

## Social Media as A Communication Channel of Luxury Brands CSR Policy

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### Abstract

One of the aspects of activities of contemporary companies, which importance for a positive image is constantly growing, is CSR. This area is still little known in the context of luxury brands. Undeniably, the participants of the luxury goods market have enormous potential to effectively implement the idea of sustainable development. However, it should be considered whether activities in this field are desirable from the point of view of buyers of luxury products and whether informing about them via social media constitutes an attractive content for its users.

The aim of the article is to analyze the activities carried out by the luxury brand, Gucci, which is the most popular in social media in recent years, in the field of sharing information about the implemented CSR policy. The necessity to implement the idea of sustainable development into companies' strategies is beyond any doubt. However, it should be assessed to what extent the content related to this type of activity is desirable from the point of view of social media users and whether and what reaction it evokes. This article will analyze the Gucci brand profiles in social media in terms of informing users about CSR policy activities carried out by the company, as well as assessing users' reactions to brand posts.

**Keywords:** CSR, luxury brand, sustainable development, social media

### Introduction

The ways of information exchange and communication between people have changed dramatically over the last years (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010, pp. 311-320). Services like Facebook, Instagram and Youtube have become an important communication channel also in business (Kaplan, Haenlein 2010, pp. 59-68). So far, the marketing activities of companies in traditional media were of a one-way nature, consumers were only passive recipients (Libai et al. 2010, pp. 15-31). Contemporary consumers co-create and integrate the marketing activities of companies in social media, in cooperation with brands they take an active part in the company's communication with the environment (Deighton, Kornfeld 2010, pp. 4-10; Sashi 2012, pp. 267-82).

The company's presence in social media is an absolute necessity today, but it is not only a great opportunity, but also generates a number of threats (Coulter 2012; Del Guidice, Della Peruta 2013). A low level of control over social media content can pose a threat to the brand image (Gensler et al. 2013, p. 243). For many years this aspect has been a barrier to the distanced attitude of luxury brands to their presence in social media. It raised serious fears of losing a very specific

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image of a luxury brand, a specific positioning strategy based on exclusivity, heritage, uniqueness and a close relationship with the highest social class (Vigneron, Johnson 2004, pp. 486).

The "democratic" nature of social media, combined with the unlimited interactivity of their users, posed a threat of losing luxury brands elitism, and consequently significantly delayed their emergence in social media (Chevalier, Gutsatz 2012; Dauriz et al. 2014, pp. 26-31). However, it should be noted that the life cycle of luxury products has shortened in recent years. The share of young buyers for whom social media is an extremely important aspect of life has also increased among customers of luxury products, which in turn forced luxury brands to implement innovative strategies, including presence in social media (Ko et al. 2016, p. 5749).

The research conducted so far clearly proves that the presence of luxury brands in social media brings many positive results. It increases trust in the brand and strengthens relationships with customers, giving them an almost intimate character (Kim, Ko 2012, pp. 1480-1486) It also strengthens consumers engagement (Ghaoui 2014, p. 213).

CSR, despite its voluntary nature, becomes a necessity for brands that want to build and maintain their positive image. This area is still little known in the context of luxury brands. Undeniably, the participants of the luxury goods market have great potential to effectively implement the idea of sustainable development (Dryl 2018, p. 63). However, it should be considered whether activities in this field are desirable from the point of view of buyers of luxury products and whether informations about them posted in social media are an attractive content for its users.

The aim of the article is to analyze the activities carried out by the luxury brand, Gucci, which is the most popular in social media in recent years, in the field of sharing information about the implemented CSR policy. The necessity to implement the idea of sustainable development into companies' strategies is beyond any doubt. However, it should be assessed to what extent the content related to this type of activity is desirable from the point of view of social media users and whether and what reaction it evokes. This article will analyze the Gucci brand profiles in social media in terms of informing users about CSR policy activities carried out by the company, as well as assessing users' reactions to brand posts.

The article consists of four chapters, an introduction and conclusions. The first chapter presents the concepts of CSR and sustainable development and the relationships between them. In the further part of the considerations, it was indicated how social media are used in the marketing activities of luxury brands, as well as the brands that are most active in social media. For many years, Gucci has been ranked first in the rankings of the most popular brands among social media users. Therefore, the last chapter of the article is devoted to the activities of the Gucci brand in social media regarding the brand's CSR policy. Three posts posted by Gucci on the brand's profiles on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter were analyzed. These were posts about socially responsible initiatives that the brand carried out during the analyzes prepared for the purpose of this article.

## **CSR and sustainable development - the essence of concepts and relations between them**

The concepts of sustainable development and corporate social responsibility have become extremely popular in recent years. This is due not only to the multiplication of social problems, environmental degradation, respect for workers' rights, etc., but also to the expectations of consumers, who make their purchasing choices more and more consciously. The obligation to implement the guidelines of the sustainable development policy lies not only with institutions, state governments or organizations whose domain of operation is a specific line of the philosophy of sustainable development, but also broadly understood business, the impact of which both on the environment and society is beyond doubt. This fact is also emphasized in many definitions of the concept of sustainable development. They emphasize that sustainability is to apply to both social and economic aspects of life, and its achievement requires the integration of political, economic and social activities, while maintaining the natural balance and durability of basic natural processes. The aim of the sustainable development policy is to guarantee the possibility of meeting the basic needs of both the present and future generations.

The place of activities that fit into the philosophy of sustainable development in the overall corporate strategy is however not clear. The approach most often presented in the literature is the assumption that the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility is the business response to the challenges of sustainable development.

Undeniably, corporate social responsibility is an interdisciplinary concept (Rok 2008, p. 158). CSR in the management context is defined as a philosophy of action based on the principles of respecting the interests of all entities operating in the company's environment (Rudnicka 2012, p. 33). There can be found four dominant trends in the literature, indicating the relationship between CSR and sustainable development, namely:

- CSR as the implementation of the concept of sustainable development at the enterprise level (Dyllick, Hockerts 2002, pp. 130-141; Wilkinson et al. 2001, pp. 1492-1592);

- CSR as the implementation of the concept of sustainable development addressed to the company's stakeholders (Zambon, Del Bello 2005, pp. 130-141; Bazin, Ballet 2004, pp. 59-75; Maignan, Ferrell 2004, pp. 3-19);
- CSR as a social dimension of sustainable development (Morimoto et al. 2005, pp. 315-325; Gauthier 2005, pp. 199-206; Hopkins 2005, pp. 213-231);
- CSR as a contribution to sustainable development (ISO 26000; Gryga 2016, pp. 229-238);
- CSR and sustainable development as the same concepts (Laszlo 2008, p.34).

## **The use of social media in the luxury goods market**

A luxury brand is defined through the prism of such features as exclusivity, prestige, high price (Berthon et al. 2008, pp. 6-30; Miller, Mills 2012, pp. 1471-79), a strong image combined with specific associations and emotions (Tynan et al. 2010, pp. 1156-63). The identity of a luxury brand is created on the basis of such values as:

- authenticity, heritage, pedigree,
- aesthetic consistency,
- highest quality,
- unique aesthetic symbolism,
- hedonistic and emotional nature of promotion (Beverland 2004, pp. 446-66; Okonkwo 2009, pp. 302-10).

Such a demanding and clearly defined brand image requires constant control. Until recently, therefore, it was considered to be in conflict with the idea of unlimited communication with users, which is the essence of marketing activities carried out in social media.

The development and growth of popularity of social media has changed the way luxury brands create relationships and interact with their users. The legitimacy of using mass media, including social media, in the communication of luxury brands with consumers was highly controversial. The disputable compatibility of these two worlds resulted from the assumed contradiction between the mass nature of social media and the natural need to create an aura of uniqueness, exclusivity and even a personal relationship with selected buyers around luxury brands (Heine, Berghaus 2014, p. 223-234; Okonkwo 2010, pp. 302-10; Quach, Thachon 2017, pp. 163-72). However, luxury brands could not remain indifferent to the power of social media and for over a decade they have clearly marked their presence in them, creating strong ties with their users (Koivisto, Mattila 2018). The use of social media and the way of engaging their users in relations with a luxury brand is an increasingly popular area of interest among both practitioners and researchers of this phenomenon (Kunz et al. 2017, pp. 161-71).

The considerations in this area so far indicate five main areas of marketing activities carried out by luxury brands in social media, namely:

- entertainment - providing fun and interesting content;
- interaction - the brand provides the possibility of sharing and exchanging information between users;
- customization - providing personalized information about the brand to a strictly defined group of users;
- following the fashion - disseminating actual, in compliance with trends information about the brand;
- word of mouth marketing - stimulating the willingness of users to share information about the brand with other users of social media (Kim, Ko 2012, pp. 1480-86).

Entertainment strongly motivates users to create and share content on social media (Phelps et al. 2004, pp. 333-48), as well as to be a member of the brand community (Gummerus et al. 2012, pp. 857-77). In addition, information that is entertaining, exciting, amusing, and interesting is the widely virally shared content (Dobele et al. 2007, pp. 291-304).

The participatory nature of social media enables users to collaborate and share information, including content, videos and photos (Hennig-Thurau 2007, pp. 311-30). In this context, the interactivity of posts posted by brands is of particular importance. It induces users to react, such as likes, comments, and sharing content (De Vries et al. 2012, pp. 83-91).

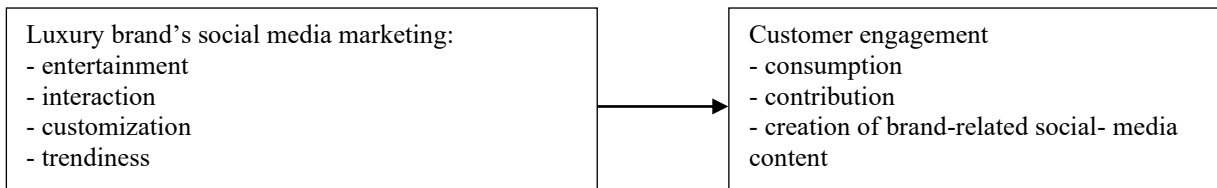
Customization has its source in the possibility of providing personalized information to a selected group of recipients via social media. Personalization and customization allows to create strong ties with customers and increase their commitment. However, it should be noted that actions based on individualized communication with each user and quick response to comments posted by recipients on the brand profile are particularly effective in this respect (Hewett et al. 2016, pp 1-24).

Social media has become an important source of information about the brand. Customers expect actual information from companies, posted with the appropriate frequency. Increasingly, when making purchasing decisions, they are guided by the

knowledge gained from social media (Vollmer, Precourt 2008), while considering them to be a more reliable source of information than traditional forms of marketing communication, such as advertising (Foux 2006, pp. 38-9).

The last dimension of the activities of luxury brands in social media is word of mouth marketing. Unlike the above-mentioned four types of activities, the implementation of which is on the side of the brand, WOM is a behavioral manifestation of customer involvement, which is a reaction to the company's activities in social media (Kunz 2017, pp. 161-71). Customer engagement behavior has been divided into three categories, namely consumption, contribution, and creation.

The considerations presented in the literature on the above-described dimensions so far have allowed for the creation of a holistic model that categorizes the activities undertaken by luxury brands in social media into those that create the company's commitment and customer engagement (Figure 1).



**Fig 1. The impact of a luxury brand's activities in social media on consumer engagement**

Source: L. Xia, S. Hyunju, *Examining the impact of luxury brand's social media marketing on customer engagement : Using big data analytics and natural language processing*, *Journal of Business Research*, May 2019, s. 5-6.

### The most popular luxury brands in social media in 2021

According to the Luxe Digital Report, the most popular luxury brand on social media in 2021 was Gucci. The ranking takes into account the world's largest brands in the luxury goods industry based on their consolidated sales, according to the Deloitte Report, and data compiled on the basis of the Forbes ranking of the 100 most valuable brands. The starting point for the analyzes is the real interest of users in searching for the names of each of the luxury brands included in the above-mentioned reports. Gucci turned out to be the dominant brand in this category. Its share in the number of searches for a brand name on Google, among the most frequently searched 15 brands included in the analysis, was 15,2% (Table 1).

**Table 1: The most popular luxury brands in social media in 2021**

	Brand	Share of Serach Interest	Website Traffic	Social Media Audience	Social Media Engagement
1	<u>Gucci</u>	15,2%	9,200,000	70,500,000	14,2%
2	<u>Chanel</u>	11.6%	8,600,000	81,400,000	8,6%
3	<u>Hermès</u>	10,27%	4,400,000	14,300,000	3,1%
4	Dior	10,0%	8,600,000	62,300,000	21,2%
5	Louis Vuitton	9,7%	13,500,000	75,600,000	14,5%
6	Rolex	6,7%	4,300,000	20,400,000	5,0%
7	Tiffany	6,2%	3,500,000	48,306,113	8,8%
8	Prada	4,7%	3,200,000	24,000,000	7,5%
9	Versace	4,6%	2,600,000	34,500,000	25,8%
10	Armani	4,3%	2,000,000	30,500,000	5,4%
11	Valentino	4,0%	923,000	19,800,000	10,5%

12	<u>Balenciaga</u>	3,7%	1,600,000	14,500,000	3,4%
13	<u>Cartier</u>	3,4%	1,300,000	15,900,000	3,0%
14	<u>Burberry</u>	3,4%	3,000,000	44,200,000	3,1%
15	<u>Omega</u>	2,4%	1,500,000	5,100,000	4,4%

Source: <https://luxedigital/business/digital-luxury-ranking/most-popular-luxury-brands/>

In the further part of the analysis presented in Luxe Digital Report, SimilarWeb and Rival IQ were used to measure traffic on brand websites, the number of users, observing the brand in social media and their engagement. The traffic on the brand's website was measured in the first half of 2021. The number of brand followers includes the number of brand fans on Facebook, brand followers on Instagram, Twitter and YouTube and Google Plus subscribers. User engagement was measured taking into account the number of comments, likes and shares.

### **Communication of Gucci's CSR policy in social media**

The Gucci runs the website [equilibrium.gucci.com](http://equilibrium.gucci.com), dedicated to CSR and sustainable development activities. On the website one can read: „We manage and operationalise sustainability across all levels of our business. We implement comprehensive policies and align with the key international standards, guidelines and procedures.” In addition to the currently implemented initiatives, the website also includes documents on the brand's CSR policy, the Code of Ethics, and the "Modern Slavery Statement" (a document on respect for employee rights in the Gucci supply chain and in its general business activities).

Information about initiatives is also posted on the brand's profiles on social media, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The brand runs a YouTube channel, but does not publish here information about its CSR activities.

The following posts will be analyzed further: Gucci Fur Free, Gucci Changemakers and Gucci Carbon Neutral, as well as users' reactions to them.

On the Gucci brand profile on Facebook on October 12, 2017, there was an entry informing that the company joined the Fur Free Alliance, LAV Onlus and Humane Society and decided to stop using natural fur in the production of clothes. The decision concerned all clothing collections from the 2018 summer collection, and one of the collections that appeared on the market in 2017.

The post was shared 1,860 times. It obtained 949 comments and 6,400 likes. A post with the same content was also posted on the brand's profile on Instagram, where it received a much more intense reaction from users than on Facebook. It obtained 177,457 likes and was commented 10,450 times.

Another initiative in line with Gucci's CSR strategy is Gucci Changemakers, a global program that supports industrial change aimed at fostering unity through social action, including a long-term plan to support diversity and combat social exclusion. The program was initiated in 2018. The brand has allocated \$ 5 million to finance its initiatives, as well as \$ 1.5 million for a scholarship fund. Scholarships are awarded to undergraduate students who are interested in fashion, but whose financial resources do not allow them to study in this field. Moreover, as part of the program, an employee volunteering initiative is implemented, aimed at activities for the benefit of the community and the fashion industry.

The post informing about the Gucci Changemakers initiative appeared on the brand's Facebook profile on March 18, 2019. This information has been commented only 22 times, has received 592 likes and has been shared only 29 times. The post on Instagram enjoyed a bit more popularity. Gained 93,100 likes and was commented 827 times. The information posted by the brand on Twitter was met with the slightest response. Only three users commented it, 275 liked it, and 43 shared it. The reaction of users following the Gucci brand profile on social media to the announcement of the Gucci Changemakers initiative was much less popular than in the case of Gucci Fur Free.

Another Corporate Social Responsibility initiative taken by the Gucci is Gucci Carbon Neutral. The program aims to reduce the environmental impact and accelerate positive changes in the field of greenhouse gas emissions. The initiative concerns both the activities undertaken by the brand and the participants of the entire supply chain. It is implemented

through four REDD + 1 projects that support the protection of forests around the world. As declared in the Initiative Notice, Gucci's supply chain has become carbon neutral as a result of its activities.

Information about the start of the implementation of the Gucci Carbon Neutral program was posted on social media on September 12, 2019. The post with this information on Facebook was commented 50 times, obtained 1,400 likes and 63 shares. The reaction of Instagram users included 960 comments and 101 614 likes. Users who follow the brand on Twitter showed the least involvement. Only 8 people commented on the information about the initiative, 384 people liked it, and 60 people shared it (Table 3).

**Table 3: User reactions to Gucci posts about CSR initiatives**

<b>Initiative</b>	<b>Comments</b>	<b>Likes</b>	<b>Shares</b>
Gucci Fur Free (12.10.2017)	Facebook		
	949	6 400	1 860
	Instagram		
	10 450	177 457	-
	Twitter		
	207	4 900	2 000
Gucci Changemakers (18.03.2019)	Facebook		
	22	592	29
	Instagram		
	827	93 100	-
	Twitter		
	3	275	43
Gucci Carbon Neutral (12.09.2019)	Facebook		
	50	1 400	63
	Instagram		
	960	101 614	-
	Twitter		
	8	384	60

Source: own work

Among the analyzed programs, the Gucci Fur Free initiative enjoyed the greatest interest of social media users. Like the Gucci Carbon Neutral program, it is part of the area of Corporate Social Responsibility, which aims to protect natural resources. However, user engagement is definitely higher with Gucci Fur Free. This is especially true of the number of likes on Instagram posts (177 457 Gucci Fur Free, 101 614 Gucci Carbon Neutral), as well as the reactions of Twitter users. Gucci Fur Free's Twitter post had 4,900 likes, while only 384 people liked the Gucci Fur Free post on greenhouse gas emissions. However, the greatest distance between the analyzed initiatives can be noticed in the case of the number of shares on Twitter. The Gucci Fur Free post has been shared 2,000 times, while Carbon Neutral has only been shared 60 times and the Gucci Changemakers 43 times. Worryingly low, Gucci scored on the number of comments from Carbon Neutral and Changemakers on Twitter (8 and 3 comments, respectively). Considering the number of brand followers on social media, users' reaction to information about the two above-mentioned initiatives is negligible.

## Conclusion

The concept of sustainable development is an important initiative for the benefit of society around the world. Its effective implementation requires the involvement and integration of activities of many entities. This obligation, although not established by law, also applies to enterprises. Special expectations apply to the participants of the luxury goods market, both the companies operating in it and the buyers of these goods.

The expectations of a wide range of stakeholders are taken into account by CSR, which is the business response to the idea of sustainable development. Some of the guidelines of the Corporate Social Responsibility policy have been implemented on the luxury goods market for a long time, and were even desirable actions to maintain the luxurious character of the brand. Such activities include, for example, patronage of culture and arts, cultivating and learning the art of craftsmanship. It is obvious, however, that a comprehensive approach to CSR policy cannot be limited only to the above-mentioned areas.

In recent years, social media has become a popular medium that serves not only to promote the company, but also to inform about the CSR strategies of luxury brands.

The most popular luxury brand on social media in 2021 was Gucci. This article analyzes the reactions of social media users to the posts by: Gucci Fur Free, Gucci Carbon Neutral and Gucci Changemakers. Among the analyzed programs, the Gucci Fur Free initiative was the most popular. This is especially true of the number of likes on Instagram, posts as well as the reactions of Twitter users. Considering the number of brand followers on social media, user reactions to information about initiatives related to Corporate Social Responsibility can be considered very weak, in the case of Carbon Neutral and Changemakers, even negligible.

Certainly, this problem requires a diagnosis, understanding the reasons for such a low attractiveness of this type of content for users. Brand posts regarding the analyzed initiatives are certainly not graphically attractive, they do not attract users' attention with their colors, attractive photos or images of famous people. In addition, they do not encourage users to interact in any way. It is indisputable that there is a need to undertake CSR initiatives, informing stakeholders about them is also a legitimate activity. Social media is an important channel of communication, however, it is necessary to consider how to structure messages in order to arouse greater interest and involvement of users.

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