

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Could Prada's move to amplify diverse voices solve fashion's racial blindspot?

February 14, 2019



Prada came under fire for its character. Image credit: Prada

By BRIELLE JAEKEL

Following repercussions of a product many deemed as racist, Italian fashion label Prada is spotlighting diversity and inclusion in a new program, as many of its peers attempt to navigate similar controversies.

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A recent unfortunate trend in the high-fashion world has seen labels facing backlash due to products that members of the public say resemble blackface. These brands are often missing the mark with items viewed as racist, and it could be because of a lack of diversity within the company.

"[Prada's diversity initiative] could help in the longer term, but it takes time to imbue an organization with different perspectives and change culture and behavior," said Allen Adamson, cofounder of marketing firm **Metaforce** and adjunct professor at NYU Stern School of Business, New York. "It will likely benefit, but it's not an instant fix because it's difficult to change organization culture and behavior.

"They don't change overnight," he said. "It certainly can't hurt, but it is not a magic pill that will make them immune to potential incidents or touching the third rail."

Diversity in fashion

In December, Prada responded to consumer complaints that a monkey character depicted in its holiday merchandise and marketing resembled blackface.

For the holiday season, Prada worked with agency 2x4inc to develop a series of seven creature characters that were inspired by the brand's codes. After one of the figures received backlash on social media, Prada issued an apology and removed it from circulation ([see story](#)).

However, since Gucci, Moncler and even music artist Katy Perry have all seen similar blunders in the past and present, it seems to be a bigger issue than a one-off mistake.



Moncler's jacket, seen as a resemblant of black face. Image credit: Moncler

Prada has jumpstarted a new program in which it will focus on amplifying voices of color within its own company and beyond.

Film producer and activist Ava Duvernay is working with the label to help accomplish this mission, not just within the Prada brand but also throughout the entire fashion industry. She will co-chair a new group entitled the Prada Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Council, consisting of academic and cultural experts from high-level social institutions.

The council will steer Prada as it looks to increase the onboarding of diverse talent and fostering growth within fashion students of color. Scholarships and training programs in the United States and in every Prada office worldwide will be a significant part of the council's mission.

"Prada is committed to cultivating, recruiting and retaining diverse talent to contribute to all departments of the company," said Miuccia Prada, CEO and lead creative director at Prada, in a statement announcing the council.

Moving forward

Gucci was another recent 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](#)).

In a similar move to Prada, Gucci CEO Marco Bizzarri expressed the label's goal to move forward with a clear view in hopes to prevent anything like this from happening again. The CEO has talked to various outlets, including an in-depth interview with WWD to showcase the steps Gucci taking to avoid alienating any of its audience in this way.

The brand's creative director, Alessandro Michele, responsible for the design, shared a lengthy heartfelt message to all of Gucci's employees explaining where the inspiration for the sweater originated and his deepest regrets on the feelings that it evoked. He explains that the fact that people were hurt by the design caused him great grief



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

Music artist Katy Perry was the latest to deal with this issue, as her namesake brand released a pair of shoes many say also looks similar to blackface. The shoes feature red lips and a pair of eyes against black fabric.

"The challenge is that the fashion industry needs to move fast and figure out what is edgy but also acceptable," Mr. Adamson said. "Any time you're pressing to try something new to press new ground, you are more likely than not to occur risk and offend certain groups of consumers.

"The long-term strategy to avoid is to bring into the organization leaders and managers with different perspectives, views and backgrounds," he said. "The views of these different backgrounds and experiences will also the organization to avoid alienating audiences and help them see what is coming next.

"Lots of these organizations are what I call a sea of similarities. You get a very inbred myopic company if you just draw your resources from the same reservoir as everyone else in the industry."

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