

Diploma Thesis: ModeKlasse

GENTLE LUXURY & HUMANISTIC CAPITALISM:

A CASE STUDY OF BRUNELLO CUCINELLI

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Introduction:

The primary idea behind this diploma project started with an exploration of design ideas that center on human well-being, and I was influenced by Hygge and Wabi Sabi, and soft minimalism which value simplicity and harmony and slow down in the fast pace of modern life. And slowness in the design process and craftsmanship. To aim for well-being is the first step on the ladder but whose well-being are we actually talking about? In an attempt to respond to this question, I crossed paths with Brunello Cucinelli's Humanistic Capitalism. This holistic approach of Humanistic Capitalism to wellbeing takes into account everyone involved - consumers, employees, suppliers, communities, as well as the environment. While the objective is not far

fetches, yet it needs to rethink what luxury is and how it can restore harmony with the earth without sacrificing pleasure, aesthetics, or the pursuit of well-being, all while upholding ethical principles (Rinaldi & Testa, 2017).

The following thesis paper focuses on the case study of Brunello Cucinelli's brand and philosophy of Humanistic Capitalism. For the brand, this approach integrates community, integrity, work-life balance, cultural enrichment, and profitability into its business strategies. The paper considers a new paradigm for responsible companies within the luxury fashion industry. Brunello Cucinelli's Humanistic Capitalism addresses several critical considerations: it reduces its environmental impact and contributes to the economic development of the region (the village of Solomeo). It honors and repays the cultural influences that shape its aesthetic codes while ensuring respect for workers' rights. It respects consumers and prioritizes their needs and expectations. These

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factors are the essential building blocks for constructing a responsible fashion company. (Rinaldi & Testa, 2017).

However, this raises an important question: does this Humanistic Capitalism truly extend its benefits universally, or is its impact primarily concentrated in Italy and the broader Western hemisphere? I will examine the visual culture of three of Cucinelli's fashion campaigns to explore how well the imagery aligns with the brand's stated values. Furthermore, this comprehensive research seeks to inform a design philosophy for my own fashion brand—one rooted in the

principles of Humanistic Capitalism.

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The Philosophy of Humanistic Capitalism:

From these initial principles, I now move toward the fundamental philosophy behind Brunello Cucinelli's Humanistic Capitalism, one that blends his professional goals with his personal ideals. From the very beginning, Brunello Cucinelli imagined a modern approach to capitalism, one that is grounded in timeless values, where profit can be pursued without causing harm. And where a portion of earnings is to be dedicated to projects that would genuinely enhance human life.

Cucinelli set himself for bold actions and the common good, by placing humanity at the heart of everything from life to his business. For him, true quality is equal to prioritizing human dignity in every process (Cucinelli et al., 2018).

In his book *The Dream of Solomeo*, Cucinelli describes his vision for a workplace that is both enjoyable and inspiring—one that offers views of the surrounding countryside and ensures employees earn a little more, allowing them to lead dignified lives. To him, poverty was intolerable, and this belief shaped his efforts to create an environment that not only supports material well-being but also nurtures the spirit. By providing regular restorative breaks, he acknowledged that the soul requires nourishment just as the body does and that achieving this harmony is essential for a balanced daily life (Cucinelli et al., 2018). Cucinelli's values were deeply influenced by witnessing his own father's tears and humiliation at work, an experience that inspired his commitment to dignity and fairness. He was also guided by Plato's philosophy of inner order as a virtue, which shaped his belief in using natural resources responsibly. He saw Mother Earth not as something to be depleted but as a source to be preserved and allowed to regenerate naturally. At the core of his vision was a dedication to safeguarding what already

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exists, restoring what has been neglected, and leaving a legacy of beauty in Solomeo—a small homeland known as the hamlet of cashmere and harmony. (Cucinelli et al., 2018)

The Origin of the Company and the Village of Solomeo:

The origin of the company dates back to 1978, when Brunello Cucinelli began crafting cashmere

knitwear in the province of Perugia. His breakthrough came with the introduction of colored cashmere, a significant innovation in an industry that had previously relied solely on natural tones, primarily used for menswear. Recognizing the potential appeal of vibrant cashmere for a female audience, Cucinelli revolutionized the market. Beyond his innovative product, he also prioritized exceptional quality, fair pricing, and reliable delivery times, setting the foundation for his brand's success (Rinaldi & Testa, 2017, p.188).

After establishing his business in Perugia, Brunello Cucinelli relocated to the village of Solomeo, his wife's birthplace. Over time, he became drawn to the idea of purchasing the village's historic castle. He envisioned the company not only as a business but also as an expression of his homeland's culture, serving as a source of inspiration for himself, his employees, and his collaborators. This vision led him to acquire clusters of abandoned buildings and land around the castle, initiating extensive restoration projects that even included the parish church. A substantial portion of the company's profits was dedicated to this village restoration, underscoring the deep connection between the company and its surrounding territory (Cucinelli et al., 2018).

Solomeo has since become a hallmark of the Brunello Cucinelli brand. The village's coat of arms, featuring the castle, now carries the company label and serves as its logo. Brunello describes

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himself not as the castle's owner but as its guardian. The restored buildings, which house the company's headquarters, have become a tourist destination, complemented by an experiential store. In recent years, Solomeo has seen further development, including significant cultural contributions such as the Cucinelli Theater, the Forum of the Arts, and the Neo-Humanist

Academy. The theater's design draws inspiration from ancient Greek gymnasiums, where young people were educated in music, arts, and physical training. The Forum of the Arts, intended as a hub for creativity and cultural exchange, includes an amphitheater that hosts open-air performances and events, along with the Philosopher's Garden—a series of terraces overlooking the Umbrian Valley. The Neo-Humanist Academy, inaugurated in 2010, is housed in a classically styled building adjacent to the Forum of the Arts. It offers a venue for professional training in craftsmanship and management, business meetings, and cultural enrichment programs. Together, these achievements not only enrich the village and its community but also create a lasting heritage for future generations (Rinaldi & Testa, 2017, pp.192-194).

Social Cultural Responsibilities: The Concept of Labor and Human

Integrity

One of Immanuel Kant's statements that shaped Brunello Cucinelli's idea of human integrity is: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end" (Cucinelli et al., 2018, p.51). Furthermore, in his memoir, Cucinelli recalls his teenage years when his father worked at a company manufacturing prefabricated reinforced concrete and would return home feeling belittled by his employers. This experience profoundly affected Cucinelli, motivating him to pursue a way of life and work that upholds both moral and economic dignity for all individuals (Cucinelli et al., 2018, p. 52).

The company's workplace is located inside the castle tower, adorned with medieval frescoes on the walls and offering a picturesque view of the Umbrian countryside. It includes a restaurant canteen serving traditional Umbrian dishes, preserving the culinary and social traditions that hold significant cultural value. Manual labor at the company is not regarded as a degrading activity but is instead viewed as a dignified and profitable profession. A large portion of the workforce is under the age of 30, with employees earning wages that are comparatively higher than those offered by other Umbrian firms. Brunello Cucinelli values manual crafts and professions, placing them on equal footing with the quality of the products and the intrinsic identity of the company (Rinaldi & Testa, 2017).

While Brunello Cucinelli's commitment to Humanistic Capitalism prioritizes social responsibility and community well-being, the company's ethical approach also calls for careful consideration of its environmental impact. This brings us to the complex challenges surrounding cashmere production and its sustainability.

The luxury fashion industry distinguishes itself through exceptional quality and the enduring vision of stylists, creating items meant to last far beyond one fashion cycle. Unlike fast fashion, these goods are seen as long-term investments, not fleeting trends. This durability naturally slows fashion cycles, discourages over-consumption, and minimizes resource waste. Luxury products are inherently rare, often produced in smaller quantities or limited editions. As Plato argues, luxury goods are by definition scarce. The idea of scarcity, in this context, may be interpreted as rarity, as luxury products are often made on a smaller scale. With fewer items needed and less frequent replacements, the overall demand on resources decreases (Amatulli et al., 2017).

However, when we turn to raw materials—particularly cashmere—the picture shifts dramatically. Mongolia and China produce 90% of the world's cashmere, yet their ecosystems are increasingly strained. In Mongolia, for example, growing global demand has driven herders to expand goat populations, contributing to overgrazing and severe land degradation. The resulting environmental damage undermines the notion of cashmere as a sustainable luxury material (Hafey, 2020).

Although Brunello Cucinelli frames its sourcing and production practices as part of a universal humanistic capitalism, the reality in cashmere-producing regions suggests otherwise. The environmental toll of cashmere production raises serious questions about the brand's commitment to sustainability on a global level, challenging the idealized image of luxury as inherently eco-conscious.

It's not surprising that Brunello Cucinelli maintained strong profits during and after the COVID 19 pandemic. The company achieved revenues of €502.6 million in the first nine months of 2021, up 32.7% from 2020 despite the pandemic. The lower cashmere prices—caused by Mongolia's economic struggles—helped reduce production costs, giving Cucinelli an advantage. However, this benefit for the company came at a significant cost for Mongolia, where falling cashmere prices hurt the local economy and created financial challenges for herding families(Hafey, 2020).

Marketing Campaigns and Visual Culture of Brunello Cucinelli

Brunello Cucinelli's organizational approach intertwines product strategies with communication activities, creating a cohesive and intentional narrative. The group values teamwork and individual accountability over rigid hierarchical structures, which aligns with their broader ethos of responsible fashion. According to *The Responsible Fashion Company*, this model ensures that the company's campaigns are deeply connected to its overarching values and vision.

The company's advertising campaigns frequently highlight Italian culture, village life, and the ideals of dignity, respect, and good manners. Elegance and environmental protection are central themes, reinforcing a message of timeless refinement and ethical responsibility. As described in

The Dream of Solomeo, these elements reflect the brand's commitment to sustainable luxury and thoughtful craftsmanship.

In this context, analyzing Cucinelli's marketing campaigns offers a unique lens through which to understand their impact on contemporary visual culture. Fashion not only shapes societal norms and perceptions but also embodies the dynamics of the gaze—voyeuristic, panoptical, and otherwise. By examining the visual narratives within these campaigns, I aim to uncover how the brand communicates its philosophy and whether these representations truly reflect its values. Beyond the garments, these campaigns tell a story, one that deserves close scrutiny to understand the deeper cultural and ethical messages they convey.

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1. The Eyes Are the Interpreters of the Soul (Fall-Winter 2022)- Fabrizio Ferri 1991.

This campaign revives an image by Fabrizio Ferri from 1991, symbolizing shared emotions, hope, and trust in humanity. The meeting of two faces serves as a window into the brand's soul. The turtleneck, pulled up over the face and nose, suggests a kind of "mask," as the post-COVID visual culture. While not a medical mask, the covering can be read as a hint to protective distancing measures, instead of distancing as isolation the campaign highlights intimacy despite the barriers. The eyes left uncovered become the focal point for human connection through gaze. A

striking feature of this campaign is the mutuality of the gaze between the man and woman. Unlike traditional visual representations where the female figure is often objectified or positioned solely as the subject of male observation, this image portrays a mutual exchange. Figures are equally involved in the act of looking and being looked at, which aligns well with the brand's philosophy of mutual respect, trust, and human connection. The connection between past values and current global challenges is present in the minimal visual composition of the campaign.



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2. Journey Towards Universal Humanism (Fall-Winter 2020)- Alessandro Burzigotti.

This campaign portrays the idea of universal humanism and the interconnectedness of humanity.

as described by the brand itself, the image should portray the ethical commitment to craftsmanship, sustainable practices, and respect for all cultures. It should show an ongoing quest—not only for better products but for a better way of living, where modernity and tradition coexist in harmony.

The image of the family pointing at a map invokes exploration and heritage. It suggests that while Cuccinelli draws inspiration from Italian roots, its humanism is universal, transcending borders and cultures. However, a closer look at the campaign's visual elements reveals a different story. Our gaze is led toward the Western hemisphere, where the visual storytelling remains distinctly grounded in a Western perspective. In the central image, where a family gestures toward a map, the choice to point west—literally and symbolically—introduces a contradiction. Despite the campaign's emphasis on the global outlook, the scene reveals a geographic and cultural emphasis on European ideals. This raises the question of whether the brand genuinely walks the talk in its commitment to universal humanism, or if the campaign serves more as a symbolic and romanticized gesture than a substantive embodiment of its stated values.



3) Time for the spirit: (Fall-Winter 2014) - Alistair Taylor-Young (shot in the Umbrian countryside).

This campaign emphasizes the harmony between body and spirit, work and rest, humans and nature. It suggests that time spent nurturing our souls not only renews us but also reshapes how we view the world, highlighting the need for sustainable practices and respect for the earth. However, the rapidly growing global demand for cashmere has had significant environmental consequences in Mongolia. Between 2008 and 2018, Mongolia's raw cashmere exports tripled, leading herders to expand goat populations. This increase has exacerbated overgrazing and land degradation, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of cashmere production.

Although Brunello Cucinelli's initiatives reflect an intention to uphold ethical and sustainable practices, the larger environmental toll of increased cashmere production in Mongolia remains a pressing issue. While the brand's efforts to prioritize quality and sustainability are apparent, the cumulative effects of rising demand present challenges to Mongolia's ecosystem (Hafey, 2020).

As I noted earlier in the discussion of previous campaigns, even though the brand relies heavily on cashmere from Asia—particularly Mongolia and China—the universal humanism it espouses rarely extends toward these eastern regions in a meaningful way. This is evident in many of the campaign images, which often perpetuate a Western-focused perspective. Brunello Cucinelli issued a statement expressing appreciation for the people of Mongolia and China, yet the

language feels more romanticized than transparent. The statement fails to address the tangible humanistic and environmental implications of their cashmere outsourcing in these countries.

This raises critical questions: Is cashmere truly sustainable for Mongolia and China? Or is the concept of sustainability only considered a priority when it concerns Western interests?



Conclusion and a Design Philosophy Inspired by Humanistic

Capitalism:

By examining Cucinelli's campaigns and statements on its website, we can see how the brand integrates its philosophy into action, presenting a human-centered approach to marketing that emphasizes shared values over simple consumerism. This perspective positions luxury as an experience rather than a mere object. Brunello Cucinelli's approach to Humanistic Capitalism offers a holistic framework for rethinking luxury fashion. By intertwining cultural preservation, environmental responsibility, and the dignity of labor, Cucinelli demonstrates that ethical principles can coexist with aesthetic excellence and commercial success. The philosophy of Humanistic Capitalism extends beyond producing garments; it seeks to balance tradition and modernity, ensuring that everyone involved—employees, communities, and consumers—benefits in a meaningful and lasting way. This research shows that Brunello Cucinelli's vision aligns economic viability with a profound respect for humanity and the environment, challenging the industry's traditional reliance on short-term profits and fast-paced production cycles.

Moreover, this philosophy has directly influenced the development of my design framework. The concept for my diploma collection arose from a desire to prioritize human well-being, a notion that resonates with my personal experiences of severe anxiety—episodes so frequent and intense that they led to significant health challenges. In response, I turned to the principles of Hygge, Wabi

Sabi, and soft minimalism—philosophies that emphasize simplicity, harmony, and slowness—as a way to counteract the relentless pace of contemporary life. Working in the fast-moving world of

fashion, where trends rapidly lose relevance and even designers can feel outmoded, I wanted to

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create garments that stand the test of time. My goal was to design pieces that could be cherished for years, carrying personal and emotional value rather than merely aligning with fleeting styles.

I have always believed that what we wear has a profound impact on how we feel and think, just as our state of mind influences the choices we make in clothing. In a world saturated with information and constant change, I felt it was vital to strip away unnecessary complexity, both in concept and form. I sought to create emotional pieces that evoke a sense of grounding, comfort, and peace—

clothing that feels stable when life seems unstable. This approach led me to the notion of harmony: when everything, from the fabric to the fit, exists in balance, it nurtures a deeper sense of calm and confidence. To reinforce this philosophy, I focused on organic materials and organic shapes, ensuring that my designs featured rounded edges and almost no sharp lines. This decision was rooted in my belief that softness—both in material and form—can foster a deeper sense of well

being and emotional connection.

Through my research, I encountered Brunello Cucinelli's philosophy of humanistic capitalism, which expanded my understanding of well-being to include everyone involved in the fashion lifecycle. His perspective emphasizes not only the end consumer but also the employees, suppliers, and communities whose lives are touched by the industry. This broadened outlook prompted me to reconsider the true meaning of luxury—not as mere opulence but as a thoughtful blend of beauty, ethical integrity, and environmental responsibility. My collection strives to

embody these values, offering a vision of fashion that is meaningful, sustainable, and profoundly human.

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