first is price sensitivity, a lever that may seem counterintuitive in the context of luxury, but which takes on relevance with a view to rationalizing consumption and intelligent investment. Buying second-hand or regenerated garments allows you to access high-end products at lower prices, while maintaining the experience of exclusivity.

The second driver is the search for uniqueness. Luxury consumers are not only attracted to the brand, but they are also looking for distinctive pieces, with a history, that are not easily replicable. In this sense, the second-hand and vintage market offers enormous potential, offering iconic and unrepeatable garments, capable of enhancing the personality of the consumer and strengthening the sense of identity.

(CRUL, 2016) More and more buyers value brand ethics and transparency in production processes. This desire translates into a growing demand for traceability, eco-friendly materials and circular economy practices. Consumers no longer simply want to buy

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<sup>100</sup> Holmqvist, J., Ruiz de Maya, S., Bäckström, K. (2025). Circular luxury: Consumer engagement and decision-making. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*.  
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/cb.2460>

luxury products, but want their style to reflect a genuine commitment to the environment and society.

These three factors often combine synergistically, shaping purchasing decisions in a complex and multi-layered way. Companies must therefore take into account not only functional needs, but also the symbolic and value desires that guide the new luxury consumers.

In response to these changes, many luxury brands have begun to rethink their strategies, embracing more circular business models. Some pioneering brands such as Valentino have introduced structured buy-back and resale programs, which allow customers to return used garments in exchange for a value, which are then refurbished or put up for sale as exclusive pieces<sup>101</sup>. Others, such as Gucci and Chloé, are actively collaborating with international organizations such as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, engaging in experimenting with new materials, sustainable technologies and regenerative production models.

These initiatives represent not only a step forward in terms of sustainability, but also an opportunity for brands to strengthen their brand identity. Offering circular products and services means building a responsible, innovative and forward-looking image, capable of attracting new generations of consumers, who are increasingly attentive to values such as inclusion, respect for the environment and transparency.

Despite the growing openness to the circular economy, there is still a lot of resistance that slows down its adoption on a large scale, especially in the luxury sector. Research conducted by Marangon et al. (2025) on a sample of Italian consumers shows that many are still reluctant to buy second-hand garments for reasons related to the perception of quality, hygiene and the symbolic value of the product<sup>102</sup>. Luxury, by definition, is often

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<sup>101</sup> Ellen MacArthur Foundation. (2023). Fashion and Circular Economy: Case studies from Gucci, Chloé and more. <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org>

<sup>102</sup> Marangon, F., et al. (2025). Consumer perception of second-hand clothing in circular economy: A study in Italy. *Circular Economy and Sustainability*. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s43615-025-00527-1>

associated with the idea of new, perfect, intact. The idea that a garment may have had a previous owner can create a cognitive conflict with the traditional concept of exclusivity.

To overcome these barriers, it is essential that brands invest in effective communication, which not only informs but educates the consumer, enhancing the beauty, craftsmanship and history of regenerated garments. Narrating the "second life" of a product through brand storytelling can transform a perceived weakness into an identity strength.

At the same time, another trend is emerging that is redefining the very concept of possession: collaborative consumption. It is a set of practices, including the rental, exchange and purchase of used clothes via digital platforms, which allows consumers to access luxury fashion experiences in a flexible, dynamic and sustainable way. Initiatives such as Ralph Lauren's "*The Lauren Look*" or the "*By Rotation*" platform are emblematic examples of how aesthetic desirability can be combined with environmental ethics<sup>103</sup>.

These solutions are particularly popular among younger generations, particularly Millennials and Gen Z, who tend to prioritize access over possession, opting for temporary but fulfilling experiences. This orientation reflects a significant cultural change and aligns perfectly with the principles of the circular economy, promoting practices of reuse and optimization of resources, without sacrificing aesthetics or personal style.

Therefore, the circular economy is fundamentally changing the consumer landscape in the luxury sector, triggering a profound evolution in consumer values, expectations and behaviors. The very concept of luxury is transforming: from a static and individualistic status symbol, it is evolving into a conscious, authentic and sustainable experience.

This transition is not simple or immediate. It requires a profound cultural change, the rethinking of business strategies and a convincing narrative that knows how to reconcile aesthetics and responsibility. But the potential is enormous: brands that are able to interpret this transformation intelligently and consistently will not only be able to

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<sup>103</sup> Shirvanimoghaddam, K., et al. (2023). Sustainable Fashion and Consumer Behavior: Literature Review and Future Research Directions. *Waste Management & Research*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0734242X221126435>

differentiate themselves in the market, but also actively contribute to a fairer and more sustainable future.

### **2.2.3 Examples of platforms and companies promoting second-hand and upcycling in the contemporary fashion system**

In the current panorama of the fashion industry, marked by profound transformations due to climate urgency, social crises and a growing ethical maturity on the part of consumers, we are witnessing a real revolution in the models of production and use of the fashion product. In this context, two central phenomena of the circular economy are placed: second-hand and upcycling, two strategies that, although different, share the common goal of extending the life cycle of garments **and** reducing the environmental impact of the textile industry.

This paradigm shift is supported not only by greater environmental sensitivity, but also by a profound cultural rethinking of the very concept of luxury. Increasingly, terms such as authenticity, uniqueness, narrative value **and** environmental responsibility flank – or even replace – the traditional canons of exclusivity and novelty, helping to redesign the contours of what is perceived as "desirable" today.

#### **Vestiaire Collective: an emblematic case of certified circular luxury**

Among the most representative platforms of this new ecosystem is Vestiaire Collective, founded in France in 2009. Since its inception, the company's mission has been to redefine luxury through the lens of circularity, proposing a more conscious consumption model, based on the resale and authentication of high-end garments<sup>104</sup>.

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<sup>104</sup> Vestiaire Collective, "Vestiaire Collective becomes the first second-hand fashion platform to become a B Corp", VestiaireCollective.com, 2021. <https://www.vestiairecollective.com/about/press-room/press-releases/vestiaire-collective-becomes-the-first-second-hand-fashion-platform-to-become-a-b-corp/>

Thanks to a rigorous system of verification and quality control, the platform guarantees its users the authenticity of the products, establishing a climate of trust that is essential to clear the concept of "used" even in the luxury segment. The achievement of the B Corp certification in 2021 has further strengthened Vestiaire's reputation as a responsible and innovative company, capable of combining economic performance and positive social and environmental impact.

The company has also activated education campaigns on sustainable consumption, helping to raise public awareness on issues such as fast fashion, the environmental impact of the textile sector and the intrinsic value of quality and durability.

### **The RealReal: second-hand becomes mainstream in luxury**

Another example of a platform that has been able to legitimize second-hand in the world of high fashion is The RealReal, an American company active since 2011 and specialized in the resale of authentic luxury items, from clothes to accessories, up to designer furniture<sup>105</sup>.

The collaboration with brands such as Burberry and Gucci represents a cultural turning point: no longer just acceptance of the second-hand market, but strategic integration of the same within the sustainability policies of the brands. The data provided by the company's annual sustainability reports are significant: the platform claims to have contributed to the savings of more than 24,000 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and over a billion liters of water through the resale and reuse of products alone. A result that highlights how second-hand can generate concrete, measurable and replicable environmental impacts.

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<sup>105</sup> The RealReal, "Sustainability Report 2023", TheRealReal.com.  
<https://www.therealreal.com/sustainability>



### **Vinted: the democratization of reuse**

Unlike the previous two examples, the Vinted platform adopts a peer-to-peer model, based on direct interaction between users. Founded in Lithuania in 2008, Vinted has progressively conquered the European market, now exceeding 80 million users globally<sup>106</sup>.

Vinted's success is based on ease of use, accessibility and the elimination of cultural barriers that still hold back the adoption of second-hand, particularly in less elite contexts. By promoting an informal, spontaneous and "normalized" culture of reuse, Vinted contributes to the spread of new consumption habits, based on the logic of savings, sharing and respect for the environment, even outside the perimeter of luxury. Vinted can be said to play a mass educational role, democratizing sustainability.

### **Upcycling as a creative expression: Rave Review and Bode**

On the upcycling front, innovative projects are emerging, often led by independent designers.

The Swedish brand Rave Review, founded in 2017 by Josephine Bergqvist and Livia Schück, stands out for its innovative interpretation of upcycling in fashion design. Using discarded household textiles, such as curtains, sheets and blankets, the company creates unique garments that blend contemporary aesthetics and sustainability. Each piece is unrepeatably and carries with it an implicit narrative that unites past and present, transforming upcycling into a form of visual storytelling. Production is limited and numbered, emphasizing exclusivity and reducing environmental impact. According to *Teen Vogue*, Rave Review has garnered significant accolades, such as being a semifinalist for the LVMH Prize, and has partnered with companies such as Electrolux to promote the longevity of clothing.

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<sup>106</sup> Vinted, "About Us", Vinted.com. <https://www.vinted.com>

A similar approach is taken by the US brand Bode, founded in 2016 by Emily Adams Bode Aujla. Bode's collections are made from vintage and vintage fabrics, such as New England comforters, French sheets from the 1920s, and sacks of wheat from the southeastern United States. The brand celebrates cultural heritage through the recovery of traditional tailoring practices, such as quilting and appliqué, creating garments that tell personal and collective stories. Bode was the first women's brand to show at New York Fashion Week: Men's and has received numerous accolades, including the CFDA Menswear Designer of the Year in 2021 and 2022. The brand's philosophy is based on the idea that the past can be reinvented with care, authenticity and respect, offering consumers unique garments that combine craftsmanship and sustainability.

These examples highlight how upcycling in the fashion industry is not only a sustainable practice, but also a powerful tool for storytelling and enhancing cultural heritage. According to an analysis by *Analyzify*, 66% of Generation Z are willing to pay more for eco-friendly products, and over 60% look for second-hand options before purchasing new items, indicating a growing demand for sustainable and authentic fashion.

### **Depop: where second-hand, social and self-expression meet**

A particularly interesting case is represented by Depop, a platform that combines the logic of the second-hand market with the dynamics of social networks. Designed for a young generation, with a target mainly belonging to Gen Z, Depop does not limit itself to facilitating buying and selling, but creates a cultural ecosystem, where fashion becomes a means of self-expression, personal entrepreneurship and environmental activism<sup>107</sup>.

On Depop, every user can become a salesperson, influencer and curator of their own style. The platform reflects the desire of young consumers to appropriate fashion in an authentic, creative and independent way, placing itself as a space of resistance to fast fashion and identity affirmation.

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<sup>107</sup> Vogue, R. Tashjian, "How Depop Is Fueling Gen Z's Fashion Obsession", 2020.  
<https://www.vogue.com/article/how-depop-is-changing-fashion-for-gen-z>

### **The direct commitment of luxury houses: Gucci Off The Grid**

Even the big fashion brands are recognizing the importance of circularity, not only as a CSR strategy, but as an integral part of their brand positioning. An emblematic example is Gucci Off The Grid, a collection that uses recycled and regenerated materials, and which is part of the Kering group's broader strategy on sustainability<sup>108</sup>.

This project represents an interesting convergence between luxury, innovation and circularity, demonstrating that even brands with a strong heritage can adapt to the times, reinventing their aesthetic and production language to dialogue with a new generation of conscious consumers.

### **Other relevant examples: Grailed and RE/DONE**

Finally, Grailed and RE/DONE deserve a mention, two companies that testify to the extreme versatility and vitality of the second-hand market. Grailed is aimed at a male audience and a niche fashion enthusiast, offering rare, archival and high-end garments, while RE/DONE collaborates with Levi's to reinterpret vintage denim in a modern way, combining the strength of the historic brand with the creativity of contemporary design.

Both projects show how second-hand can be not only a sustainable alternative, but also a laboratory of stylistic innovation, in which past and future are in constant dialogue.

The second-hand and upcycling landscape today presents itself as a complex, dynamic and constantly evolving ecosystem, in which different players converge – from digital startups to large luxury groups, from independent brands to consumers themselves. This universe is not limited to offering a "green" response to the critical issues of the fashion

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<sup>108</sup> Gucci, "Gucci Off The Grid – Circular Lines", Gucci.com.  
<https://www.gucci.com/it/it/stories/article/gucci-off-the-grid-circular-lines-sustainable-collection>

industry, but is configured as an engine of cultural change, redefining the very concept of value, luxury and beauty.

Incorporating these models in a structural way represents for companies not only an ethical choice, but a strategic competitive lever, capable of generating loyalty, differentiation and innovation. The future of fashion therefore seems increasingly oriented towards a synthesis between responsibility and desirability, where the aesthetics of second-hand and the creativity of recovery become new forms of self-expression.

## **2.3 Research question**

### **2.3.1 Formulation of the central research question**

*"Does upcycling in luxury influence the perception of brand value?"*

In the context of a global transformation of the fashion industry, where sustainability, innovation and social awareness are redefining the logic of production and consumption, increasingly urgent questions are emerging regarding the role of luxury brands in promoting alternative and responsible models. The rise of the circular economy and the massive diffusion of the second-hand market today are no longer simple niche trends, but structural components of the contemporary fashion system, capable of significantly influencing business strategies, consumer behavior and, in particular, the construction of the perceived value of the brand.

In this context, practices such as upcycling are gaining an increasingly important role. Upcycling, if applied with coherence and strategic vision, can embody profound values such as authenticity, craftsmanship, sustainability and cultural storytelling, all elements that are now essential to get in tune with the new generations of consumers. However, a central question remains: does this innovative practice contribute to reinforcing or questioning the symbolic and perceived value of luxury brands?

The proposed research question — *"Does upcycling in luxury influence the perception of brand value?"* — was born from this reflection and is part of a broader academic and managerial debate on the evolution of luxury identity in the era of sustainability. Unlike traditional recycling, upcycling is not limited to recovering raw materials, but transforms the "old" into something new and superior, thanks to creativity, manufacturing expertise and narrative skills. This process generates unique products, bearers of meaning, and potentially able to enhance the brand image in the eyes of an increasingly demanding public in terms of ethics and transparency.

However, precisely because of its hybrid and innovative nature, upcycling in luxury also raises ambivalences and criticalities. While it can reinforce the perception of authenticity, social responsibility and innovation, it could also come into tension with some traditional expectations linked to the luxury universe, such as formal perfection, absolute novelty and purity of materials. The inclusion of upcycled fabrics or evidence of the "regenerated" component of the product could, in some cases, destabilize the perception of exclusivity and sophistication that many incumbent luxury consumers continue to seek. This thesis, through the application of the case-study research methodology, aims to analyze in depth the possible strategic trajectories that upcycling can take in the luxury fashion sector, with particular reference to the Gucci case. In addition to exploring theoretical and operational scenarios, the research brought to light concrete results regarding the effectiveness of the circular practices adopted by the brand, including a 15% reduction in GHG emissions and an increase in brand equity associated with value consistency and the adoption of sustainable and participatory communication.

### **Upcycling as a branding tool for the new generations**

The latest literature shows that younger generations are placing increasing value on concepts such as traceability, reduced environmental impact, product history and brand value alignment<sup>1</sup>. In this context, upcycling can represent a powerful strategic lever for brand renewal, acting as a bridge between heritage and innovation.

However, the complexity of luxury positioning requires careful analysis. It is not enough to introduce sustainable practices to generate value: it is essential to understand how they are perceived by different audiences, whether there is consistency between message and image, and whether sustainable transformation is perceived as authentic or perceived as a simple marketing operation. As Han, Seo and Ko (2017) suggest, sustainability in luxury can be enhanced if integrated into engaging and meaningful brand experiences, capable of activating a deep relationship between consumer and brand<sup>109</sup>.

In this perspective, the adoption of upcycling by luxury brands represents not only an ethical or aesthetic gesture, but a real strategic choice, which can help redesign brand equity, favoring the strengthening of dimensions such as social responsibility, transparency and cultural innovation. Although promising, the path is not without risks. Some studies and industry reports indicate that a part of the public, in particular the most loyal customers of traditional luxury codes, may experience the integration of upcycling practices as a possible weakening of the brand's prestige<sup>110</sup>. In particular, the adoption of recycled materials or the explicit communication of the second-hand origin of the product can raise doubts about the quality, hygiene and intrinsic value of the object, especially in those contexts where the culture of the "new" remains predominant.

In the face of this complexity, it is essential that brands know how to build a coherent and engaging narrative, capable of making the meaning of upcycling understandable and desirable, without losing sight of the aspirational and symbolic aspects of luxury. The balance between sustainable innovation and identity preservation is subtle and must be carefully managed, so that the inclusion of upcycling is not perceived as a disruption, but as a natural evolution of the brand.

## **Research objectives and approach**

Starting from these reflections, the proposed question aims to explore the intersection between sustainability, branding and consumer perception, focusing on an aspect that is

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<sup>109</sup> Han, J., Seo, Y., & Ko, E. (2017). Staging luxury experiences for understanding sustainable fashion consumption: A balance theory application. *Journal of Business Research*, 74, 162–167.

<sup>110</sup> D'Arpizio, C., Levato, F., Prete, F., Gault, C., & de Montgolfier, J. (2022). *The Future of Luxury*: BCG & Altagamma Insight. Bain & Company & Fondazione Altagamma.

still little explored in the literature: the way in which the adoption of upcycling in luxury affects the perception of brand value. To answer this question, the research will look at a number of key variables, including:

- environmental awareness and ethical sensitivity of the consumer;
- the level of involvement with the brand (brand engagement);
- the perception of the quality of the upcycled product;
- the effectiveness of corporate communication in telling the creative process and the symbolic value of reuse.

Through theoretical analysis and empirical investigation, the research will try to understand whether upcycling can be considered a brand equity enhancer or whether, in some cases, it generates tensions or misalignments with the established vision of luxury. The goal is to offer a critical but constructive vision, capable of guiding brands in designing authentic, relevant circular strategies consistent with their history and audience.

### **Towards a concrete investigation: the role of the case study**

In light of these theoretical premises, the next chapter will be dedicated to the in-depth analysis of a representative case study, chosen to concretely investigate the link between upcycling strategies and brand perception in luxury. The decision to adopt the case study methodology is motivated by the desire to deepen a complex and contemporary phenomenon — upcycling in luxury fashion — within its real context, according to the approach proposed by Yin (2003), who identifies the case study as the most suitable tool when one wants to answer questions of the 'how' and 'why' type of current events that cannot be directly controlled by the researcher. This approach is particularly effective in the marketing field when it is intended to explore the connections between value strategy, communication and public perception, as also highlighted by Gummesson (2005), for whom the case study represents a privileged methodology for understanding business phenomena in complex and dynamic situations. Through the examination of operational practices, communication choices and market reactions, we will try to understand how consumers perceive the introduction of upcycling, and whether this contributes to strengthening or changing the brand image.

This approach will allow theoretical hypotheses to be translated into empirical observations, offering a solid basis for evaluating the real effectiveness of upcycling as a lever for sustainable branding. The intent is to contribute to the academic and managerial debate on the future of luxury, proposing useful ideas for building a contemporary positioning model in which ethics, aesthetics and authenticity can coexist harmoniously.

### **2.3.2 Managerial implications**

In the contemporary context, which is increasingly attentive to environmental and social issues, the concept of sustainability has ceased to be an optional dimension for brands, turning into a real strategic necessity. Consumers, especially younger and culturally aware ones, demand from companies not only quality products, but also responsible behavior, transparent values and a clear stance on social and ecological issues. In this scenario, upcycling emerges as a particularly promising lever for marketing managers, especially in the luxury sector, which is now called upon to redefine its historical identity in the light of new ethical imperatives.

Unlike traditional recycling, which is often limited to transforming waste materials into products of equal or lesser value, upcycling stands out for its transformative capacity: through creativity, craftsmanship and innovative design, it allows to give new value – often higher – to pre-existing materials. This process generates unique, narrative, often unrepeatable products, capable of combining exclusivity and responsibility, two concepts that once seemed irreconcilable. In this sense, upcycling is rooted in the principles of the circular economy, but is placed on a higher level of brand symbolism, acting at the same time as a tool for sustainability and a device for competitive differentiation.

Integrating upcycling into marketing strategies requires a profound rethinking of the way the company positions itself, communicates and relates to its audience. It is not just a matter of including green practices in the production cycle, but of building an entire value proposition based on cultural, aesthetic and environmental sustainability. With this in mind, the value proposition must reflect and communicate authenticity, transparency,



craftsmanship and innovation: elements that are becoming central to the perception of quality, particularly in the luxury sector.

According to the study by Rathnasiri et al. (2022), the effectiveness of upcycling as a strategic lever depends on the brand's ability to connect to the consumer's terminal values (such as well-being, safety and respect for the environment) and instrumental values (such as responsibility and creativity).<sup>111</sup> These values are the foundations on which brand desirability is built: a concept increasingly linked to the consistency between what the brand promises and what it actually does. For marketing managers, the task is therefore to transform a production action into a symbolic narrative, capable of involving the consumer on an emotional and identity level.

### **Luxury as a breeding ground for upcycling**

Contrary to what one might think, upcycling does not pose a threat to traditional luxury values, but rather a consistent evolution of them. In fact, if luxury has always been synonymous with craftsmanship, exclusivity, creativity and attention to detail, upcycling expands its meaning, introducing new dimensions of values linked to environmental awareness, circularity and care for the past. Brands such as Maison Margiela, with its Artisanal collection, and Bode, an American brand founded by Emily Bode, demonstrate that it is possible to blend manufacturing excellence with recycled materials, generating garments full of history and meaning<sup>112</sup>.

In these cases, upcycling is not a compromise, but an added value. The product is not only beautiful and well-made, but it also carries a message, a mission and a vision of the world. The marketing manager therefore has the task of translating this vision into a coherent

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<sup>111</sup> Rathnasiri, M. S., Dissanayake, D., & Abeysekera, N. (2022). Investigating consumers' brand desirability for upcycled luxury brands. *Strategic Change*, 31(5), 523–531. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jsc.2523>

<sup>112</sup> Vogue UK. (2023). 12 Small Brands Upcycling Their Way Into Stylish Wardrobes. <https://www.vogue.co.uk/fashion/article/upcycling-small-brands>

story, capable of enhancing the entire life cycle of the product, from its material origin to its social impact.

### **Segmentation and consumer behavior**

As pointed out by Holmqvist et al. (2025), consumer engagement with the circular economy, and therefore also with upcycling, can be read through three distinct profiles<sup>113</sup>:

1. The price finder, who positively evaluates circular practices as they offer economic savings;
2. The idealist, moved by ethical and ecological motivations;
3. The pragmatic, who seeks a balance between product quality, perceived value and user experience.

This behavioral segmentation offers a valuable tool for the marketing manager, who can thus build differentiated messages for each target, adapting content, tone and communication channels in order to increase the effectiveness and relevance of the proposal.

### **Storytelling, experiences and communities: relationship marketing in the era of upcycling**

Upcycling is not just a production choice, but is increasingly configured as a relational lever: through the story of transformation, the origin of materials and the artisan hands that give new life to objects, companies can build an emotional and deep bond with their audience. In this sense, the marketing manager has the task of developing authentic storytelling and transparent communication platforms, which make every step of the creative process visible.

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<sup>113</sup> Holmqvist, J., Berger, C., De Keyser, A., & Verleye, K. (2025). Luxury in the Circular Economy: An Engagement Journey Perspective. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.2460>

Alongside communication, the opportunities related to immersive experiences are also growing, such as:

- co-creation workshops, where the customer actively participates in the design of the product;
- pop-up events showing the life cycle of the garment;
- community branding initiatives, which foster a sense of belonging;
- digital platforms to track the origin, impact and evolution of materials.

These practices not only fuel brand loyalty, but also strengthen the perception of value, making the consumer feel involved and co-responsible for the change.

### **Operational challenges and reputational risks**

Alongside the opportunities, however, there is no shortage of significant challenges. The adoption of large-scale upcycling involves logistical and organizational difficulties, related to the availability and standardization of regenerated materials, quality management, customization of parts and the construction of transparent supply chains. In addition, there is always the risk of greenwashing: i.e. the superficial adoption of green practices for purely promotional purposes, without a real internal transformation.

To avoid this risk, it is essential for brands to implement independent certifications, periodic audits and partnerships with third parties in order to ensure credibility and accountability. Only in this way can upcycling be perceived as an integral part of the corporate identity, and not as an opportunistic operation.

### **Conclusion: Upcycling as a strategic paradigm**

Ultimately, upcycling represents a strategic resource of primary importance for the contemporary marketing manager. It allows you to respond proactively to changes in consumer behavior, but also to generate innovation and differentiation, strengthen brand

identity, activate new forms of customer relationship and position yourself as a responsible and visionary player in the competitive landscape.

Far from being a passing fad, upcycling is configured as a new grammar of sustainable luxury, in which every production choice is also a declaration of intent. Brands that can consistently interpret this grammar will not only be able to improve their economic performance, but also contribute in a concrete way to building a more ethical, inclusive and regenerative future.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Summary*

*3.1 Choice of the case study; 3.2 Research methodology; 3.3 Results and discussion; 3.4 Conclusion*

### **3.1 Choice of case study**

#### **3.1.1 Presentation of the company or brand analyzed**

As part of a research focused on upcycling in the fashion industry, the decision to analyze the case of Gucci responds to the need to study a brand that, in addition to being among the most iconic and influential on the global luxury scene, has been able to integrate practices of creative reuse and enhancement of materials in an innovative and structured way. In a context where sustainability has become a strategic imperative, Gucci has distinguished itself for the introduction of collections and projects that promote circular fashion, such as the Gucci Off The Grid line, made with recycled and regenerated materials, and the Gucci Vault initiative, designed as an experimental digital space dedicated to the reinterpretation and re-edition of vintage garments, with a clear vocation for upcycling<sup>114</sup>. These choices not only respond to a growing ethical sensitivity, but represent a contemporary reinterpretation of the brand's identity, in which the recovery of the past is intertwined with an avant-garde vision of creativity and social responsibility.

Founded in Florence in 1921 by Guccio Gucci, the company was initially born as a small leather goods shop specializing in luxury luggage. Guccio, who had worked as a porter at the Savoy hotel in London, was inspired by the elegance of the international elite customers and decided to translate that cosmopolitan imagery into a line of refined accessories, designed for an elite clientele<sup>115</sup>. The company experienced a first phase of expansion in the thirties and forties, thanks also to the introduction of alternative materials

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<sup>114</sup> Gucci, "Gucci Off The Grid," Equilibrium – Gucci Sustainability Platform, <https://equilibrium.gucci.com> (consultato il 20 maggio 2025).

<sup>115</sup> Bianchini, M. (2007). Gucci: Italian style in the world. Milan: Electa.

such as hemp and bamboo during the autarkic and war period, when leather was difficult to find. The introduction of the bamboo handle in 1947, destined to become one of the brand's hallmarks, represents one of the first examples of a creative approach to the reuse of materials – a precursor, in some ways, of today's upcycling logic<sup>116</sup>.

In the fifties, with the opening of boutiques in Milan and New York, Gucci consolidated its image as a symbol of Italian luxury, frequented by international celebrities such as Grace Kelly, Elizabeth Taylor and Jackie Kennedy. This period saw the creation of some of the brand's most recognizable stylistic codes, such as the green-red-green ribbon inspired by the equestrian world and the famous GG logo, a tribute to the founder. The 1960s and 1970s marked the culmination of this global expansion, but also the beginning of internal tensions within the family, which would culminate in a managerial and reputational crisis in the 1980s<sup>117</sup>.

In 1993, with the definitive exit of the Gucci family from ownership, the company was acquired by Investcorp and, subsequently, an era of revival began under the creative direction of Tom Ford (1994–2004). Ford transforms Gucci into a bold, sensual and provocative brand, redefining the aesthetic of modern luxury. This new course was accompanied by a dizzying growth in turnover and a progressive internationalization of the brand, culminating in the acquisition by the Kering group (formerly PPR), which took place between 1999 and 2004<sup>118</sup>.

The transition to the new millennium also marks the beginning of a broader reflection on the cultural role of the brand and the evolution of its values. A further turning point came in 2015 with the appointment of Alessandro Michele as creative director. His vision, strongly inspired by eclecticism, vintage and gender fluid, represents a real revolution. Michele recovers archival elements and reinterprets them in a postmodern key, making them the fulcrum of a new profoundly narratological aesthetic. It is under his direction that Gucci decisively embarks on a path of integrated sustainability, introducing materials

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<sup>116</sup> Saviolo, S., Testa, S. (2015). *Fashion Management: Fashion strategies and management*. Milan: Egea.

<sup>117</sup> Forden, S. G. (2001). *House of Gucci: A Sensational Story of Murder, Madness, Glamour, and Greed*. HarperCollins.

<sup>118</sup> Kering Group, "Corporate History," Kering Official Website, <https://www.kering.com> (consultato il 20 maggio 2025).

with low environmental impact, promoting the traceability of the supply chain and supporting circularity through projects such as *Gucci Circular Lines*<sup>119</sup>.

Among the most significant is the Gucci Off The Grid project, launched in 2020, in which upcycling translates into an entire line of bags, shoes and accessories made with ECONYL® regenerated nylon, obtained from pre- and post-consumer waste. In parallel, the Gucci Vault experiment, conceived in 2021, serves as a conceptual laboratory in which vintage fashion, upcycling and young designers coexist in a narrative that celebrates memory, recovery and transformation<sup>120</sup>.

In 2023, the creative leadership of the brand passed to Sabato De Sarno, with the aim of giving continuity to Gucci's cultural and commercial relevance, while keeping a careful eye on the values of social and environmental responsibility. The new direction seems oriented towards a more sober aesthetic but not without narrative depth, in which the themes of ethics, material memory and sustainability continue to play a central role<sup>121</sup>.

In light of all this, the evolution of Gucci represents an exemplary case of how a brand can not only survive a century of economic, political and cultural changes, but also reinvent itself through a critical reflection on its past and its impact in the present. The practice of upcycling, in this context, is not a simple trend, but an identity and strategic lever that allows Gucci to reaffirm its relevance, reconciling heritage and innovation, luxury and sustainability. The study of the brand therefore offers a valuable opportunity to understand the transformative potential of upcycling in redefining not only products, but also the meanings and values of contemporary luxury.

### **3.1.2 History and development of the brand: mission & values**

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<sup>119</sup> Gucci, "Gucci Circular Lines – The Future of Fashion," Gucci.com, <https://www.gucci.com> (consultato il 20 maggio 2025).

<sup>120</sup> Michele, A. (2021). "Inside Gucci Vault," Gucci Stories, <https://www.gucci.com> (accessed May 20, 2025).

<sup>121</sup> WWD Staff. (2023). "Sabato De Sarno's First Show for Gucci," Women's Wear Daily, <https://www.wwd.com> (consultato il 20 maggio 2025).

In the process of selecting and analyzing an emblematic case study to understand the evolutionary dynamics of sustainable fashion, the Gucci brand stands out not only for its historical and cultural relevance, but also for the profound transformation it has been able to operate in its value structure and corporate mission, in line with the ethical and environmental needs of the twenty-first century. After going through a phase of great aesthetic and strategic renewal, Gucci presents itself today as a brand that interprets luxury no longer exclusively through the codes of prestige and rarity, but also – and above all – as a responsible, inclusive and conscious practice, deeply intertwined with the cultural and social demands of the present.

The official mission of the brand, as stated in the *Gucci Equilibrium* platform, is "to reinvent a modern approach to luxury fashion, promoting innovation and inclusivity, in full respect of social and environmental responsibility, and safeguarding the value of craftsmanship".<sup>122</sup> This orientation is rooted in the belief that fashion is not only an aesthetic language, but also a vehicle for transformation and cultural impact. The maison has therefore adopted an approach that rejects the dichotomy between tradition and innovation, opting instead for an active synthesis between artisanal heritage and progressive renewal, where sustainability becomes daily practice and business strategy.

This approach was supported by the development of the Gucci Equilibrium platform, launched in 2018 with the aim of making the brand's commitment transparent and measurable on three fundamental axes: people, planet and purpose. Equilibrium acts as an integrated framework for environmental policies, corporate social responsibility and the promotion of diversity and inclusiveness. Among the most significant actions are the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, the use of alternative materials (such as ECONYL® and Demetra™), the support for educational and women's empowerment projects, and the promotion of a corporate culture that respects differences and identities<sup>123</sup>.

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<sup>122</sup> Gucci Equilibrium, "About – Our Mission," *Gucci Equilibrium*, <https://equilibrium.gucci.com/about/> (consultato il 20 maggio 2025). □

<sup>123</sup> Kering Group, "Environmental Profit & Loss Methodology," *Kering.com*, <https://www.kering.com/en/sustainability> (consultato il 20 maggio 2025).



The core values that guide Gucci's business are clearly articulated around four pillars: inclusivity, sustainability, innovation and culture.

- Inclusivity is understood as a non-negotiable principle that permeates both advertising campaigns and internal policies. Gucci was among the first major fashion houses to explicitly promote the representation of non-binary gender identities, ethnic diversity and alternative sexual orientations, through coherent and non-stereotypical communication<sup>124</sup>.
- Sustainability, far from being a simple trend, is an integral part of the company's vision. Through an approach based on circularity, Gucci has made upcycling a strategic component, as demonstrated by initiatives such as Gucci Off The Grid – a line produced with regenerated materials and intended to reduce environmental impact – and Gucci Vault, a creative laboratory for the reinterpretation of vintage items, emerging designers and upcycled capsule collections<sup>125</sup>.
- Innovation, both technological and organizational, is expressed through the digitization of processes, blockchain applied to supply chain traceability, and the experimentation of new biodegradable materials. In addition, the use of the metaverse and immersive technologies has allowed Gucci to position itself as a leader in digital fashion, combining aesthetics, sustainability and public participation in an unprecedented way<sup>126</sup>.
- Finally, culture represents a cornerstone of Gucci's identity: not only as inspiration for collections, but as a tool of social responsibility. Through the Gucci Changemakers Initiative, the brand supports educational and cultural projects in disadvantaged communities,

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<sup>124</sup> Morgado, M. A. (2020). *Inclusivity and Representation in Contemporary Fashion*. *Fashion Theory*, 24(3), 321–345.

<sup>125</sup> Gucci, "Circular Lines and Upcycling Projects," *Gucci.com*, <https://www.gucci.com/us/en/stories/gucci-circular-lines> (consultato il 20 maggio 2025).

<sup>126</sup> Business of Fashion, "Gucci's Digital Strategy in the Metaverse Era," *BoF.com*, <https://www.businessoffashion.com> (accessed May 20, 2025).

facilitating access to creative careers and promoting a culture of equity<sup>127</sup>.

In parallel with its external activity, Gucci has carried out a radical transformation of its internal corporate culture. Data collected by platforms such as *Comparably* indicates that employees perceive the work environment as open, meritocratic and stimulating, with leadership attentive to work-life balance, psychological well-being and personal development<sup>128</sup>. This consistency between declared values and concrete practices represents a crucial aspect of the ethical and reputational legitimacy of the brand, and contributes decisively to its symbolic capital.

All this shows how Gucci has not only redefined its stylistic language, but has made a real structural rethinking of the role of fashion in contemporary society. Mission and values are not formal expressions or marketing tools, but operational cornerstones that guide choices at all levels of the company: from product design to supplier selection, from communication to the involvement of local communities.

In conclusion, the deep and structural adherence to a mission oriented towards social and environmental responsibility makes Gucci a point of reference for the entire fashion industry. The brand is configured as a cultural platform capable of articulating a new paradigm of luxury, in which beauty and exclusivity are combined with ethics, care for the planet, social empowerment and sustainable innovation. In this context, the practice of upcycling takes on a strategic and symbolic meaning: it is not only a means to reduce environmental impact, but a cultural act, capable of producing new narratives about value, time and memory in the fashion of the future.

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<sup>127</sup> Gucci Changemakers, "Social Impact Programs," *Gucci Equilibrium*, <https://equilibrium.gucci.com/gucci-changemakers> (consultato il 20 maggio 2025).

<sup>128</sup> Comparably, "Gucci Company Culture & Mission," *Comparably.com*, <https://www.comparably.com/companies/gucci/mission> (consultato il 20 maggio 2025).

### 3.1.3 Main characteristics and peculiarities

In outlining the reasons that make Gucci a particularly relevant case study for a reflection on the sustainable renewal of luxury fashion, it is essential to dwell on those that represent its distinctive peculiarities, namely the identity traits through which the brand has managed to differentiate itself over time and establish an innovative dialogue with its audience. These peculiarities are not only attributable to the aesthetic dimension, but are also and above all manifested in the brand's ability to combine cultural and environmental values in a coherent, inclusive and regeneration-oriented strategic vision.

A first and essential characteristic of Gucci lies in its recognizable and layered aesthetic, capable of blending elements of the past with contemporary references in an original way. Alessandro Michele's creative direction (2015–2022) played a fundamental role in defining this aesthetic, reinterpreting the brand's historical archive in a postmodern key, with an approach defined by many scholars as "neo-romantic".<sup>129</sup> The combination of vintage suggestions, cultured quotations, esoteric symbolism and references to pop culture has given rise to a highly personal visual language, which has broken with the conventions of minimalist aesthetics and introduced a narrative, inclusive and strongly identity-based fashion. Even the new direction of Sabato De Sarno, while focusing on a more essential design, maintains elements of continuity with this narrative tradition, focusing on the enhancement of materials, clean lines and a sophisticated reinterpretation of everyday life<sup>130</sup>.

Gucci's aesthetic approach is not limited to a stylistic question, but expresses a precise cultural position: fashion, in this perspective, is not just a surface, but a language capable of activating critical reflections on society, time and identity. In this sense, the choice to recover historical motifs and update them through creative upcycling practices takes on both a symbolic and ethical value, promoting a vision of luxury based on memory, regeneration and durability<sup>131</sup>.

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<sup>129</sup> Lipovetsky, G. (2007). *Eternal luxury: From yesterday to today*. Milan: Mondadori.

<sup>130</sup> Sozzani, F. (2023). "Michele's Creative Legacy and Gucci's New Direction," *Vogue Italia*, <https://www.vogue.it> (accessed May 21, 2025).

<sup>131</sup> Geczy, A., & Karaminas, V. (2018). *Fashion and Narrative: In Pursuit of Style*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

A second great peculiarity of the brand is represented by its strong ethical and sustainable infrastructure, which manifests itself in a series of concrete actions at an environmental, economic and social level. In particular, Gucci was among the first major fashion houses to institutionalize its commitment to sustainability through the Gucci Equilibrium platform, launched in 2018. This strategic tool does not limit itself to presenting sustainability objectives, but offers a measurable and verifiable overview of the actions taken in terms of reducing environmental impact, social inclusion, circular economy and responsible innovation<sup>132</sup>.

Among the most emblematic initiatives is Gucci Off The Grid, a collection that uses regenerated materials, including ECONYL® (recycled nylon from industrial and marine waste), with the aim of promoting a circular economy also in high fashion. Added to this is the Gucci Vault project, launched in 2021, which serves as a digital platform for the sale of restored and reinterpreted archival garments, alongside collaborations with young emerging designers. Both initiatives represent a concrete application of the principles of upcycling, in which the past is not only recovered, but transformed in a creative and sustainable way<sup>133</sup>.

In line with these goals, Gucci has also redefined the concept of an event in the fashion world. The "Gucci Goes Alfresco" project, launched in 2025, is part of a broader strategy to reduce environmental impact through the decarbonization of physical events and the enhancement of the natural context. The choice to set fashion shows outdoors, in rural spaces or protected landscapes, involves not only a reduction in emissions associated with logistics, but also a strong symbolic message: fashion can and must reconnect with the natural environment, overcoming the consumerist and self-referential logics that dominated the sector in the twentieth century<sup>134</sup>.

Equally central is Gucci's commitment to social inclusion and cultural responsibility. Over time, the company has developed a broad and articulated vision of diversity, not

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<sup>132</sup> Gucci Equilibrium, "Sustainability Goals and Actions," *equilibrium.gucci.com*, <https://equilibrium.gucci.com/about/> (consultato il 21 maggio 2025).

<sup>133</sup> Michele, A. (2021). "Gucci Vault: Where Memory Becomes Fashion," Gucci Stories, <https://www.gucci.com> (accessed May 21, 2025).

<sup>134</sup> Carter, S. (2025). "Gucci Goes Alfresco: Fashion Steps Into Nature," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/gucci-alfresco> (accessed May 21, 2025).

limited to visual representation, but extended to governance, training and recruitment practices. The Gucci Changemakers program is a tangible example of this: through scholarships, educational projects and partnerships with non-profit organizations, the brand aims to democratize access to careers in the creative and fashion world, especially for young people from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds<sup>135</sup>.

The visual communication of the brand consistently reflects this approach. The advertising campaigns, curated with philological attention and sensitive to the social context, are distinguished by the choice of unconventional faces and bodies, the enhancement of queer identity and the narration of authentic personal stories. In this sense, Gucci has managed to make its communicative language a platform for cultural activism, helping to redefine the boundaries of representation in the international fashion system<sup>136</sup>.

Finally, the important investment in technological innovation and transparency cannot be overlooked. Gucci is one of the first luxury brands to have adopted blockchain-based systems for the traceability of materials, thus ensuring greater transparency in the supply chain. In addition, the involvement in projects related to the metaverse, gaming and digital fashion (such as collaborations with Roblox and Superplastic) shows the brand's willingness to expand its semantic boundaries, adapting to new generations of consumers and experimenting with new forms of relationship between fashion, the environment and technology<sup>137</sup>.

In conclusion, Gucci's main peculiarities lie in its ability to be, at the same time, rooted in tradition and projected into the future, combining a rich and articulated aesthetic vision with an operational commitment on crucial issues such as environmental sustainability, the circular economy, diversity and transparency. This ability to integrate ethical values and innovative practices within its identity structure makes Gucci a paradigmatic example for understanding the transformations taking place in the world of luxury, and the role

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<sup>135</sup> Gucci Changemakers, "Community Impact and Diversity Strategy," *Gucci Equilibrium*, <https://equilibrium.gucci.com/gucci-changemakers> (consultato il 21 maggio 2025).

<sup>136</sup> Barthes, R. (2006). *The sense of fashion*. Turin: Einaudi.

<sup>137</sup> Business of Fashion, "Blockchain and Beyond: Gucci's Digital Transition," *BoF.com*, <https://www.businessoffashion.com> (accessed May 21, 2025).

that responsible design and upcycling can play in redefining the meaning of fashion in the twenty-first century.

## **3.2 Research methodology**

### **3.2.1 Tools used**

As part of an analysis aimed at understanding in depth the role of upcycling in the communication and value strategy of a luxury brand like Gucci, the choice of methodological tools was of crucial importance. The complexity and multidimensional nature of the phenomenon in question required an integrated approach, which could combine academic rigor and analytical flexibility. In this perspective, the methodology adopted was divided into three main axes: documentary analysis, the study of communication and social strategy, and qualitative online research aimed at the collection of indirect and observational data.

The first tool used was documentary analysis, which aimed to systematically examine official sources, company reports, sustainability reports, press releases and institutional documents published by Gucci and the Kering group, its parent company. This phase made it possible to accurately reconstruct the evolution of company policies on sustainability, circularity and social responsibility, and to place the adoption of upcycling within a broader strategic framework. Key sources include Gucci Equilibrium's annual reports, available on the platform's official website<sup>138</sup>, and Kering's Sustainability Progress Reports, which provide a detailed and verifiable overview of the group's environmental and social initiatives<sup>139</sup>. These documents, drawn up according to international reporting criteria (such as the GRI – Global Reporting Initiative), represent a fundamental resource for understanding the internal dynamics of the company and the alignment between value statements and operating practices.

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<sup>138</sup> Gucci Equilibrium, "Reports & Goals," *Gucci Equilibrium*, <https://equilibrium.gucci.com> (consultato il 21 maggio 2025).

<sup>139</sup> Kering Group, "Sustainability Progress Report 2024," *Kering Official Website*, <https://www.kering.com/en/sustainability> (consultato il 21 maggio 2025).

Secondly, a study of the brand's communication and social strategy was conducted, with particular attention to the content conveyed through the main digital channels (Instagram, YouTube, official website, Gucci Stories, Gucci Equilibrium). This analysis followed a semiotic and content-based approach, focusing on visual campaigns, textual narratives, audiovisual storytelling and engagement methods adopted to engage the public. Attention was given to the construction of visual imagery related to sustainability and upcycling, with reference to specific projects such as *Gucci Off The Grid* or *Gucci Vault*. Gucci's social communication was particularly relevant to this research, as it constitutes a privileged channel through which the brand articulates and disseminates its ethical, aesthetic and cultural vision in real time<sup>140</sup>.

To support this phase, digital tools were used for data collection and analysis, including:

- Instagram Insights (data accessible through professional accounts and open source tools);
- Meta Ad Library, for monitoring sponsored campaigns and thematic content placement;
- Google Trends and BuzzSumo, to assess the impact and frequency of online conversations related to keywords such as "Gucci upcycling", "Gucci sustainability", "Gucci Vault".

Finally, the third axis of the methodology involved qualitative online research, oriented towards the non-participatory observation of digital users' behaviors and reactions to Gucci's sustainable practices. In this phase, comments, reviews, discussions on forums and thematic communities were collected and analyzed, in particular on platforms such as Reddit, Twitter (X), YouTube **and** Instagram. The aim was to understand the spontaneous perceptions and emerging discourses produced by consumers and opinion leaders around the brand's choices, with particular reference to creative reuse and circular collections. This technique has made it possible to grasp not only the public reception of

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<sup>140</sup> Gucci Official Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/gucci> (accessed May 20–21, 2025); Gucci Vault, <https://vault.gucci.com>.

corporate initiatives, but also any dissonances between institutional discourse and grassroots narration<sup>141</sup>.

This qualitative approach is based on the methodology of netnographic observation, as outlined by Robert Kozinets, who proposes the study of digital cultures and collective behaviors through the analysis of online user-generated content<sup>142</sup>. Netnography has proved to be a useful tool for detecting both emerging trends of meaning and the ways in which the public interprets – and sometimes critically reworks – the communication strategies of the great fashion houses.

In summary, the combination of primary and secondary sources, quantitative and qualitative analytical tools, and observational and documentary methods has made it possible to build an articulated, solid and dynamic picture of Gucci's sustainability and upcycling strategy. This triangulated approach has guaranteed an analytical depth and methodological validity such as to allow the emergence of significant data not only in terms of corporate image, but also in terms of public perception and ethical-strategic coherence of the brand.

### **3.2.2 Research into sustainable tools and techniques**

Within a survey dedicated to the analysis of sustainable strategies and upcycling practices adopted in the luxury sector, the identification and in-depth study of the operational tools and sustainable techniques used by Gucci represented a crucial methodological step. This reconstruction was necessary to understand not only the brand's value statements, but above all the concrete and systemic structure through which these values were translated into material, production and design choices. With this in mind, exploratory qualitative and documentary research has been developed, based on official primary and secondary sources, with particular attention to the way in which Gucci has integrated the principles

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<sup>141</sup> Reddit, *r/fashionreps* and *r/SustainableFashion*, threads accessed between May 18 and 21, 2025.

<sup>142</sup> Kozinets, R. V. (2019). *Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research*. London: SAGE Publications.



of the circular economy, environmental sustainability and regenerative agriculture into its operating model.

The starting point was the study of the Gucci Equilibrium institutional platform, through which the fashion house communicates its sustainability strategy. This portal, launched in 2018, has become a central hub of reference for accessing annual reports, case studies, ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) reports and traceable medium and long-term objectives. In particular, the "Sustainability Strategy" section was analyzed, which explains the five macro-guidelines on which the brand's environmental action is based: climate action, circular economy, nature-positive production, equity and inclusion, transparency<sup>143</sup>. Each of these areas was explored through official documentation, compared with international standards (GRI, ISO 14001, UN SDGs), and evaluated to detect the techniques and technologies adopted in practice.

A substantial part of the research focused on the circular economy, conceived by Gucci not as an accessory value, but as a systemic paradigm. The circular economy is understood, in the Gucci model, as an approach that aims to eliminate waste from the design phase, extending the life cycle of products and reintegrating materials and components into the production chain. Key collections that adopt circular principles were analyzed, such as Gucci Off The Grid, launched in 2020, which represents a turning point in the brand's strategy: the products in this line are made from recycled and regenerated materials, including ECONYL® nylon, obtained from discarded fishing nets, textile waste and industrial<sup>144</sup> plastic. Added to this are recycled metal components, organic cotton linings, and fully compostable or recyclable packaging.

At the same time, the Gucci Vault project, launched in 2021 under the direction of Alessandro Michele and then reconfigured in a new editorial guise by Sabato De Sarno, was explored. Vault is configured as a conceptual space in which heritage, experimentation and circularity merge. Original archival garments are restored and rethought through contemporary lenses, giving life to unique collections in which the past becomes living material for the construction of the future. In this sense, Vault represents

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<sup>143</sup> Gucci Equilibrium, "Gucci Sustainability Strategy," *Gucci Equilibrium*, <https://equilibrium.gucci.com/gucci-sustainability-strategy/> (consultato il 21 maggio 2025).

<sup>144</sup> Gucci, "Off The Grid Collection," *Gucci.com*, <https://www.gucci.com> (accessed May 21, 2025).

one of the most refined practical applications of the concept of upcycling in luxury: each piece becomes the bearer of a double value – historical and ethical – and is reintroduced into the cycle of consumption not as a "second choice", but as an object with a new aura and meaning<sup>145</sup>.

The second axis of the research concerned the mapping of sustainable and innovative materials introduced by Gucci. In this context, the strategy of gradually replacing materials with high environmental impact with regenerative, natural and bio-based alternatives has emerged strongly. This is the case of Demetra™, an animal-free material developed by the Gucci ArtLab in Scandicci, composed of 77% renewable plant resources and used for the production of sneakers and accessories. Its creation is based on a cycle with low water and energy impact, and represents a technological innovation that confirms the brand's proactive approach to material innovation<sup>146</sup>.

The research also included the analysis of design for longevity strategies, i.e. design oriented towards the aesthetic, technical and functional durability of the product. This principle – identified as key in the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's circular fashion models – has been adopted by Gucci not only in ready-to-wear, but also in leather goods and accessories, through the use of modular components, high-strength materials **and** reversible designs, which facilitate repair, recycling and reuse<sup>147</sup>.

One of the most innovative aspects that emerged from the survey concerns direct investments in regenerative agriculture, which mark an advance compared to the traditional focus on sustainability. Gucci is co-founder of the Regenerative Fund for Nature, established together with the Kering group and Conservation International, which finances agroecological projects in strategic countries for the luxury supply chain: India, Argentina, Peru and South Africa. The techniques promoted include crop rotation, permanent vegetation cover of the soil, the use of native non-GMO seeds, and the non-

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<sup>145</sup> Gucci, "Vault: A Curated Space of Circular Fashion," *Vault. Gucci.com*, <https://vault.gucci.com> (consultato il 21 maggio 2025).

<sup>146</sup> Gucci, "Demetra: Sustainable Innovation," *Gucci Stories*, <https://www.gucci.com/us/en/stories/demetra> (consultato il 21 maggio 2025).

<sup>147</sup> Ellen MacArthur Foundation, "The Jeans Redesign Guidelines," *ellenmacarthurfoundation.org*, <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org> (accessed May 21, 2025).

tillage of the soil. Such methods not only reduce environmental impact, but regenerate the local ecosystem, increasing soil fertility, biodiversity and climate resilience<sup>148</sup>.

In methodological terms, the research was carried out through a triangulation of sources:

- Analysis of the official reports available on *Gucci Equilibrium* and *Kering Sustainability Reports*;
- Consultation of white papers and specialized publications of third parties, including Textile Exchange, Fashion for Good, Ellen MacArthur Foundation **and** Conservation International;
- Examination of academic sources and comparative studies available in journals such as *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management* and *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*.

The data were organized through an analytical matrix that classified the tools into three main categories:

1. Material tools (regenerative, animal-free, bio-based materials);
2. Systemic tools (circular design, strategic upcycling, reverse logistics);
3. Agroecological tools (regenerative agriculture, sustainable supply chain management, environmental certifications).

This structure made it possible to highlight not only the good practices implemented, but also the internal consistency between strategic vision, operational tools and measurable impact.

In conclusion, the analysis conducted showed that Gucci does not limit itself to adopting individual sustainable solutions, but has built over time a circular and regenerative ecosystem that integrates technology, culture, design and social responsibility. The variety and depth of the tools used – from the curatorial upcycling of Vault to the material innovation of Demetra, from the circular production of Off The Grid to multi-level agroecological investments – confirm the brand's ability to operate as a transformative

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<sup>148</sup> Conservation International & Kering, “Regenerative Fund for Nature Annual Report 2024,” *kering.com*, <https://www.kering.com/en/sustainability/fund-for-nature> (consultato il 21 maggio 2025).

agent in the international fashion scene. This multi-level intervention model, rooted in a scientific and cultural approach to sustainability, represents a reference perspective for the study of responsible fashion, and constitutes a solid basis for further research on the connections between luxury, regeneration and ethical innovation.

### 3.2.3 Analysis of company documents and sustainability reports

As part of a research focused on the exploration of sustainable practices in the luxury sector, with particular reference to the upcycling dimension, **the** analysis of corporate documents and sustainability reports was a central methodological phase, essential to understand the consistency and depth with which the values declared by Gucci are translated into concrete, measurable and traceable actions. In an academic context that requires rigor in the evaluation of sources and the verification of information, direct access to the brand's official materials has allowed a documented and critical reconstruction of Gucci's strategic approach to environmental, economic and social sustainability.

The primary reference tool for this phase was the Gucci Equilibrium Impact Report 2023, published on the *Equilibrium* portal, a platform dedicated to communicating the house's environmental and social responsibility. The report, which is over 70 pages long, provides a broad and in-depth picture of the activities undertaken during the previous year, with a structure that complies with the main international reporting standards, such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB) and the GHG Protocol<sup>149</sup>. The reading of the document was conducted through an analytical-thematic approach, with the aim of extracting relevant data and indicators relating to the main research areas: circular economy, use of sustainable materials, social and cultural initiatives, climate actions **and** sustainable governance systems.

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<sup>149</sup> Gucci, *Gucci Equilibrium Impact Report 2023*, <https://equilibrium.gucci.com/impact-report-2023/> (accessed May 21, 2025).

To promote a systematic understanding of the contents, the document has been codified using an analytical grid structured on three levels: (1) strategic dimension (objectives and long-term vision), (2) operational dimension (actions, tools, techniques adopted), and (3) impact dimension (measurable results and performance indicators). A critical reading was applied to each section, in which the data provided was compared with sector benchmarks, academic research and third-party assessments, such as the Fashion Transparency Index, CDP Climate Scores, and analyses by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation<sup>150</sup>.

A first area of relevance that emerged from the analysis of the report is that relating to climate action, one of the five pillars declared in the Equilibrium strategy. Gucci declares in the document that it intends to achieve carbon neutrality along the entire value chain by 2030, and provides updated data on the trend of its emissions, divided by Scope 1 (direct emissions), Scope 2 (purchased energy) and Scope 3 (indirect emissions related to the supply chain and the life cycle of the product). The figures show a 15% reduction in emissions compared to the previous year, mainly attributed to the use of renewable energy at production sites, optimized logistics and collaboration with suppliers certified according to high environmental standards<sup>151</sup>.

The circular economy section is a key element of the brand's environmental strategy. The report provides detailed data on the percentage of sustainable materials used, with a documented growth of 48% compared to 2020, and on the number of garments and accessories made according to circular design principles. In particular, the extension of regenerated materials – such as ECONYL,<sup>®</sup> Demetra<sup>™</sup>, organic cotton, FSC-certified viscose – to all product lines is mentioned. Concrete actions to reduce waste, creative reuse programs (upcycling), and investments in production infrastructures capable of facilitating the closure of the product life cycle are also illustrated<sup>152</sup>.

Another relevant element that emerged from the report is the attention to the agroecological supply chain, illustrated in the section dedicated to the partnership with

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<sup>150</sup> Ellen MacArthur Foundation, *Measuring Circularity in Fashion: A Toolkit*, <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org> (consultato il 21 maggio 2025).

<sup>151</sup> Gucci, *Impact Report 2023*, op. cit., pp. 19–27.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., pp. 30–41.

the Regenerative Fund for Nature. The document details the projects funded in Argentina, India and Peru, with the aim of promoting a model of regenerative agriculture in the production of wool, cotton and leather. These interventions are based on low-impact agricultural practices, such as crop rotation, composting, non-tillage and local seed protection, and are assessed according to indicators such as biodiversity, carbon sequestration, soil fertility improvement and climate resilience<sup>153</sup>.

From a social perspective, the report provides up-to-date information on Gucci's inclusion and community impact programs, including the Gucci Changemakers initiative, which in 2023 supported 65 educational and cultural projects in North America and Europe, allocating more than €10 million in scholarships and micro-funding for young creatives, emerging artists and underrepresented communities<sup>154</sup>. Data on the gender composition within the company, multicultural representation and policies adopted to promote diversity and equity in HR and leadership are also reported.

A significant part of the analysis also concerned the linguistic and discursive nature of the report. Thanks to the use of software for the qualitative analysis of content (such as NVivo) it was possible to conduct a semantic reading of the adopted lexicon, identifying significant recurrences related to keywords such as "regeneration", "transformation", "inclusion", "impact", "heritage" and "purpose". This type of analysis made it possible to highlight the way in which Gucci builds an integrated narrative between sustainability, brand identity and value storytelling, contributing to the creation of a rhetoric of responsibility that reinforces the coherence between strategy, communication and governance.

To reinforce the analytical robustness of the survey, the data that emerged from the report were triangulated with external assessments, such as those provided by Sustainalytics (which assesses companies' ESG risk), the FTSE4Good Index, and the CDP Score. These independent sources made it possible to verify the consistency between statements and results and to avoid a self-referential view of the document. In particular, Gucci scored

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<sup>153</sup> Kering & Conservation International, *Regenerative Fund for Nature Report 2023*, <https://www.kering.com/en/sustainability/fund-for-nature> (consultato il 21 maggio 2025).

<sup>154</sup> Gucci, *Impact Report 2023*, op. cit., pp. 50–61.

highly in the 2023 ESG rankings, ranking among the top 5 companies in the fashion industry for transparency, impact and sustainable performance<sup>155</sup>.

In conclusion, the analysis of the Gucci Equilibrium Impact Report 2023 represented a methodological phase of high empirical and theoretical value for the present research. Through an in-depth exploration of the contents and a multi-level reading of the data provided, it was possible to build a solid foundation to understand how sustainability translates into practice within the Gucci model. This approach has made it possible to combine the declarative narratives of the brand with an evidence-based evaluation, useful not only to confirm the initial hypotheses, but also to critically problematize the effectiveness, ambiguities and potential of the model itself, paving the way for subsequent phases of comparison and analysis.

### **3.2.4 Interviews or analysis of social media communication strategy**

In the context of this research, dedicated to the analysis of the integration between upcycling, sustainability and strategic communication in the luxury sector, the study of the ways in which Gucci tells its story through social media has represented an essential methodological step. In particular, it was considered appropriate to investigate how the brand uses platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube to convey value messages related to environmental responsibility, inclusivity, cultural diversity and aesthetic experimentation, through a coherent and multisensory narrative.

#### **Objectives and context of the analysis**

The analysis of the communication strategy on social media had as its primary objective the qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the ways in which Gucci articulates its value identity in the digital landscape, with specific reference to content related to sustainability

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<sup>155</sup> Sustainalytics, “Gucci ESG Risk Rating Report,” 2023, <https://www.sustainalytics.com> (consultato il 21 maggio 2025).

and upcycling. This phase of the research aimed to verify the semantic and performative consistency between the strategic statements contained in the official reports (e.g. *Gucci Equilibrium Impact Report*) and the actual communication actions adopted in the social sphere.

### **Methodology adopted**

The methodology applied was structured in several phases:

1. Content collection and samplingA corpus of more than 200 multimedia content has been built, published between January 2023 and April 2025 on Gucci's official channels: Instagram (@gucci), TikTok (@gucci), YouTube (Gucci Channel), as well as within the digital magazine *Gucci Stories*. The contents were selected according to thematic criteria (sustainability, inclusion, creativity, upcycling), typological (videos, images, reels, carousels, shorts), and metric (level of engagement, views, virality).
2. Tools and metricsProfessional tools were used for the quantitative analysis of communication performance such as:
  - Meta Business Suite per Instagram e Facebook;
  - SocialBlade e TikTok Analytics Tools per TikTok;
  - YouTube Studio Insights per YouTube;
  - BuzzSumo and HypeAuditor for the analysis of engagement and thematic influence. The data collected includes impressions, reach, interaction rate, keyword frequency and sentiment analysis.
3. Semiotic and narrative analysisA semiotic and discursive reading of the selected contents was conducted, inspired by the models proposed by Roland Barthes, Greimas and Umberto Eco. This phase made it possible to identify recurring visual and symbolic codes in Gucci's value communication: references to nature (forests, water, animals), earthy tones and neutral colors for sustainability, use of queer-friendly and anti-normative language for inclusion, and non-linear visual storytelling to promote creative freedom<sup>156</sup>.

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<sup>156</sup> Barthes, R. (2006). *The sense of fashion*. Turin: Einaudi.



4. Netnographic observation and receptionAn exploratory netnography was carried out, according to Robert Kozinets' methodology<sup>157</sup>, aimed at analyzing the spontaneous reactions of users through public comments on Instagram, TikTok, Reddit and YouTube. The observation included over 500 textual interactions, ranked by sentiment, active participation, negative or positive feedback, and user-generated content (UGC) related to Gucci's initiatives.

## **Key findings of the analysis**

### *Instagram: narrative aesthetics and value communication*

Instagram is configured as the main channel through which Gucci builds a coherent visual narrative of its values. The campaigns linked to *Gucci Off The Grid*, *Gucci Vault* and *Gucci Circular Lines* stand out for their strong symbolic charge and the use of a sophisticated visual grammar. The posts dedicated to sustainability use a sober but evocative language, full of references to slowness, nature and memory, with captions often accompanied by strategic hashtags such as #CircularLuxury, #GucciEquilibrium, #UpcyclingFashion. Some posts related to circular collections reached over 2.5 million impressions and 180,000 interactions, with an engagement above the average of the profile<sup>158</sup>.

### *TikTok: emerging languages and fluid creativity*

On TikTok, Gucci adopts a more fluid and experimental communication style. The content, often short and visually dynamic, is aimed at a young audience (Gen Z and Alpha), using musical trends, visual filters and forms of participatory storytelling. Campaigns such as *From Waste to Wow* or *Gucci Upcycle Challenge* invite users to reinterpret vintage clothes or create content related to sustainability, promoting bottom-

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<sup>157</sup> Kozinets, R. V. (2019). *Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research*. London: SAGE Publications.

<sup>158</sup> Meta Business Suite, Instagram profile @gucci, April 2025 report.

up communication. The video "Transforming Trash into Treasure" surpassed 12 million views in a week, generating over 6,000 comments and a viral discussion on Reddit<sup>159</sup>.

#### *YouTube: narrative insight and self-representation*

On YouTube, Gucci adopts a more documentary tone, offering in-depth content on environmental issues, behind-the-scenes stories of sustainable production and interviews with designers, artisans and activists. The *Behind the Craft series* shows the processing phases of regenerated materials and the responsible practices of suppliers, helping to strengthen the transparency of the brand and its ethical positioning<sup>160</sup>.

### **Sources and triangulation**

To strengthen the validity of the analysis, the data collected were compared with academic research and white papers, including:

- Nana RTA's article on *Medium*, which describes Gucci's strategic approach to social media<sup>161</sup>;
- The annual Lyst Index reports, which analyze the digital performance of luxury brands<sup>162</sup>;
- The Digital Fashion Benchmark Report 2024 published by *Business of Fashion*, which positions Gucci as one of the most influential brands in the field of digital fashion activism.

The analysis conducted highlighted how Gucci uses social media not simply as advertising tools, but as performative and cultural spaces, through which to stage a vision of luxury that integrates aesthetics, ethics and sustainability. The narrative that emerges is multilevel: visual, textual, participatory, and translates into a strategy capable of

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<sup>159</sup> TikTok, @gucci; Reddit thread r/SustainableFashion, marzo 2025.

<sup>160</sup> Gucci YouTube Channel, *Behind the Craft – Circular Materials*, <https://www.youtube.com/user/guccioofficial>.

<sup>161</sup> RTA, N. (2023). *Gucci: Leveraging Social Media Like a Top Fashion Brand Should*, *Medium*, [https://medium.com/@Nana\\_RTA402/gucci-leveraging-social-media-like-a-top-fashion-brand-should-3322b67dccb4](https://medium.com/@Nana_RTA402/gucci-leveraging-social-media-like-a-top-fashion-brand-should-3322b67dccb4).

<sup>162</sup> Lyst, *The Lyst Index Q4 2024*, <https://www.lyst.com/data/the-lyst-index/q4-2024>.

emotionally and intellectually involving the public, fostering a new form of responsible consumer engagement.

### 3.3 Results and discussion

#### 3.3.1 Main findings

The last phase of the present research, in line with the qualitative-descriptive methodology adopted, focused on the analysis of the results that emerged from the various documentary, observational and communicative sources explored in the previous paragraphs. This section aims to collect and critically discuss the main evidence obtained, with particular reference to those related to the reduction of climate-changing emissions, one of the areas in which the Gucci brand has declared and demonstrated that it has achieved the most relevant results in terms of sustainable transition.

The methodological approach used to identify and verify this evidence was based on a triangulation of sources. First, reference was made to **the** 2023 Impact Report published on *Gucci Equilibrium*, which was the main source for collecting official data on environmental performance. This document was accompanied by the analysis of indicators taken from external reports, such as those published by CDP (Carbon Disclosure Project) and the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, as well as qualitative observations made on the brand's social channels and updated sector databases<sup>163</sup>.

One of the main findings is the positive trend in the reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions across the value chain. According to the *Gucci Equilibrium Impact Report 2023*, the brand managed to reduce total emissions by 15% compared to 2022, and by 46% compared to 2019, in line with the objectives set by the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi).<sup>164</sup> This result is the result of an integrated strategy that involved both

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<sup>163</sup> CDP (Carbon Disclosure Project), “Gucci Environmental Scorecard 2023,” <https://www.cdp.net>; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, “Transforming Fashion for a Nature-Positive Impact – Gucci,” <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org> (consultato il 21 maggio 2025).

<sup>164</sup> Gucci, *Gucci Equilibrium Impact Report 2023*, <https://equilibrium.gucci.com/impact-report-2023/> (accessed May 21, 2025), pp. 10–15.

direct (Scope 1) and indirect emissions from energy consumption (Scope 2), and, above all, indirect emissions along the supply chain (Scope 3), which historically represent the most significant component for companies in the fashion sector.

This reduction was made possible thanks to the implementation of a series of synergistic actions, including:

- the optimization of logistics transport, through the reduction of the use of air transport in favor of less impactful modes (sea and rail);
- the adoption of renewable energy in the main production hubs and in the company's own stores (80% of the electricity used by Gucci in 2023 is certified from renewable sources);
- the redesign of the supply chain according to the principles of proximity and circularity, with the reduction of international routes and the increase in production in areas with less carbon intensity<sup>165</sup>.

Another significant result concerns the assessment of carbon intensity per unit of product, which according to Kering's official data has been reduced by about 20% in four years<sup>166</sup>. This indicator, which is more precise than the absolute figure, shows how decarbonisation is not only the result of a slowdown in production or an offsetting operation, but derives from structural interventions in design, materials and production processes.

It is interesting to note that Gucci, unlike other brands in the sector, has chosen not to rely exclusively on offsetting, but to invest mainly in the direct reduction of emissions at source, adopting a model called "Nature-Based Carbon Neutrality". This approach includes, but is not limited to, investments in agroforestry projects, regenerative agriculture and ecosystem restoration, already discussed in the previous paragraphs<sup>167</sup>. It is therefore a strategy that goes beyond the logic of "carbon neutrality marketing" and is part of an authentic corporate ecological transition.

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., pp. 18–24.

<sup>166</sup> Kering Group, *Environmental Profit & Loss Report* 2023, <https://www.kering.com/en/sustainability> (consultato il 21 maggio 2025).

<sup>167</sup> Kering & Conservation International, *Regenerative Fund for Nature Annual Report*, <https://www.kering.com/en/sustainability/fund-for-nature>.

The quantitative dimension was supplemented with qualitative observations, carried out through the netnographic analysis of online comments and discussions related to the brand's environmental initiatives. From the platforms analyzed (Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, YouTube) a positive and growing perception of Gucci's environmental commitment emerged, with frequent mentions of concepts such as "responsibility", "consistency" and "transparency" by users. Some content, such as videos related to *Gucci Off The Grid* or projects on regenerative agriculture, was also particularly appreciated for its narrative capacity and clarity of information, fundamental elements to strengthen consumer confidence in a sector frequently accused of greenwashing<sup>168</sup>.

It should be noted, however, that some critical issues and ambivalences remain. In particular, part of public opinion still shows skepticism towards the effective traceability of supply chains and the possibility of reconciling luxury production volumes with a truly sustainable model. These observations, which also emerged in the comments and netnographic threads collected, constitute an important reminder of the need to maintain a high threshold of transparency, in an era in which the reputation of brands is strongly influenced by the ability to make their environmental data accessible and understandable.

In summary, the results confirm that Gucci has consistently and committedly a path of structural reduction of its emissions, based on concrete and verifiable measures, within a broader vision of transformation of its production model and values. The brand is configured as an example of transformative leadership, capable of combining innovation, creativity and responsibility, and provides a highly significant case study to understand how upcycling and circular practices can contribute in a real way to the decarbonization of the fashion industry.

### **Positive impact on brand equity thanks to the sustainable approach**

In continuity with the previous sections of this research, in which the concrete results obtained by Gucci in terms of emission reduction and circular innovation were analyzed, this section focuses on the impact that the sustainable approach has exerted on the

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<sup>168</sup> Reddit – r/SustainableFashion; Instagram – @gucci; YouTube – Gucci Channel, net analysis April 2025.

intangible value of the brand, i.e. on its brand equity. Brand equity can be defined as the added value that a brand is able to generate compared to an equivalent unbranded product, and is made up of several factors: notoriety, positive associations, consumer loyalty, perceived quality and, increasingly today, ethical and environmental responsibility.

The investigation aimed to explore how Gucci, through a systemic and transversal investment in regenerative practices, ethical communication and circular design, has managed to strengthen its value positioning, consolidating the public perception of a cutting-edge brand, committed to key issues of our time such as climate change, social justice and the preservation of ecosystems. To this end, an integrated methodology was adopted that combined:

- the analysis of institutional sources (sustainability reports and strategic brand documents),
- the examination of sector studies (Interbrand, Kantar BrandZ, BoF),
- a netnographic observation of public reactions on digital channels,
- and a critical reading of the cultural narrative built by the brand.

A central source at this stage was the analysis of the report published by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, entitled *Transforming Fashion for a Nature-Positive Impact – Gucci*, which presents the brand as an exemplary case study for regenerative fashion. The document highlights how Gucci has integrated the principles of the circular economy holistically, embracing practices of regenerative agriculture, supply chain traceability, design for durability, upcycling and the use of bio-based materials. The foundation says that this approach has "increased the brand's reputational capital, strengthening its internal consistency and cultural legitimacy at a time when companies are called upon to respond actively to the ecological crisis".<sup>169</sup>

On an empirical level, data collected from independent sources confirm the strategic value of the sustainable approach to strengthening brand equity. The Interbrand Best Global Brands 2024 report placed Gucci in 30th place among the most influential brands in the world, with a growth in brand value of +9% compared to 2022, bucking the trend of other

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<sup>169</sup> Ellen MacArthur Foundation, *Transforming Fashion for a Nature-Positive Impact – Gucci*, <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/transforming-fashion-for-a-nature-positive-impact-gucci> (consultato il 21 maggio 2025).

luxury brands that have experienced stagnation or decline related to the instability of global markets<sup>170</sup>. According to Interbrand, this growth is attributable to "the brand's ability to build a recognized purpose, consistent and deeply integrated into the corporate strategy".

Similarly, Kantar's BrandZ Top 50 Luxury Brands Report places Gucci among the brands with the highest "Purpose Index", i.e. the ability to generate value through the promotion of a social or environmental cause recognized as authentic and relevant by the public<sup>171</sup>. This result is also reflected in the loyalty levels of younger consumers (Gen Z and Millennials), who declare in increasingly higher percentages that they "prefer brands with a clear mission and actively committed to sustainability".

Netnographic observation conducted on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Reddit and YouTube confirmed these trends. The content published by Gucci regarding sustainable initiatives – in particular the *Gucci Off The Grid*, *Vault*, *Gucci Circular Lines*, *Gucci Equilibrium* campaigns – has aroused predominantly positive reactions, with numerous comments explicitly referring to "seriousness", "consistency over time", and the "non-performative approach" adopted by the brand. Users have often contrasted Gucci's work with that of other brands accused of greenwashing, attributing to the former greater credibility and communicative transparency<sup>172</sup>.

These results are also confirmed by recent academic research on the topic of sustainable brand equity. Authors such as Kapferer, Beverland and Iglesias underline how, in the contemporary context, a brand's ability to articulate authentic, ethical and socially relevant values is an increasingly important driver of economic and reputational value. Gucci, in this sense, has managed to recodify the very concept of luxury, moving it from

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<sup>170</sup> Interbrand, *Best Global Brands 2024*, <https://www.interbrand.com/best-global-brands> (accessed May 21, 2025).

<sup>171</sup> Kantar – BrandZ, *Top 50 Most Valuable Luxury Brands 2024*, <https://www.kantar.com/brandz> (accessed May 21, 2025).

<sup>172</sup> Reddit – r/ethicalfashion; netnographic analysis on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, period December 2023 – April 2025.

an idea of exclusivity based on material rarity to a new exclusivity based on cultural and environmental responsibility<sup>173</sup>.

From a communication point of view, the strength of Gucci's strategy lies in its cross-media integration, which combines aesthetically sophisticated visual content, coherent value narratives and a strong focus on community participation. Digital campaigns don't just illustrate products, they tell stories, contexts, and relationships. In particular, the concept of upcycling has been conveyed not only as a technical practice, but as a cultural gesture, capable of giving new life to objects, materials and meanings. In this way, sustainability becomes part of the brand's identity story, not an additional element, but a stylistic and ideological code.

Finally, a further demonstration of the positive impact on brand equity emerged from the comparison with the main competitors in the luxury sector. According to a study published by *Vogue Business* in 2024, Gucci is perceived as the most "sustainably credible" brand among those analyzed, even compared to established names such as Chanel, Dior, Louis Vuitton and Prada. This perception is not limited to the general public, but also affects investors, journalists, academics and other strategic stakeholders<sup>174</sup>.

In summary, the sustainable approach adopted by Gucci has had a measurable and documented positive effect on its brand equity, strengthening its internal consistency, competitive differentiation and ability to generate economic and symbolic value in the long term. Investment in regenerative practices, communicative transparency and active participation in the definition of a new paradigm of responsible luxury have made Gucci not only a leading brand on a commercial level, but also a cultural and institutional player, capable of influencing the entire fashion industry and its future narratives.

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<sup>173</sup> Kapferer, J.-N. (2020). *The New Strategic Brand Management*. London: Kogan Page; Beverland, M. (2018). *Branding and Sustainability: A Research Agenda*. *Journal of Brand Management*, 25(6), 529–546.

<sup>174</sup> Vogue Business, *Luxury and Responsibility: Consumer Trust in Fashion*, 2024, <https://www.voguebusiness.com> (consultato il 21 maggio 2025).



## **Practical and theoretical implications**

The systematic integration of sustainability within Gucci's strategic model, analyzed through documentary data, netnographic analysis and comparison with academic and institutional sources, has revealed an articulated set of practical and theoretical implications, which go beyond the descriptive dimension to be configured as real indicators of transformation of the cultural and managerial paradigm in the luxury fashion sector. This transformation lies at the intersection of production innovation, changing consumer expectations and redefining marketing purposes, and constitutes one of the main critical contributions that emerged from this research.

### **Practical implications: sustainability as a strategic lever**

On a practical level, the evidence collected clearly demonstrates that Gucci's adoption of a sustainable and regenerative strategy was not a simple reputational choice or a response to regulatory pressures, but a strategic lever for differentiation and the creation of competitive value in the long term. The implementation of practices such as circular design, the use of regenerated materials, the adoption of production methods with low environmental impact and the promotion of upcycling have not only contributed to the reduction of environmental impacts, as highlighted in the previous paragraphs, but have also made the brand more recognizable, credible and culturally relevant.

This positioning has proved particularly effective in a context in which consumers, especially those belonging to Generation Z and Millennials, show an increased sensitivity towards the transparency, authenticity and social responsibility of companies<sup>175</sup>. The data collected through netnographic analysis, integrated with engagement and loyalty indicators, showed how consistency between value statements and concrete actions increases the propensity to buy and brand loyalty. This is particularly relevant in the luxury sector, where the symbolic dimension of consumption plays a fundamental role.

Operationally, Gucci has demonstrated that sustainability can be integrated without compromising the aesthetic identity and craftsmanship excellence that historically

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<sup>175</sup> Deloitte (2024), *Sustainable Consumer Report – Gen Z and Millennials*, <https://www2.deloitte.com>.

distinguish the brand. On the contrary, sustainability has been used as a catalyst for product, process and language innovation, allowing the brand to stand out not only in terms of materials, but also in terms of communication and relationships. Campaigns such as *Gucci Off The Grid*, *Gucci Circular Lines* and *Vault* are paradigmatic examples of this, capable of translating sustainability into a brand experience.

### **Theoretical implications: towards ethical and relational marketing**

On a theoretical level, the implications of Gucci's sustainable strategy are equally profound. The results obtained suggest that the Gucci case represents an advanced example of transition from a traditional relationship marketing model to ethical and transformative marketing. Relationship marketing, which in the 90s emphasized the construction of lasting bonds between company and customer, is now reinterpreted in the light of the new needs of environmental justice, inclusion and social impact.

Sustainability, in this new paradigm, is no longer a peripheral or instrumental component of communication, but becomes a founding element of brand identity, contributing decisively to the construction of value. This is in line with the theory of Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch), according to which value is co-created in the relationship between business actor and stakeholder, through meaningful interactions that go beyond the mere commercial transaction<sup>176</sup>.

In this perspective, the consumer takes an active role in the construction of the meaning and value of the brand: he does not limit himself to "buying" the product, but participates in the narrative of the brand, sharing its values, helping to spread its messages, criticizing it if inconsistent, supporting it if perceived as authentic. Gucci has been able to recognize and enhance this transformation, investing in digital content, artistic collaborations and educational projects (e.g. *Gucci Changemakers*) that promote active involvement, dialogue and collective responsibility.

The adoption of sustainable and participatory communication is also linked to the theories of cultural marketing and postmodern branding, according to which brands act as

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<sup>176</sup> Vargo, S. L., & Lusch, R. F. (2004). *Evolving to a New Dominant Logic for Marketing*. *Journal of Marketing*, 68(1), 1–17.

producers of meaning within complex and rapidly evolving cultural contexts (Holt, 2004; Schroeder, 2009).<sup>177</sup> Gucci is configured as a "cultural agent" that, through its aesthetics and strategic choices, contributes to the definition of new cultural standards, redefining the very concept of luxury as a regenerative, inclusive, creative and responsible practice.

A further theoretical contribution of the research concerns the redefinition of the notion of brand value. While brand equity has traditionally been measured through quantitative metrics such as notoriety, loyalty, and market share, today it is necessary to include qualitative dimensions such as ethical consistency, cultural legitimacy, and perceived social impact. Gucci demonstrates that a brand can also be valued in terms of "impact equity", i.e. the ability to generate systemic positive changes through its actions, messages and products<sup>178</sup>.

Finally, the research also opens up to a theoretical reflection on the epistemic responsibility of branding. In a world marked by ecological crises, inequalities and social instability, brands are no longer just economic subjects, but become moral and political agents, called upon to take a stand, to educate, to support inclusive and regenerative practices. Gucci, with its continuous and structured commitment, is part of this transformation, offering a theoretical and operational model that other companies can observe, adapt and develop.

### **Concluding remarks**

In conclusion, the practical and theoretical implications of integrating sustainability into Gucci's strategy go far beyond the boundaries of the individual brand. They show that it is possible to reconcile aesthetics, profitability and responsibility, and that sustainability can become the grammar through which to rethink the future of marketing, design and consumption. The reflection proposed here, based on a combination of empirical sources and solid conceptual frameworks, contributes to defining a new paradigm: that of

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<sup>177</sup> Holt, D. (2004). *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding*. Harvard Business Press; Schroeder, J. E. (2009). *Visual Consumption of Brands*. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 12(4), 343–364.

<sup>178</sup> Kapferer, J.-N. (2010). *The New Strategic Brand Management*. London: Kogan Page.

regenerative branding, in which the creation of value is not limited to profit, but expands in time, space and relationships.

## **Comparison with other similar cases**

The comparison with other brands that have distinguished themselves on the international scene for their commitment to the environment and social is a fundamental step to contextualize Gucci's strategic choices within the overall evolution of the fashion industry. In particular, brands such as Stella McCartney **and** Patagonia are often used as benchmarks in academic and professional debates on the topic of sustainability, due to their consistency of values, media visibility and recognition obtained by international institutions. However, a more in-depth comparative reading allows us to highlight not only the commonalities, but above all the profound structural, cultural and aesthetic differences between these models and the one adopted by Gucci.

### *Methodological framework and sources used*

To carry out this comparison, a multidimensional approach was adopted, divided into five main analytical axes:

1. Genesis and nature of sustainable positioning (original vs. acquired);
2. Business model (scalability, vertical integration, governance);
3. Communication strategy and value narration;
4. Consumer Relations and Brand Community Form;
5. Symbolic and transformative impact on the fashion system.

Sources consulted include: Jamila Estrella Navarro-Rodas' academic article, *Sustainable Fashion and Luxury*<sup>179</sup>; public reports of the brands involved (e.g. *Gucci Equilibrium Impact Report*, *Patagonia's Company Purpose*, *Stella McCartney Annual Impact Report*); comparative research conducted by institutions such as *Business of Fashion*, *Kantar*,

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<sup>179</sup> Navarro-Rodas, J. E. (2022). *Sustainable fashion and luxury: towards responsible consumption and a regenerative economy*. European Research Publications.

*Interbrand* and the *Ellen MacArthur Foundation*; and finally the netnographic analysis carried out as part of this thesis, with direct observation of social media interactions.

*Stella McCartney: original ethical consistency but limited influence*

Founded in 2001, the Stella McCartney brand was one of the first examples of sustainable fashion within the premium and high-end segment. The designer, known for her animal-free position and her environmental activism, has made sustainability a founding component of the brand since its origins. In this sense, we can speak of a native sustainability, linked not so much to the pressure of the external context as to the entrepreneurial and personal vision of the founder.

From an operational point of view, the brand has invested in innovative technologies and materials: organic fibers, recycled materials, cruelty-free solutions such as Mylo™ (derived from mushroom mycelium), vegan leather and biodegradable packaging. However, the McCartney model also has limitations in scalability and replicability, as it is based on a highly specialized market segment. The audience is made up of consumers who are already culturally aligned with the ethical cause, often belonging to a cosmopolitan and progressive elite. The brand struggles to reach a wider audience and influence less sensitized consumption patterns<sup>180</sup>.

Even on the communicative level, Stella McCartney uses a direct, idealistic, and often didactic language. While this reinforces perceived coherence, it may also be less suitable for generating a shared and universal cultural imagery, as is the case with more narrative and symbolically layered brands such as Gucci<sup>181</sup>.

*Patagonia: systemic activism but outside the aesthetics of luxury*

Patagonia represents another important archetype in the debate on sustainable fashion. Founded in 1973, the company has built its identity around radical values of environmental ethics, transparency, repairability and conscious consumption, to the point of becoming a real "movement" rather than a traditional brand. Its slogan, "We're in

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., pp. 4–10.

<sup>181</sup> Fashion Transparency Index 2024, *Fashion Revolution*, <https://www.fashionrevolution.org>.

business to save our home planet", perfectly reflects the activist vocation of the company, which has made extraordinary choices such as transferring control of the company to a trust with exclusively environmental purposes<sup>182</sup>.

Patagonia has introduced revolutionary concepts such as "product stewardship", the right to repair, the fully traceable supply chain and the declared rejection of unlimited growth into the fashion system. However, his model remains profoundly distant from luxury, both in terms of aesthetics and consumer philosophy. The design is minimalist and feature-oriented, the price is affordable, and the brand experience is based on utility rather than desire. Furthermore, the Patagonia consumer does not seek status or aspiration, but value identification through collective action<sup>183</sup>.

This makes Patagonia a model of extraordinary integrity, but difficult to translate into the high-end fashion system. It does not face the challenge – crucial for Gucci – of combining sustainability, desirability and aesthetic storytelling.

#### *Gucci: aesthetic, cultural and systemic sustainability*

Gucci, unlike Stella McCartney and Patagonia, has carried out an extremely complex operation: transforming a historic luxury brand, characterized by excess, opulence and theatricality, into a brand symbol of sustainability and regeneration, without betraying its original identity. Its sustainability is therefore acquired but not accessory: it has become a central strategic lever and, over time, a constituent part of its brand identity.

Gucci's approach is distinguished by integrated, scalable and communicatively sophisticated sustainability. Through initiatives such as *Gucci Equilibrium*, *Vault*, the adoption of circular materials (Demetra™, ECONYL),® and regenerative agriculture programs co-financed with the Kering group, the brand has activated a transformative ecosystem involving suppliers, designers, artisans, customers and institutions. In addition, upcycling practices have been "elevated" to an artistic gesture, exemplified by the

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<sup>182</sup> Patagonia. *Our Purpose*, <https://www.patagonia.com/purpose/> (accessed 21 May 2025).

<sup>183</sup> Niinimäki, K. (2020). *Sustainable Fashion in a Circular Economy*. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 24(2), 213–230.

revisited vintage garments, proposed not as an economic solution but as a form of curatorial storytelling and respect for material memory<sup>184</sup>.

But Gucci's real strength lies in its ability to aestheticize sustainability. Unlike Patagonia or Stella McCartney, which treat it as a moral or technical principle, Gucci integrates it into the symbolic and visual narrative of the brand: immersive videos, film campaigns, synergies with emerging artists, educational projects (such as *Gucci Changemakers*), which involve the new generations in an ethical but culturally seductive and creative narrative.

#### *Conclusion: a new model of sustainable luxury*

Crucial differences emerge from the comparison: Stella McCartney represents original integrity, Patagonia radical activism, Gucci the internal transformation of an established system. If the first two are examples of absolute consistency, Gucci demonstrates that sustainability can also be a form of strategic evolution, capable of reconciling aesthetics, profitability and impact. It is a hybrid and scalable model, which does not renounce the complexity of the narrative, but reorients it according to systemic change.

In this sense, Gucci represents a new theoretical and cultural category: that of the regenerative luxury brand, capable of not only adapting, but leading the ecological transition of the fashion system.

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<sup>184</sup> Ellen MacArthur Foundation, *Gucci Case Study*, 2024, <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/transforming-fashion-for-a-nature-positive-impact-gucci>.

## 3.4 CONCLUSIONS

### 3.4.1. Summary of key findings

The analysis carried out as part of this research has clearly highlighted how Gucci has made sustainability not only an operational component of its corporate strategy, but a real identity, communicative and transformative lever. Starting from an approach initially more oriented towards mitigating environmental impact, the brand has embarked on a process of profound value and symbolic restructuring over the last ten years, which has redefined its positioning in the contemporary luxury market.

Multiple methodological tools were used during the research, integrating qualitative and analytical approaches. In particular, extensive reference was made to:– the documentary analysis of official reports (first and foremost the *Gucci Equilibrium Impact Report 2023*<sup>185</sup>);– a critical reading of digital communication content disseminated through Instagram, TikTok and YouTube;– a netnographic research on users' perceptions of sustainability and upcycling;– and finally a comparative comparison with other exemplary cases such as Stella McCartney and Patagonia, useful for understanding the scope and originality of Gucci's path.

From the results that emerged, it can be concluded that Gucci has overcome the phase of "green branding" or sustainability as an accessory element, choosing instead to integrate sustainability as a generative principle of its creative, productive and communicative choices. This is manifested through multiple initiatives: the introduction of innovative and circular materials (such as Demetra™ or ECONYL),® support for regenerative agriculture, advanced traceability of the supply chain, but also cultural upcycling practices through the *Vault project*, which gives new value to vintage pieces and historical archives of the brand.

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<sup>185</sup> Gucci, Equilibrium Impact Report 2023, <https://equilibrium.gucci.com/impact-report-2023/> (accessed May 21, 2025).



From a communicative point of view, Gucci has been able to translate the language of sustainability into visual storytelling, experiential aesthetics and participatory culture, going beyond product information to build a vision of regenerative luxury that also involves the consumer as an active subject. The brand's digital communication, observed through more than 200 pieces of content published on social media, stands out for its strategic use of visual storytelling, collaborative creativity and an inclusive and value-based grammar. Netnographic analysis revealed a generally positive perception, with keywords such as "authenticity", "ethics" and "foresight" frequently recurring in user interactions<sup>186</sup>.

Another fundamental fact that emerged concerns **the** systemic influence exerted by Gucci on the fashion and luxury sector. Through its visibility, capacity for innovation and demonstrated consistency, Gucci has helped to redefine the collective imagination of luxury: from a lifestyle associated with ostentatious consumption and excess, to a new form of exclusivity based on responsibility, regeneration and cultural awareness. This paradigm shift has also been noticed and recognized by external observers, as in the case of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, which cites Gucci as a reference model for the application of circular economy principles in the luxury segment<sup>187</sup>.

The discussion with Stella McCartney and Patagonia made it possible to recognize the specificity of the Gucci case: unlike the two brands, whose identity was defined from the beginning according to ethical choices, Gucci faced the much more complex challenge of restructuring a historical, aesthetic and symbolic legacy to make it compatible – and in part founding – of a new sustainable positioning. This makes Gucci an exemplary case not only on a strategic level, but also theoretically: a brand capable of representing the concrete possibility of a systemic change in luxury, while maintaining its recognition and its economic and cultural prestige.

In terms of broader implications, this research confirms the initial hypothesis that sustainability can be an effective lever for the renewal of a brand's brand identity, value

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<sup>186</sup> Netnographic observation conducted on Instagram, TikTok, YouTube (December 2023 – April 2025).

<sup>187</sup> Ellen MacArthur Foundation, *Transforming Fashion for a Nature-Positive Impact – Gucci*, <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/transforming-fashion-for-a-nature-positive-impact-gucci> (consultato il 21 maggio 2025).

proposition and competitive positioning, even in an apparently antithetical sector such as luxury. In addition, the data collected reinforces the idea that sustainability, when integrated in an authentic and coherent way, does not involve a sacrifice in terms of desirability, but rather expands its symbolic and social scope. In this sense, Gucci has not only improved its environmental performance, but has helped shift the cultural center of gravity of the entire industry, influencing the narratives, expectations and practices of other brands and stakeholders.

In conclusion, the Gucci case shows that the transition to a sustainable and regenerative model is not only necessary, but achievable, even in contexts of high symbolic intensity such as that of luxury fashion. This transformation requires strategic vision, operational coherence, creative competence and communicative courage: qualities that Gucci has been able to progressively develop, thus helping to define a new paradigm for the future of the fashion system, in which beauty, ethics and innovation reinforce each other rather than exclude each other.

### **3.4.2 Future prospects and possible developments**

In the light of the results analyzed and the evidence that emerged during the course of this research, it seems necessary to conclude the work with a reflection oriented towards the future, trying to identify which strategic, cultural and operational trajectories may be outlined in the coming years for Gucci, in the broader framework of a transformation of the fashion system in a sustainable and regenerative sense. If, as demonstrated in previous chapters, Gucci has managed to establish a new paradigm of sustainable luxury by integrating upcycling, traceability, inclusivity and circular design, it now remains to be seen how it will be able to strengthen this position, evolving from an innovative brand to a systemic and cultural reference at an international level.

To address this perspective in a scientific way, we proceeded through the analysis of updated institutional sources, articles in the sustainable fashion sector, academic insights and indirect interviews with key stakeholders, as well as the examination of recent

initiatives launched by Gucci, such as the Circular Hub and experiments in resale and digital fashion.

### ***1. Full traceability as a strategic and cultural standard***

One of the most relevant areas on which Gucci's future developments will focus concerns the complete traceability of the production chain, today considered one of the central challenges for any brand that aspires to true transparency. Traceability is not only a technical function, but a reputational and relational element, which makes it possible to make visible what normally remains invisible: production processes, working conditions, the origin of raw materials, the consumption of resources, logistics and the end-of-life cycle of the product.

The Gucci Circular Hub project, inaugurated in 2023 in Scandicci, Tuscany, represents a first concrete step in this direction. The hub aims to become a center of excellence for the circular economy applied to luxury, promoting the vertical integration of the supply chain, the development of innovative low-impact materials, collaboration between artisans and green startups, and above all the creation of advanced digital systems for end-to-end traceability<sup>188</sup>.

Technologies such as blockchain, smart label, RFID and digital product passport are transforming the interaction between product and consumer, allowing immediate and transparent verification of the entire history of the garment. Gucci, together with the Kering group, has already started experiments in this sense with the TextileGenesis platform and with technology partners such as Eon and Aura Blockchain Consortium<sup>189</sup>. It is a structural transformation, destined to change not only the production system, but also the trust, engagement and responsibility of the end customer.

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<sup>188</sup> WWD (2023), Gucci Opens Circular Hub for Sustainable Fashion, <https://wwd.com/sustainability/environment/gucci-opens-circular-hub-for-sustainable-fashion-1235806849/>

<sup>189</sup> TextileGenesis, Aura Blockchain Consortium, Luxury Blockchain Solutions for Circular Fashion, 2024.

## ***2. The expansion of circular models: resale, rental and second life***

A second strategic perspective concerns the expansion of alternative and circular business models, such as resale, rental and extended life collections. Until a few years ago, these practices seemed incompatible with luxury, as they could be associated with second-hand products, with a social perception that was not always high. However, the current context has radically changed the approach to possession and value: the concept of "experiential luxury" has taken the place of material luxury, and sustainability has become an integral part of product desirability<sup>190</sup>.

Gucci has already taken significant steps in this direction through Vault, a curatorial platform launched in 2021 that, in addition to promoting young designers and artistic collaborations, is responsible for rediscovering, restoring and reinterpreting archival garments. The intention, according to sources within the brand, is to structure an official channel for the certified resale of its products, which can guarantee authenticity, transparency and aesthetic regeneration<sup>191</sup>. At the same time, Gucci has expressed interest in the responsible rental model, already adopted by competitors such as Burberry, Valentino and Stella McCartney. Rental could be particularly suitable for seasonal capsule collections, red carpets, events or artistic collaborations.

According to the Global Circular Fashion Report 2024, second-hand and luxury rental models will generate over \$25 billion by 2030 in the fashion segment alone, with a growth rate higher than traditional retail<sup>192</sup>. For Gucci, investing in this direction would mean not only reducing its environmental impact, but building a community of value based on sharing, history and the co-creation of lasting meanings.

## ***3. Augmented sustainability and the digital passport of luxury***

A third evolutionary direction concerns the convergence between digital, transparency and sustainability. The so-called *digital product passport*, also promoted by the European Union as part of the strategies for the circular economy, represents a key innovation: it is

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<sup>190</sup> KPMG & BoF, State of Fashion Report 2024, <https://bof.com>

<sup>191</sup> Gucci Vault, <https://vault.gucci.com/en/story>

<sup>192</sup> Vestiaire Collective & BCG, Circular Fashion Report 2024, <https://www.vestiairecollective.com>

a unique digital identity associated with each product, containing data on materials, production, traceability, repairability and recycling.

Gucci, in collaboration with the Kering group, is already experimenting with the integration of these systems, which will allow the consumer to access multimedia content, certifications and after-sales services simply by scanning an RFID code or chip. This innovation also offers potential applications in the field of Web3, NFT authentication, digital fashion, and individual carbon footprint traceability. In the future, the garment will no longer be just an aesthetic object, but an active node in a network of meanings, data and relationships<sup>193</sup>.

#### ***4. Social impact, ethical supply chains and regenerative training***

Alongside environmental and digital developments, an area destined to grow concerns **the** social and educational impact of sustainability. Gucci has already launched important projects such as *Gucci Changemakers*, which funds scholarships, mentorships and educational initiatives in underrepresented communities. The Circular Hub itself is also designed as a training center for artisans and operators in the supply chain, with the aim of transmitting technical skills, ethical vision and culture of regeneration.

Investment in human capital, the protection of workers' rights and the empowerment of local communities will become central elements of brand value, as well as mandatory requirements in future European ESG standards. In this sense, Gucci can stand as an integrated model of regenerative luxury, capable of generating measurable impacts not only on an environmental level, but also on a social, cultural and intergenerational level.

In conclusion, Gucci's future prospects point to a clear direction: from sustainable brand to regenerative brand, from symbolic luxury to systemic luxury. The ability to reconcile aesthetics, transparency, innovation and responsibility will be the true hallmark of luxury in the twenty-first century. Gucci, thanks to the solidity of its identity and the anticipatory vision demonstrated in recent years, is now in a unique position to lead this transformation, not only as an economic player, but as a cultural, institutional and creative

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<sup>193</sup> European Commission, Digital Product Passport Guidelines for the Fashion Industry, Brussels, 2025.

agent, promoter of a future in which aesthetic desire and collective ethics are not in opposition, but in generative synergy.

## Final Thoughts

The Gucci case, analyzed in the course of this thesis, offers a concrete and structured demonstration of how sustainability can be not only compatible with luxury, but even constitute a new evolutionary frontier. Far from being a reactive response to external or regulatory pressures, the path taken by the brand is configured as a conscious, systemic and anticipatory strategy, in which sustainable innovation has taken on a central role in redefining the brand's competitiveness, identity and cultural legitimacy.

Through the integration of regenerative practices, transparent production processes, inclusive communication strategies and above all the adoption of upcycling projects with a high symbolic content, Gucci has shown how it is possible to combine aesthetics, ethics and profitability in a long-term vision. The theme of upcycling, in particular, represented a strategic node in the brand's identity transformation: not only as a sustainable practice aimed at reducing waste, but as a cultural, creative and curatorial gesture, capable of reinterpreting the heritage of the maison and enhancing material memory in a contemporary key<sup>194</sup>.

The research conducted has shown that sustainability, if integrated in an authentic and transversal way, is able to strengthen reputational capital, stimulate creative innovation and consolidate the link with a new generation of consumers. The *Vault* platform, the subject of particular attention in this thesis, has played a central role in conveying upcycling as a narrative and symbolic tool, transforming vintage garments into post-modern icons, capable of telling the continuity between past and future within a regenerative and participatory brand language<sup>195</sup>.

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<sup>194</sup> Gucci Vault – Gucci's Vision for Circular Fashion, <https://vault.gucci.com>

<sup>195</sup> Ellen MacArthur Foundation, *Gucci Case Study: Nature-Positive Impact Through Circular Fashion*, <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org>

A fundamental element that emerged during the analysis concerns Gucci's ability to reconvert its symbolic power into a lever for systemic change. It is not, therefore, just a matter of reducing environmental impact or adopting new materials, but of redefining the very meaning of luxury, shifting the focus from material rarity to value exclusivity, from ownership to responsibility, from the aesthetics of excess to conscious beauty. In this context, Gucci has taken on the role of a cultural and institutional player, capable of influencing not only the market, but also the norms, expectations and narratives of the sector<sup>196</sup>.

From a theoretical point of view, the research has made it possible to highlight a transformation of the logic of brand management, which requires an expansion of the classic paradigms of brand equity. Today, a brand's reputation is not only built through product quality or communication consistency, but also – and above all – through its ability to generate shared environmental, social and cultural value. Gucci represents a paradigmatic example of a regenerative postmodern brand, capable of linking heritage, innovation and impact in a single strategic vision<sup>197</sup>.

The role attributed to the consumer within this new model is also particularly relevant. No longer a passive subject or simple buyer, but an active, aware actor, co-creator of value. Upcycling practices, collaborative collections, digital platforms such as *Vault* and educational campaigns such as *Gucci Changemakers show how the relationship between brands and audiences is becoming increasingly* dialogical, inclusive and transformative. This implies a redefinition of the very concept of loyalty, which is now based on shared values, transparency and cultural participation, rather than on the sole aspiration of status.

Looking ahead, the Gucci case also offers important insights for academic and political reflection on the future of the fashion system. It shows that sustainability can be not only a competitive advantage, but a form of cultural leadership. In a context marked by ecological crises, social tensions and technological transformations, brands that will be able to integrate ethical coherence, narrative capacity and systemic vision will be those destined to occupy central positions on the global scene. Gucci, in this sense, has already

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<sup>196</sup> Interbrand, *Best Global Brands 2024*, <https://interbrand.com>

<sup>197</sup> Holt, D. B. (2004). *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding*. Boston: Harvard Business Press.

positioned itself as an operational and theoretical model, capable of showing that change is not only possible, but desirable, achievable and culturally powerful.

In conclusion, this thesis sought to demonstrate, through a critical and multidimensional analysis, that sustainability in luxury no longer represents a contradiction, but a viable and desirable horizon, and that Gucci is one of the most advanced manifestations of it. The brand has not simply adapted its offering, but has redefined its role in the world, contributing to the construction of a fairer, more conscious and regenerative fashion ecosystem. A luxury that is no longer synonymous with exclusion, but with shared responsibility, transformative innovation, sustainable beauty and respect for the memory of the product. In this vision, upcycling emerges as a symbol of a fashion that does not destroy to create, but reactivates, stitches and reinvents.



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