

HOW GUCCI HAS SOLIDIFIED ITS CORPORATE BRAND STRATEGY THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA—A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

With technology evolving every day, it is no wonder that new ways of communication emerge sooner than one can imagine. The latest and most talked-about form of two-way communication is social media. By enabling brands to communicate with their customers, social media has surpassed the traditional forms of communication brands used to favour, such as print media. Corporate branding helps companies to stand out from their competition by distinguishing what is unique about them, and social media is an invaluable asset in achieving a coherent corporate brand. With constant innovation, brands are able to integrate social media into their marketing strategies and enable consumers to freely express their opinions and to get in touch with the brand, building positive associations around the brand. This article will analyse Gucci's corporate brand identity and its use of social media as a tool in communicating this identity to its consumers through a literature review followed by a case study, including any recommendations for the brand.

Keywords: Gucci, social media, corporate branding, brand identity

1. Introduction

Social media has quickly become an obsession across the globe. Hundreds of thousands of people check their phone the first thing in the morning. Brands all around the world have social media platforms they use actively in order to promote their products. However, the way in which they do so is extremely crucial. An Instagram feed that does not reflect who the brand is and what kind of an audience they are targeting will result in a colossal discrepancy between the audience they will generate on social media and the kind of audience they are targeting and want to sell their products to, which will engender lower sales since their following will not be interested in actually purchasing any of the products.

Whilst being a very useful tool for generating content to engage with a target audience, social media marketing can prove difficult when trying to uphold the corporate brand identity. However, a brand which has been widely successful in creating a brand image and echoing it on its social media channels is the Italian luxury super brand, Gucci. Gucci has been a key player in fashion lately, and has rebranded its corporate identity to reflect that of a younger generation with a passion for the finer things in life. Gucci's social media accounts also befittingly reproduce that image to create a stronger brand and this has resulted in Gucci becoming a

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household name with the younger generation very quickly. This essay will explore Gucci's corporate brand identity and its social media marketing strategy with relation to relevant literature and will conclude by setting forth observations and possible recommendations for the fashion house.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Corporate Branding

Corporate branding can be utilised as an effective way to communicate an overall strategy and identity to key stakeholders (Balmer and Gray, 2003). As per the means-end theory, strong corporate branding serves to distinguish a company from its main competitors and highlights what is unique to the brand's value proposition in order to make it the more favourable choice (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001). Therefore, corporate branding pairs a firm's internal and external capabilities in the path to presenting a unified image of a business identity. A corporate identity can be quite emotional in the sense that the emotions a brand hopes to elicit in its target audience are disseminated across various channels with the help of advertising as well as company employees (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001). Corporate branding can be described as "a vortex that synthesises myriad corporate level perspectives, and concepts, that have emerged from the 1950s onwards" (Balmer and Greyser, 2006). Brands have certain characters that distinguish them from competitors, a group culture upheld between the employees of the brand which come from the brand's core values, a corporate communications mix which determines how the brand is to be communicated to all the stakeholders, an understanding of what the brand means to those key stakeholders, the recognition that the brand's success depends on the satisfaction of the stakeholders, and a covenant where the customers and stakeholders are bound by their loyalty to the brand, which together form the corporate marketing mix (Balmer and Greyser, 2006).

In order to maintain the corporate brand image, everybody affiliated with the organisation must act in keeping with the "desired brand identity" (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001, p. 3). "The corporate brand is intangible, but receives degrees of tangibility through the messages that a brand puts out and the relationships that it develops with a variety of stakeholders. Secondly, the corporate brand has a high degree of complexity, partly because of these various relationships and messages" (Burt and Sparks, 2002, p. 196). The corporate brand comes to be through this combination of the goals for the desired state of the company with the brand values and image of the company, and must be maintained through all personnel and stakeholders in order to be effective. In a world where brands are becoming superpowers in the

market, retailers have turned to corporate branding in order to solidify what their brand stands for and how it is different from the abundance other brands in the market. However, this does come as a challenge in an industry where the product itself is just as important as the brand, if not more. The encounters customers have when they enter into retail stores shape their views of the brand personalities, and therefore their ideas for the brand identity (Burt and Sparks, 2002).

Retailing is the decisive medium between the creation and utilisation stages of a product, and is therefore constantly involved with interceding in the relationship between the brand and the consumers (Burt and Sparks, 2002). Retailing combines the product, consumers and employees in one medium. Hence, corporate branding and the lining up of core company values and perception with the desired state of the brand becomes even more crucial and harder to achieve in an environment with so many variables. Brands have started to add value to their products in the retail sector to “align strategic vision with the internal culture and external image” (Burt and Sparks, 2002, p. 199). Each company has a desired state, a place in the industry ladder where they would ideally like to be, and presenting customers with memorable experiences and an overall company culture helps them get one step closer to those goals. Corporate branding, in this sense, helps to produce a profound connection between the consumers and the brand.

2.2. Social Media

Traditional marketing tools have given their place to social media in the recent years. By utilising new and innovative technologies, businesses are able to develop a two-way relationship with their customers. Companies adopt a social media strategy to communicate their secure presence and contemporary nature (Saravanakumar and SuganthaLakshmi, 2012). Through social media, brands can engage with their consumers and target audience, and the brand’s consumers can write back, which was not possible until social media (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). This makes social media a hybrid of both classic and contemporary marketing techniques. “Contemporary marketers cannot ignore the phenomenon of social media because it has rapidly become the de facto modus operandi for consumers who are disseminating information on products and services” (Mangold and Faulds, 2009, p. 359). Through social media, companies are able to not only engage with their consumers in a new way in relation to the classic push marketing strategies, but they are also able to create and strengthen the corporate brand image and solidify the brand’s position in the market (Saravanakumar and SuganthaLakshmi, 2012). With the boom of smart phone technology, consumers take social media everywhere they go. With constant access to their favourite brands, and any information

they need being readily available, consumers turn to social media for information on products and services (Mangold and Faulds, 2009).

Social media is an environment for dialogue, and has increased the frequency of like-minded individuals networking and sharing ideas, which brands can utilise for their benefit. By making information about their products readily available online, offering exclusive benefits, and creating products that have a clear competitive advantage and emulate the personal goals and aspirations of the consumers regarding their social status, brands can stir the conversation in a direction which will benefit them by creating positive word of mouth on social media (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Word of mouth “is defined as the act of exchanging marketing information among consumers, and plays an essential role in consumer attitudes and behaviour towards products and services” (Chu and Kim, 2011, p. 48). Word of mouth about a product or service influences the decision-making process for a commodity substantially (Virvilaite et al., 2015). With social media becoming such a prominent part of everyday life, a positive word of mouth about a brand on social media is essential for customer acquisition and retention (Trusov et al., 2009). Word of mouth is generally built by consumers who have used the product or the brand and have shared their experiences online, within their social media platforms. For this reason, other consumers view this user generated aspect more trustworthy than a million-dollar advertising campaign done and controlled by the brand (Chu and Kim, 2011).

Social media is a fitting platform for such user generated content since consumers are able to share their experiences regarding the brand or a specific product. Tapping into this, brands have created their own social media profiles, where consumers ‘following’ or ‘liking’ a brand’s profile or posts will indicate their inclination towards that brand to their own ‘followers’, contributing to generate a positive word of mouth for the brand (Chu and Kim, 2011). “As brands gain exclusive, positive, and prominent meaning in the minds of a large number of consumers, they become irresistible and irreplaceable, and win the loyalty of the consumers. Brand loyalty, in return, brings sales revenues, market share, profitability to the firms, and help them grow or at least maintain themselves in the marketplace” (Erdogmus and Cicek, 2012, p. 1354). Therefore, social media marketing proves to be an essential tool for the brand. As brand loyalty develops for a brand through positive word of mouth on social media, consumers will feel the need to engage with the brand more on social media by ‘liking’ its posts and commenting on them since the brand will have become an essential part of their self-concepts. The fact that the Internet connects consumers worldwide will also help the brand in expanding to other parts of the world. With consumers participating in the online community,

they will be disseminating the values of the brand to new audiences, which also help to formulate a positive word of mouth and boost brand loyalty (Erdogmus and Cicek, 2012). Engaging in this way serves to unite consumers and deepen their loyalty to the brand while awakening a sense of belonging with the brand and what the brand stands for, fulfilling their social aspirations.

By creating this online community of consumers, a brand can benefit from maximised reach on its social media channels, as the online ‘friends’ of these consumers will see their interactions with the brand’s social media profile, as well as creating loyal consumers with high levels of purchase intention (Lipsman et al., 2012). Hence, brands carefully use social media to help build favourable consumer experiences and solidify their market position in relation to that of their competitors, along with applying their platform to influence consumers for larger reach (Lipsman et al., 2012). With the advancement of technology and the Internet, companies, as well as consumers, can benefit from the world of social media in an increasingly interconnected world, and appropriate social media for their own benefit by integrating it into their marketing strategy as a hybrid between classic and contemporary technique. By allowing users to express their opinions about brands and products and opening the door to two-way communication between the brand and the consumer, social media helps with broadcasting favourable connotations about the brand to consumers around the globe.

3. Case Study—Gucci

Gucci was founded by Guccio Gucci in 1921 in Florence, Italy and later developed to become one of the world’s largest fashion houses (DeFanti et al., 2013). Gucci is a prominent luxury goods brand with a specialty in leather goods and a strong heritage. Not very long after it was found, Gucci had grown to be well-known and well-established luxury brand and was the epitome of prestige (Jackson and Haid, 2002). The brand was distinctly Italian and flaunted its Italian heritage; a light-hearted, provocative and bubbly lifestyle in lieu with the allure and elegance of “*la dolce vita*” (DeFanti et al., 2013, p. 15). Gucci was also heavily associated with celebrities who were devotees such as Grace Kelly, Jackie Kennedy Onassis, and Grace Kelly’s granddaughter, Charlotte Casiraghi, who also appeared in various Gucci campaigns (DeFanti et al., 2013). In recent years, with the appointment of Alessandro Michele as the creative director, Gucci has emphasised its heritage in a modern fashion, and has combined this with an outstanding corporate and social media strategy to generate more sales.

In an increasingly global and connected world, possession of some brands elicit a certain response and help determine social status as well as being a marker for a refined sense of

style (Nueno and Quelch, 1998). Luxury items are commonly viewed as indulgent products which are meant to be enjoyed by an elite market, and are known to offer superior quality. A luxury piece can be defined as a masterpiece intended for the consumption of a selected few (Nueno and Quelch, 1998). A reason why such luxury items are preferred by consumers is their aspiration to be like the archetypal purchaser of the brand (Han et al., 2010). Such luxury products often hold a symbolic value for the consumers, since others tend to assume their social status on account of their belongings and those assumptions are believed to indicate their achievements in life (Han et al., 2010). Therefore, such items can easily be priced higher since they are deemed as luxury goods which the affluent and successful few can afford.

With creative director Alessandro Michele's new take on the brand, Gucci has branded itself to be a luxury brand which emphasises current trends, like street style. This corporate branding strategy comes to light through Gucci's social media channels. One look at its social platforms reveals Gucci's shift towards being a younger brand with an emphasis on dishevelled beauty, a modern take on *la dolce vita*. Gucci has reclaimed its Italian heritage with designs that

reflect the Italian lifestyle, and its social media platforms have kept up as well (Nueno and Quelch, 1998). Gucci's Instagram feed looks less structured compared to other luxury retailers,

as seen in Figures 1 and 2, which fall in line with Gucci's corporate branding strategy with a focus on creating a brand that is popular with the millennial generation and embraces the

streetwear style which has become hugely popular.

Figure 3 Source: <https://www.facebook.com/GUCCI/>

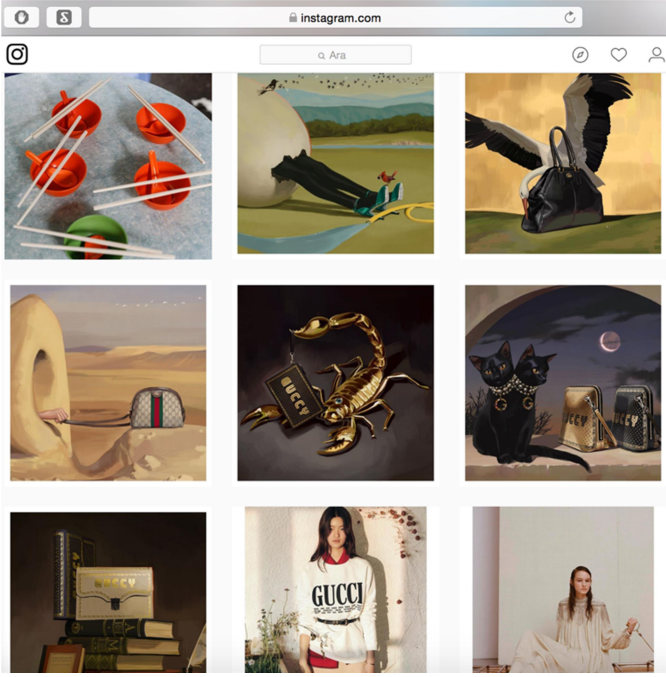


Figure 1

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/gucci/>

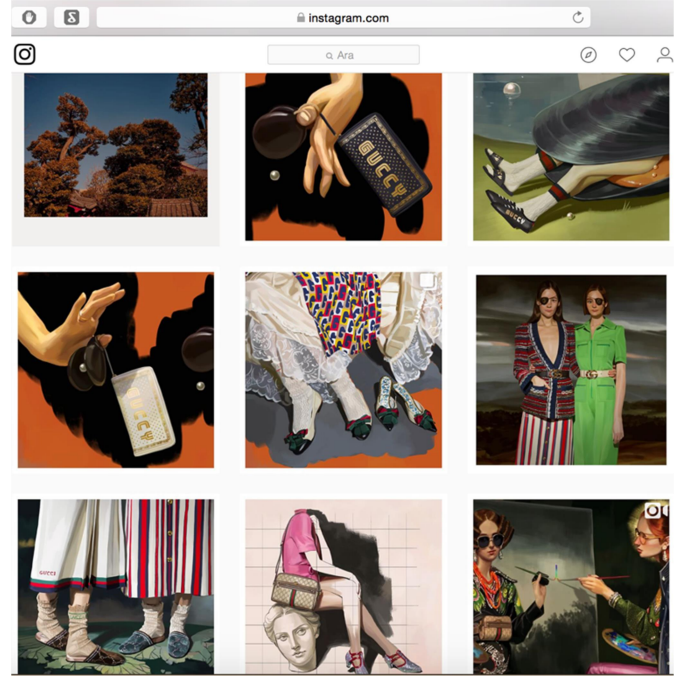
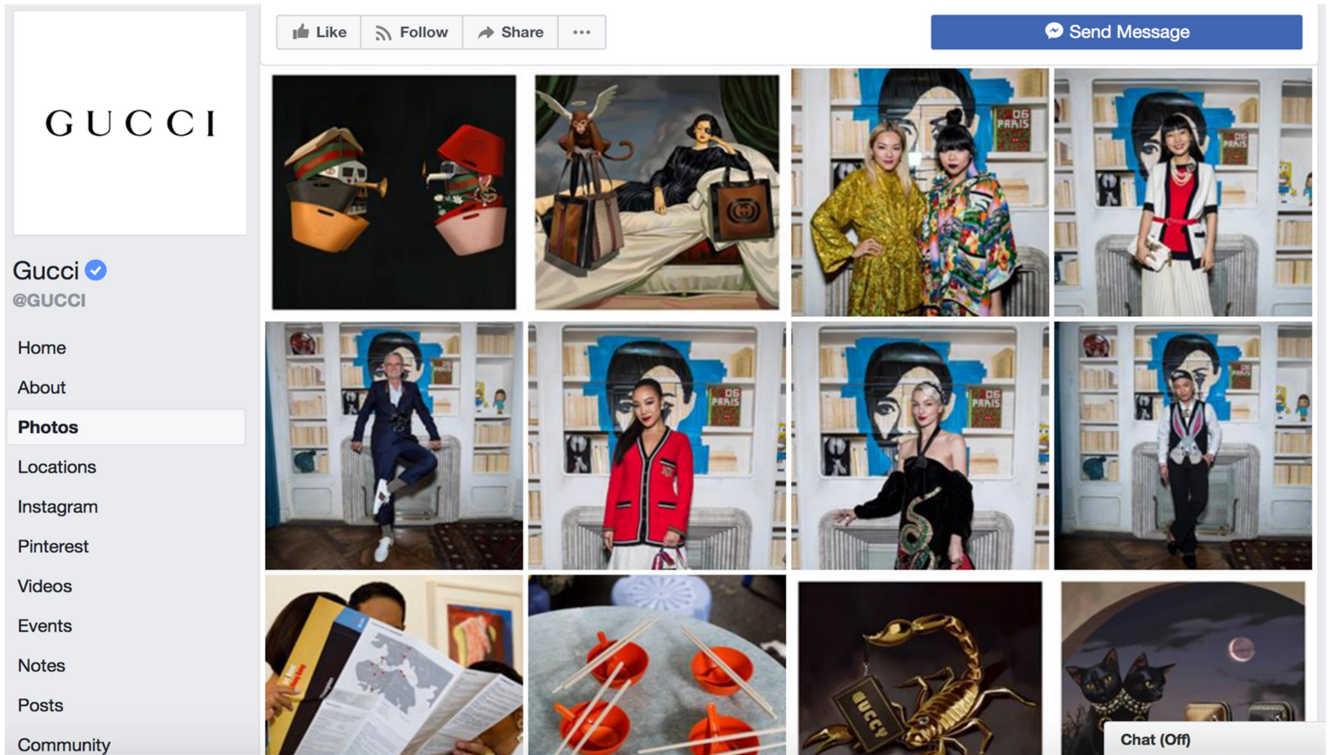


Figure 2



The way Gucci presents its products on Instagram very closely resembles digital illustrations rather than photographs. By altering images to resemble graffiti-like pictures, Gucci again highlights its corporate branding strategy and its unique value proposition (Nueno and Quelch, 1998). On its Facebook page, Gucci has followed the same look as its Instagram, since corporate branding suggests that each platform, including social media, retail spaces and employees, should be uniform in communicating the brand image (Balmer and Gray, 2003). The photos posted are mainly replicated from Instagram, however some photo-shoots are posted in greater detail on Facebook, as seen in Figure 3. Gucci also incorporates its retail spaces into its social media platforms to reiterate what its corporate brand is, as seen in Figure 4. On Gucci's YouTube channel, consumers are able to find its Fashion Shows for recent seasons as well as its various campaigns, including social responsibility campaigns (Figure 5). However, the way that the video thumbnails are created as well as how the videos are shot employ techniques to emphasise Gucci's 'swag' and cool attitude, which have been embraced as the brand identity.

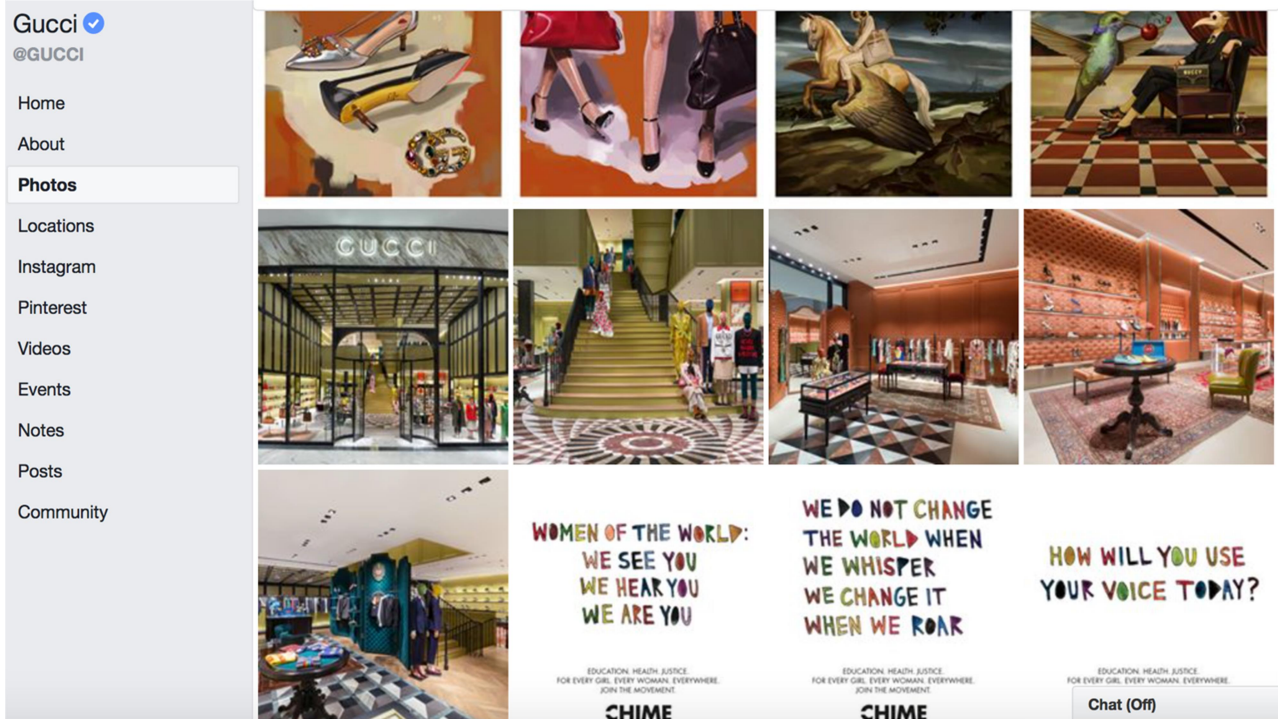


Figure 4 Source: <https://www.facebook.com/GUCCI/>

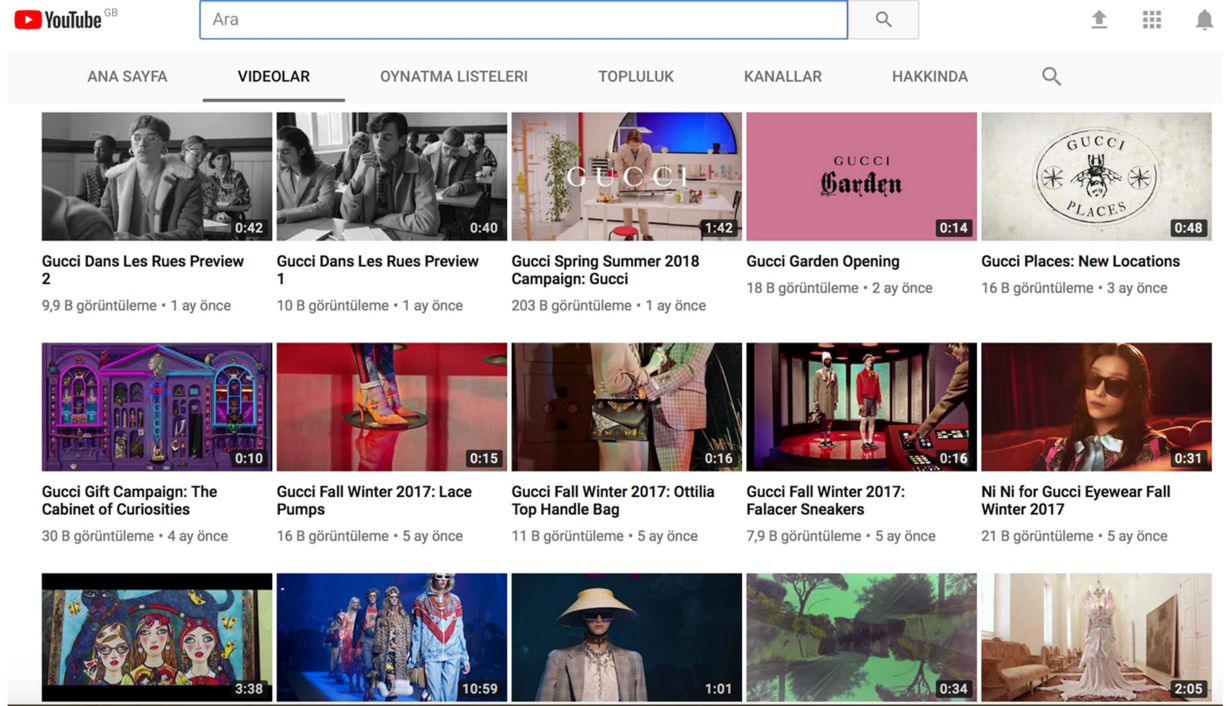


Figure 5 Source: <https://www.youtube.com/gucci>

Gucci's social media channels reflect its brand identity, which is one that screams 'cool' and empowers its consumers to be who they are. Gucci's new creations under creative director Alessandro Michele are known to be daring and pushing the limits, which is something its social media accounts have closely followed as a sentiment. Rather than presenting its collections and products on pretty models much like other fashion houses, Gucci has chosen to dare to be different and showcases them on its social media accounts as parts of illustrations that look like the surrealist paintings of Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico (Figure 6), further highlighting Gucci's brand identity and how it puts a modern twist on the classic Italian way of life. Gucci has been associated with celebrities and social media influencers who have been deemed 'cool' and 'effortless', but have also been widely successful, such as singer Harry Styles (Figure 7), and blogger Negin Mirsalehi (Figure 8). Shifting from Grace Kelly and Charlotte Casiraghi as muses to rock stars and bloggers has given Gucci the edge it needed, and having a vast number of followers on its social media platforms (22,6 million on Instagram, 17 million on Facebook, 212 thousand on YouTube) further enables the brand to solidify its corporate brand strategy. Through employing an effective social media strategy in accordance with its approach to corporate branding, Gucci is able to strengthen its market position by way

of emotional appeals (Nueno and Quelch, 1998). Consumers who wish to live the Gucci way and to look effortlessly cool and turn heads wherever they go will follow Gucci on social media and by 'liking' its posts, they reiterate their love for the brand, also generating brand loyalty.



Figure 6 Source: <http://www.barcelona-metropolitan.com/whats-on/previews-and-reviews/giorgio-de-chirico/>



Figure 7 Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/GUCCI/photos/a.81172311012.111384.44596321012/10155992901891013/?type=3&the>



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Figure 8 Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BgZT6DjBokS/?taken-by=negin_mirsalehi

4. Conclusion

Gucci has reinvented its brand identity, and has employed a carefully curated corporate branding strategy to emphasise this identity to its consumers. With the help of social media and an increasingly interconnected world, Gucci has been able to better communicate this newly found brand identity to the world. Gucci's corporate branding strategy comes to life when one takes a look through its social media channels, where it is immensely highlighted what Gucci is as a brand, and what kind of a personality it has. Its social media accounts highlight the corporate brand strategy of Gucci, which is to be fearlessly fashionable and have an element of 'cool' and 'swagger' to speak to the younger, technology-savvy consumer. Despite the kinds of celebrities it has been associated with in the past, Gucci has swayed away from being a 'classic' brand and has embraced a more contemporary attitude towards fashion and as its corporate brand identity. Gucci's brand identity still takes from its heritage of being an Italian luxury goods brand, however Alessandro Michele has customised it in a way that is contemporary and fashion-forward. Nowadays, Gucci symbolises a brand that sets trends rather than following them, and one look through its social media platforms is able to confirm this.

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