



## **How effectively did Gucci implement crisis management strategies to recover their reputation after the 2019 “Blackface” sweater controversy?**

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### **Abstract**

Gucci's 2019 “Blackface” sweater controversy significantly challenged the luxury fashion house's reputation and raised concerns about racial sensitivity, cultural awareness, and corporate responsibility. This study examines how effectively Gucci implemented crisis management strategies to recover its reputation following the controversy. The study analyses Gucci's immediate response, including the removal of the product, public apology, engagement with affected communities, and subsequent diversity and inclusion initiatives. It also evaluates whether these measures successfully restored consumer trust and strengthened the brand's image. Particular attention is given to the role of transparent communication, stakeholder engagement, organisational accountability, and long-term corrective actions in crisis recovery. The study argues that although Gucci's swift response helped contain the immediate reputational damage, the effectiveness of its recovery depended largely on sustained institutional changes rather than short-term public relations efforts. Gucci's response demonstrates both the importance and limitations of crisis management in rebuilding trust after a culturally sensitive brand controversy.

**Keywords:** Gucci, Crisis Management, Brand Reputation, Blackface Controversy, Diversity and Inclusion

### **Introduction**

Gucci, founded back in 1921 by renowned designer Guccio Gucci, is a luxury fashion house based in Florence which initially gained its fame by the artistic blender of Tuscan leather and equestrian-inspired luxury. At present, the company is valued at over \$11.5B, catering for more than 60% of Kering's total revenue and ranked 4th most valuable luxury brand world-wide in 2025, according to Statista. The brand caters to a wide audience, distributing products among various categories. Categories include leather goods, shoes, ready-to-wear, watches and jewellery, among others, with leather goods holding 50% of their revenue share. With their price range spanning from an entry level of \$300 to over \$20,000 for high-end or exotic pieces, Gucci is a brand desired by most men & women. It is under constant surveillance and in the media with the brand facing public scrutiny and criticism for what appeared to be an \$890 wool turtle neck sweater that made resemblance to “blackface” back in 2019.

The fashion label caters to multiple target groups due to their dynamic pricing and the wide range of products to select from. It has made its mark on history with a plethora of iconic pieces and their signature Gucci GG monogram paired with the navy, red, and green colour



combination that scream Gucci without any mention of the brand. From their GG Marmont Leather Belt with Shiny Buckle priced at €300, among others of the similar category to statement pieces in footwear, primarily the 1953 Horsebit Loafer in Leather at €595, the company has covered all grounds and is still worn at every red carpet moment and applauded for its intricate craftsmanship. The question still arises of the deep-root cause of pedestrians saving up hundreds or even thousands of dollars to purchase an item from the label. Gucci has established an identity of luxury and wealth which makes the outrageous prices for every-day-items worth it as the brand does not sell simple products, but they sell status and aspiration. Developed through celebrity endorsements and glances to creative campaigns that play with age and gender, it has become a picture of the “ideal” lifestyle.

### **From Brand to Byword of Backlash**

Gucci has been worn by the whos-of-who of Hollywood however, one thing the brand has always been in the limelight for is for negative high-profile controversies. It has established a scandalous reputation in the current inclusive and environment-proactive generation, gaining constant backlash and hatred in the digital world. From the 1980s to the 1990s, the family was a public spectacle due to internal backlash within the family with lawsuits and power struggles when the brand’s reputation fell downhill rapidly due to the news of Maurizio Gucci’s murder being orchestrated by his ex-wife, Patrizia Reggiani.

Year after year, Gucci has made headlines for controversial purposes with recent ones revolving around heavy racism and cultural appropriation. In February 2018, the brand sent models that were from white origins down the runway at Milan Fashion Week wearing fashion props resembling the Indian Sikh turban, which is a symbol of religious faith and belief. The use of the turbans bothered and triggered Sikh commentators, social media news outlets and activists. A majority of critics argued that Gucci was pricing the turban which was full of culture and deep Indian heritage at a luxury price point which put claims of “commercialising” and “trivialising” Sikh culture.

### **The “Blackface” Sweater Controversy**

Despite constantly being in the limelight for racist accusations, the “Blackface” sweater controversy brought by the piece “Balaclava knit top black” priced at \$890 led to the skyrocketing of the image of Gucci. The sweater when worn made the bottom half of one’s face black with a red outline around the mouth region resembling overlined or full lips. The idea of Blackface was born during the 1800s where white skinned actors would paint their skin black and draw on exaggerated lips to ridicule black culture and present black skinned people as “inferior or unintellectual”. A constant struggle of the black American community has been parts of their appearance including wider noses, fuller lips and darker skin. They have been deemed unwanted and were rejected due to these facial features and they are incorporated within the sweater to mock and reignite the “Blackface”. The backlash was immediate because the controversy touched this deeply sensitive historical issue. As a result, when Gucci released this



knit top, many consumers and critics interpreted it not as an accidental resemblance but as a symbol of racial insensitivity, especially given the visible red lip detail and the way the garment covered the lower half of the face. In the luxury fashion industry, where imagery, symbolism, and branding are central to value creation, such a mistake carries especially serious consequences because consumers expect higher cultural awareness from luxury brands.

The controversy also mattered because it did not occur in isolation. Gucci had already faced criticism for previous examples of cultural appropriation. The earlier backlash shaped the way people interpreted the sweater controversy, rather than seeing it as a one-off mistake, many viewed it as part of a broader pattern of poor cultural judgment.

Another reason the scandal gained so much attention was the speed and scale of digital backlash. Social media allowed criticism to spread rapidly, and the phrase “boycott Gucci” began circulating soon after the product was identified. This created a reputational crisis that was both commercial and symbolic, the brand was not only losing goodwill, but also being accused of failing basic ethical standards. In luxury branding, where exclusivity and identity are key assets, public humiliation can be especially damaging because the brand depends on aspiration, trust, and cultural relevance. Gucci therefore had to respond not simply to product complaints, but to broader challenges to its legitimacy as a culturally aware global brand.

### **Gucci's Immediate Crisis Response**

Gucci's first crisis-management step was to remove the sweater and issue a public apology. The company apologized on social media, stating that it deeply regretted the offense caused by the wool balaclava jumper and reaffirming diversity as a fundamental value. It also withdrew the item from stores and its online platform, which was a necessary move because leaving the product on sale would have intended the criticism and suggested indifference. From a crisis management perspective, this was the correct first response because it showed recognition of hard and immediate action to reduce further damage.

However, while the apology was swift, it was also somewhat limited in its persuasive power. A statement of regret can reduce short-term anger, but it does not automatically rebuild trust if the public believes the underlying problem remains unchanged. In Gucci's case, critics questioned how such a design could have passed internal review in the first place, which shifted attention from the product to the company's decision-making process. This is a common pattern in corporate crises, once the apology is issued, the public often demands structural evidence that the company has actually learned from the mistake. Gucci therefore needed to move beyond symbolic regret and demonstrate concrete change.

The company also described the incident as a “powerful learning moment,” suggesting that it wanted to frame the controversy as a catalyst for improvement rather than a defining failure. This language is significant because it reflects a reputational strategy often used by luxury companies after scandals: preserve the brand image by acknowledging the error, but quickly redirect the narrative toward reform and responsibility. The challenge, however, is that this strategy only



works if the follow-up actions appear credible and substantial. Without that, the response can be seen as superficial damage control rather than genuine accountability.

### **Long-Term Recovery Measures**

Gucci's most important recovery move came after the immediate backlash, when it launched the Gucci Changemakers initiative. This program included a \$5 million fund, a scholarship scheme, and a volunteering initiative for employees, all designed to support communities of colour and encourage greater inclusion in fashion. The scholarship offered students interested in fashion a \$20, 000 grant over four years, while the volunteering program allowed Gucci's employees to dedicate paid time to community work. These measures were clearly intended to show that Gucci's response was not limited to a single apology, but was part of a larger effort to support social change.

The structure of the initiative was especially important because it showed Gucci recognised that the issue was systemic rather than purely cosmetic. By funding community projects, supporting young talent, and encouraging employee participation, the company attempted to address diversity at multiple levels: public relations, industry access, and internal corporate culture. This is a stronger response than a simple donation because it links reputation repair with practical action. In crisis terms, Gucci was trying to rebuild legitimacy by aligning its brand with social responsibility, not just by distancing itself from the controversy.

Gucci also benefited from the involvement of respected figures such as Dapper Dan, who played a visible role in the Changemakers effort. This mattered because crisis recovery often depends on third-party credibility. When a brand is accused of cultural insensitivity, support from trusted community voices can help signal that the company is serious about repair. Dapper Dan's involvement gave Gucci a way to show that it was listening to Black creative voices rather than speaking only from a corporate perspective. That made the recovery effort more convincing than a standard public relations campaign, although some critics still viewed it as partly reactive.

Gucci also introduced internal measures to reduce the chance of future controversies. Reports indicated that the company developed updated protocols and training to help employees respond better to disruptive behavior and public complaints. This matters because one of the main criticisms of the blackface incident was that internal review failed to catch the problem before launch. Internal reform is often the hardest part of crisis recovery because it is less visible than public apologies, but it is also more important for preventing repeat failures. In that sense, Gucci's later actions suggest a more mature crisis-management approach than its initial response alone would imply.

### **Effectiveness of the Recovery**

Gucci's recovery strategy was effective in some respects and weak in others. It was effective because the company responded quickly, removed the item, issued an apology, and later committed resources to diversity and inclusion initiatives. These actions helped reduce the immediate intensity of the crisis and allowed Gucci to shift public discussion toward reform. In



the luxury sector, where brands are expected to project control and refinement, the ability to regain a sense of stability is a major success factor. Gucci achieved that to a certain extent by combining short-term containment with longer-term reputation repair.

At the same time, the response was not fully successful because the controversy exposed weaknesses that were deeper than one product mistake. The issue was not simply that one sweater looked offensive; it was that the brand had a record of controversies that made the public less willing to accept the apology at face value. This meant Gucci had to fight not only the immediate scandal, but also a broader image problem involving cultural awareness and internal oversight. Even though the brand took meaningful corrective steps, the crisis still damaged its credibility because people remembered that the offensive design was approved in the first place. In this way, Gucci's recovery was partial: it reduced harm, but it did not erase the reasons the controversy became so serious.

A useful way to evaluate the effectiveness of Gucci's response is to distinguish between short-term and long-term recovery. In the short term, the company did well because it acted quickly and avoided appearing defensive. In the long term, however, the effectiveness depended on whether the company's inclusion efforts were sustained and whether consumers believed the changes were genuine. Crisis management is most successful when a company not only fixes the immediate issue, but also changes the systems that allowed the issue to happen. Gucci made progress in that direction, but the controversy showed that genuine trust repair requires more than marketing statements.

### **Conclusion**

Through this research paper, it is evident that one scandal, or rather in Gucci's case a range of them can change the reputation of a brand overnight and can be the reason for losses in sales and more importantly in trust. In the luxury industry, trust is a key factor due to the aspirational value and status that comes with wearing a luxury garment or carrying a designer handbag. However, a strategy as strong as Gucci's can fix most of the damage. Immediate and long-term action inclusive of an apology and change in policies can help fix most of the damage but some still sustain. This research paper highlights those very strategies that Gucci implemented, acting as a vital case study in this large industry of scandals.

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