

MEJO 531 Midterm – Gucci Blackface Sweater

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The Italian powerhouse Gucci is known for their iconic luxury fashion items including leather goods, handbags, belts and clothing. They are a leading brand within the world of fashion with a renowned, creative reputation. In February of 2019, less than a week into Black History Month, Gucci faced grave implications for a sweater perceived as blackface from their 2018 fall-winter collection. The collection featured a line of balaclava-style ski masks and knits in various color combinations. Balaclava is a style that fully covers the body exposing only the eyes and mouth when worn. One particular Gucci sweater, retailing for \$890, caused a massive uproar within the fashion community and beyond.



Designed by Gucci creative director Alessandro Michele, the black turtleneck sweater covered the bottom half of the face featuring a cutout around the mouth lined with oversized red lips. A photo of the sweater hit social media and immediately was perceived as mimicking blackface. Interestingly enough, the sweater had been on store shelves for months before it went viral online and threats to boycott the brand began. Gucci head Marco Bizzarri commented, “in the digital era, if someone says this is blackface, it’s blackface.”¹ The sweater’s photo was posted to Twitter on Wednesday February 6, 2019 and by early Thursday morning the original post had nearly 2,000 comments and had been retweeted roughly 5,300 times. Other tweets in response read “ah yes, blackface but make it fashion huh?” and

“someone obviously didn’t let Gucci know its BLACK HISTORY Month and not BLACKFACE Month. The brand’s actions were particularly offensive to African American consumers.

Tweet replies included individuals expressing their distaste for the brand and threatening to boycott, consumers were disturbed to the point of losing trust in Gucci and no longer wanting to support their products. Negative reactions came not only from their publics, Gucci’s collaborator Dapper Dan posted to Instagram saying: “I am a black man before I am a brand. Another fashion house has gotten it outrageously wrong. There is no excuse nor apology that can erase this kind of insult. The CEO of Gucci has agreed to come from Italy to Harlem this week to meet with me, along with members of the community and other industry leaders. There cannot be inclusivity without accountability. I will hold everyone accountable.”²

Gucci took action the same day the photo was posted to remove the sweater from their website and issue an apology via Twitter, where they were receiving most of their criticism. In summary, the tweet apologized to their audience for the sweater and claimed that Gucci prioritizes diversity in their decisions. They also ensured that the sweater had been removed from both online and in store sales.

¹ Givhan, R. (2019)

² Hughes, A. (2019)

Gucci as a brand apologized to their key publics, the consumers and worldwide audience offended by the seemingly racist sweater. Alessandro Michele also issued an apology to the stakeholders of the situation, Gucci's employees. In a letter to Gucci's 18,000 employees Michele took full responsibility, "the fact that, contrarily (sic) to my intentions, that turtle-neck jumper evoked a racist imagery caused me the greatest grief,"³ he said. "The pain of these days: my own and that of the people who saw in one of my creative projects and intolerable insult." In addition to his apology, Michele also expressed his original vision for the garment. His intent in creating the sweater was to pay tribute to Leigh Bowery, an Australian performance artist known for flamboyant costumes and makeup.

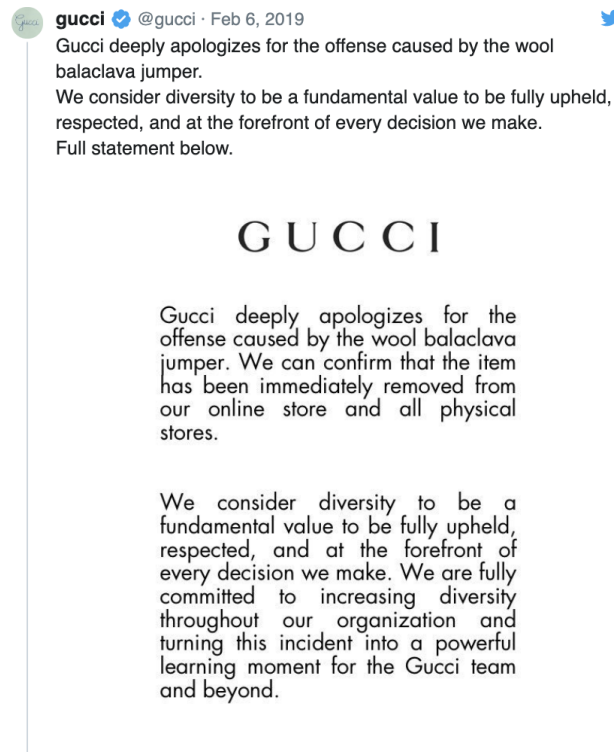
The sweater had a severe short-term impact on the public's perception of Gucci's brand priorities and values that resulted in the brand altering their long-term cultural strategy. While they swiftly apologized and took full responsibility for their actions, the concern for the lack of diversity within the company remained. Public relations values state, "sensitivity to and appreciation for cultural differences and socioeconomic factors are necessary to build trusting relationships with any group."⁴ Cultural awareness stems from within a brand, misinterpreting cultural taboos such as blackface are best avoided when those in power within the company are properly trained to understand global differences.

³ Griffith, J. (2019)

⁴ Taylor and Frances (2014)

Response Time: When the public is alarmed by a company's mistake, public relations professionals should make an immediate informed response. Before taking action, it is crucial to gather all relevant facts. In addition, a company should focus on messaging strategies to issue their apology on the same social platform their criticism was first received to address specific publics. An apology that accepts full responsibility for any wrongdoings can minimize harm and preserve trust between consumers and the brand.

In the case of Gucci's blackface sweater, response time was fairly immediate. The same day of the online backlash, Gucci had pulled the sweater from online and physical stores, issuing an apology from their official Twitter.



Gucci accepted responsibility for their mistake after gathering all relevant facts of the situation and posted the apology on Twitter, the same platform where they received most of their backlash. The response was informed, and response time was immediate, however the messaging within their apology did not resonate well with consumers. The public responded with feedback saying if Gucci viewed diversity as a fundamental value, they would enforce diversity within their own employees – preventing internal ignorance that would result in creating the sweater perceived as blackface.

The Dominos case discussed in class faced a similar situation to Gucci; the public was disturbed by a viral YouTube video including two employees mistreating the company's pizza. Domino's took their time in assessing the facts, including which store was featured in the video as well identifying the two employees who created the video. After gathering all relevant information, they released a response video on YouTube which is where the original crisis began. Similar to Gucci, they kept their messaging platform consistent which is an effective strategy as you can reach your target audience – the concerned

public who first viewed the video. The Dominos' apology video was similarly criticized as the Gucci response for seeming insincere. While the Domino's CEO did take responsibility for the situation, he reinforced that this was an isolated incident of only two employees – implying they were not associated with the brand to push the blame elsewhere. Both company's apology messaging strategies were insufficient to the public because of their lack in accepting internal company issues.

Who Speaks: When determining who speaks during a crisis, one factor to consider is whoever is responsible for the wrongdoings should be accountable for their actions and speak up. Other factors that impact who should speak are the severity of the situation and which publics need to be addressed. When the situation is a crisis, it should be addressed by employees higher up within the company to demonstrate a serious concern for the public. If a crisis is not properly addressed by a respected or well-known official, the apology is at risk for seeming insincere or viewed as an afterthought.

In the case of Gucci (a major crisis situation) the spokesperson should have been the CEO or high ranking official. As Gucci was being condemned for a racial implication, the sensitivity of the controversial topic calls for a response from an official such as the head of the company and most definitely the individual responsible for the sweater. Perhaps Gucci could have issued a more personable response from the CEO directly, instead their official Twitter account posted the apology tweet and Creative Director Alessandro Michele addressed the situation among Gucci employees. Both responses were targeted to the company's key publics – consumers on Twitter and employees who may have been offended by the situation. Being honest with your employees is just as important as being honest with consumers since Michele created the sweater, it was his responsibility to address the issue. Michele was honest with employees about his original intent for the sweater, admitted fault and took *full* accountability for his actions.

This principle relates to the Lululemon case where CEO Chip Wilson was essentially called out for fat-shaming consumers by blaming women for the fit of the company's pants. Since Wilson was the one who caused the harm, he should have been the one to issue an apology video. However, the overall apology had an unfavorable presentation style because of Wilson's inconsistent eye contact that made it seem he was speaking from cue cards, poor video editing and insufficient messaging within the actual apology. He made no effort to address the key public he harmed (Lululemon consumers) and only apologized to his employees. The point of an apology can become mute if it comes off as insincere.

Know Your Audience: As a global brand, you must be aware that your culture may not match other environments or perspectives – impacting the way your company's work is perceived. A group's value system is what they place importance on that forms their cultural identity. Being aware of value systems can help companies avoid cultural misinterpretation. In addition, training your employees to understand other group's culture systems contributes to strengthening the company's overall global perspective.

As a European brand originally founded in Florence, Italy, Gucci is subject to having a different culture than many of their consumers across the globe. The balaclava sweater viewed as mocking blackface was culturally insensitive. Despite Alessandro Michele describing his original intention for the sweater's design, it was overwhelmingly perceived with racist undertones by a majority of Gucci's publics. Gucci's insufficient understanding of their audience could stem from an internal lack of diversity and cultural awareness. Employees within the company should have been further educated on global perspective and made an effort to understand the history of other countries to avoid messages being lost in

translation. Gucci's failure to ensure Alessandro Michele had proper cultural training to view his designs through a global lens ultimately caused great offense to the company's publics, especially the African American community.

Knowing your audience also relates to the Quran case in Afghanistan when U.S. soldiers mistakenly burned copies of the Quran due to a lack of cultural awareness. In Islamic culture, it is considered culturally insensitive for any non-Muslim to even touch a copy of the Quran. The U.S.-led NATO effort became extremely controversial when deadly protests broke out after NATO soldiers were said to have burned a number of Islamic religious materials. Similar to Gucci, many immediately criticized NATO soldiers for not taking the time to understand the Afghan value system, resulting in a severe cultural misinterpretation. The original pre-deployment language/culture training did not provide specifics on how to handle religious materials, barely mentioning the handling of the Quran. Just as Gucci's creative director Michele did not make efforts to understand his global audience, the U.S. Army cultural training groups did not fully understand the importance of religion above everything else in Muslim culture. Both Gucci and the U.S. Army disrespected cultures different from their own due to a lack of training and efforts to accept global differences.

Show rather than tell: Aside from apologizing after a crisis, it is in a company's best interest to demonstrate how they will improve moving forward to avoid making similar mistakes. Actions always speak louder than words, showing your publics that you are taking preventative measures or improving your company principles can help mend the relationship between you and your consumers.

Gucci's corrective plan after the blackface incident began with appointing a diversity chief to restore their battered reputation from the racially insensitive design. The hiring of Renée Tirado was their response to the public's claim that the company lacked diversity within the company. CEO Mark Bizzarri said her appointment "is a fundamental building block to further our commitment and support the initiatives already in place...I am confident that Renée will help us create the meaningful change we want to see not only in our company but in the fashion industry."⁵ After being under fire for the balaclava sweater, Gucci also announced in February their hiring of global and regional directors for diversity and inclusion. In addition, they launched a \$20,000 design scholarship program for students interested in fashion, implemented a \$5 million Change-Makers Fund to create greater opportunities for communities of color and began a global exchange program. After the incident, Gucci set the foundation to make a positive change and avoid another cultural mishap in the future.

This principle relates to the Angola case where the outbreak of Marburg hemorrhagic fever was fatal to many communities. Burial practices are an important part of the culture in Angola, they involve family members to touch the dead body which further spread the disease. The WHO (World Health Organization) had to step in to assist with the burial process but had an intrusive behavior and took no time to understand the villager's concerns, frustrations and traditions. After a severely negative reaction from villagers, the health workers implemented better communication efforts and changed their procedures. Instead of just apologizing for their lack of cultural awareness, they took action to improve their work. This included printing educational pamphlets about the disease in multiple languages, arriving at the family's homes in street clothes and then changing into protection garments to humanize their actions, taking the time to talk to families and modifying burial customs so families could safely perform

⁵ Bramley, E. (2019)

their rituals. In addition, they changed the color of their protective garments from white to green to eliminate fear as white is associated with ghosts to the people of Angola.

This principle can also be applied again to the Quran burning case. In addition to a verbal apology, the NATO and U.S. response included an immediate intervention to any mishandling of religious materials and ensured that they were taking steps to avoid this in the future. A new directive was issued promptly after the incident that all coalition forces in Afghanistan would complete training in the proper handling of religious materials. The cultural training for military personnel was mandated by the Department of Defense American Forces Press Services and included the identification, significance, current handling and storage of religious materials. Beyond just a sincere apology, the U.S. ensured their soldiers would move forward from previous ignorance and would be given sufficient training to understand the importance of the Quran in Islamic culture. U.S. military services enforced cultural sensitivity through this new training rather than simply issuing an apology.

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