

Content Analysis of Gucci's 'Blackface' Sweater Controversy across Multiple Media Platforms

Authors : John Mark King

Abstract : Beginning on Feb. 7, 2019, the luxury brand, Gucci, was met with a firestorm on social media over fashion runway images of its black balaclava sweater, which covered the bottom half of the face and featured large, shiny bright red lips surrounding the mouth cutout. Many observers on social media and in the news media noted the garment resembled racist "blackface." This study aimed to measure how items were framed across multiple media platforms. The unit of analysis was any headline or lead paragraph published using the search terms "Gucci" and "sweater" or "jumper" or "balaclava" during the one-year timeframe of Feb. 7, 2019, to Feb. 6, 2020. Limitations included headlines and lead paragraphs published in English and indexed in the Lexis/Nexis database. Independent variables were the nation in which the item was published and the platform (newspapers, blogs, web-based publications, newswires, magazines, or broadcast news). Dependent variables were tone toward Gucci (negative, neutral or positive) and frame (blackface/racism/racist, boycott/celebrity boycott, sweater/balaclava/jumper/fashion, apology/pulling the product/diversity initiatives by Gucci or frames unrelated to the controversy but still involving Gucci sweaters) and word count. Two coders achieved 100% agreement on all variables except tone (94.2%) and frame (96.3%). The search yielded 276 items published from 155 sources in 18 nations. The tone toward Gucci during this period was negative (69.9%). Items that were neutral (16.3%) or positive (13.8%) toward the brand were overwhelmingly related to items about other Gucci sweaters worn by celebrities or fashion reviews of other Gucci sweaters. The most frequent frame was apology/pulling the product/diversity initiatives by Gucci (35.5%). The tone was most frequently negative across all continents, including the Middle East (83.3% negative), Asia (81.8%), North America (76.6%), Australia/New Zealand (66.7%), and Europe (59.8%). Newspapers/magazines/newswires/broadcast news transcripts (72.4%) were more negative than blogs/web-based publications (63.6%). The most frequent frames used by newspapers/magazines/newswires/broadcast news transcripts were apology/pulling the product/diversity initiatives by Gucci (38.7%) and blackface/racism/racist (26.1%). Blogs/web-based publications most frequently used frames unrelated to the controversial garment, but about other Gucci sweaters (42.9%) and apology/pulling the product/diversity initiatives by Gucci (27.3%). Sources in Western nations (34.7%) and Eastern nations (47.1%) most frequently used the frame of apology/pulling the product/diversity initiatives by Gucci. Mean word count was higher for negative items (583.58) than positive items (404.76). Items framed as blackface/racism/racist or boycott/celebrity boycott had higher mean word count (668.97) than items framed as sweater/balaclava/jumper/fashion or apology/pulling the product/diversity initiatives by Gucci (498.22). The author concluded that during the year-long period, Gucci's image was likely damaged by the release of the garment at the center of the controversy due to near-universally negative items published, but Gucci's apology/pulling the product off the market/diversity initiatives by Gucci and items about other Gucci sweaters worn by celebrities or fashion reviews of other Gucci sweaters were the most common frames across multiple media platforms, which may have mitigated the damage to the brand.

Keywords : Blackface, branding, Gucci, media framing

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