

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Gucci puts its money where its mouth is following diversity outrage

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Gucci's revenues topped 8 billion euros last year. Image credit: Gucci

By BRIELLE JAEKEL

CAPE TOWN, South Africa Italian fashion label Gucci believes that sustainability, diversity and emotionality are the pillars that make up modern luxury, as it works to make sure inclusivity is at its core.

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In a conversation with *Vogue* International editor Suzy Menkes at the Cond Nast International Luxury conference, Gucci CEO Marco Bizzarri and model and collaborator Naomi Campbell revealed that the label is launching a fellowship program in a number of schools to help become a staple in inclusion. The CEO believes that the brand's recent misstep with a sweater design which many believed was offensive was extremely unfortunate but was a learning experience for the label that was then turned into something positive.

"I had a chance to talk to my people and gathered everyone together and to make sure we're united," said Marco Bizzarri, president and CEO of Gucci. "To me the point I was trying to communicate to my team, you know us. Diversity for us is part of what we do. For Alessandro its been a part of his life from the very beginning. So when that happened, he and I both took it very personal."

Fashion crossroads

The Italian label is working with schools across the world, such as the Design Academy of Fashion in Cape Town, South Africa, the University of Lagos and many others. Through its new scholarship and fellowship program, it believes it will help empower those with less opportunity while learning more about African culture itself.

Gucci's initiative followed a significant diversity issue. It became another luxury brand to be in hot water thanks to accusations of depicting blackface in its designs.

The label quickly pulled a sweater from its inventory in both stores and online, after it received backlash in its likeness to blackface. The black sweater was fitted with a rollup collar with a cutout for the mouth, outlined in red, much like a golliwog doll known to be a symbol of racism ([see story](#)).



Gucci's sweater before it was pulled. Image credit: Gucci

Sustaining the Earth and fashion

In addition to diversity, Gucci along with its parent company Kering, is integrating sustainability in the core of its business in an effort to save the planet.

While the apparel and retail industry as a whole is focused on scalability, the natural world is struggling. Mr. Bizzarri believes that it is these companies' duties to become sustainable to turn this around.

With consumer calls for brand transparency increasing, Gucci launched a new platform to share stories of its corporate social responsibility with the public.

Debuted last summer, in honor of World Environment Day, Gucci Equilibrium is a microsite that delves into the brand's efforts regarding people and the planet. Gucci intends for the platform to reflect the balance of aesthetic and ethical purposes that drive its strategy ([see story](#)).

It is thoughts such as these that help Gucci appear to younger audiences and grow its business. The brand is focused on creating a wonderful culture surrounding its brand, rather than focusing on product.



Mr. Bizzarri speaks with model and activist Naomi Campbell at CNI Luxury. Image credit: Cond Nast

This mindset has even evolved to incorporate its brand ethos in younger slang, where young consumers refer to themselves as feeling "Gucci" to reveal a positive vibe.

The label was able to double its business within only a few years, but Mr. Bizzarri believes it was partially luck that brought forces such as timing and a great team to be able to do so.

"When we started with Allesandro we put creativity at the very center of everything we were doing," Mr. Bizzarri said. "We didn't talk about figures or numbers because I don't think that's the way fashion should be managed."