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Case Study

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Off-White is a billion dollar fashion brand that is dominating the world right now. The company produces unique, high end fashion meets streetwear, designs that leave everybody wanting more. This brand has only gone up since it started back in 2014, created by one of the biggest fashion designers today, Virgil Abloh. The company has not received any major backlash until early May 2019, when the company was accused of having no diversity within their staff and design team. The way Off-White handled this is what proved how unique and loyal their consumers are.

Virgil Abloh takes pride in himself as an up and coming, African American, fashion designer. He has a connection with his following, some people describe it as a cult, and he likes to express issues about race through his work in a non-literal way. He has said once it gets literal, people's brains shut down. Abloh decided to call the brand "Off-White" to signify and in-between black and white. He told *System Magazine* "It's a blank canvas, a piece of off-white material that millions of artists can shape to give it value and meaning." This brand was developed to stray away from the normal fashion guidelines, and to make connections with different communities and cultures.

The credibility for the brands message was lost though when the public realized that the company was not as diverse as it appeared to be. In May 2019 Abloh posted an Instagram story of the company Christmas party which was held later in the year. In the Instagram story there were photos and videos of the staff and artists behind the creative designs, and the public quickly noticed the lack of diversity within the company. There was not a single African American person at the party, which left the public to believe Abloh does not support up or hire the up and coming black artists. There was a lot of backlash on social media, specifically Twitter. One individual tweeted, “They call it @OffWht but it seems All White to me” and this is just one of many hate posts Abloh received. The public found the situation to hold a lot of irony since Abloh is a very successful black designer. The main question was does he not believe in his own race?

Now normally when there are allegations of a company or brand showing signs of exclusion or racism, the brand would clear it up instantly and in a straightforward way. It took time for Off-White to figure out how to solve the mess, which left people feeling even more uncertain about the companies motive. A little after the backlash started Abloh decided to post on his Instagram story African Americans that he has worked with and that have represented his designs. The public thought this was a half effort attempt to show that he does work with all races, when really they wanted to see actual diverse artists working on designs for the brand, not modeling them. Seeing, that his attempt did not settle the discussion and only caused it become worse, Abloh finally made a personal statement, “My design team is diverse as the world is big. The video shown was an Off-White <sup>TM</sup> dinner at the headquarters in the city of Milan, Italy. This party was to celebrate the hard work of the local Italian team.” Abloh has worked with diverse designers such as, Samuel Ross, Tremaine Emory, Acyde Odunlami, etc. It was simple and

sweet, he was finally clear about the location and setting and how his team is much bigger than just what the people saw. Abloh has worked with diverse designers such as, Samuel Ross, Tremaine Emory, Agye Odunlami, etc. This just proves that the public assumed the Instagram stories from the party represented his whole team and every designer he works with, which is false. His Off-White team then released a statement to back him up with. They expressed how Abloh takes pride in being an African American, and that Off-White is a black-founded and owned business. Many black designers that made an impact and helped Off-White, were listed in the statement. They concluded their statement with this, “He wishes to use this moment of being questioned to be a moment of reflection within the industry to showcase the talents behind their design entities and push to have a design community that represents the outside world.” Both statements by Abloh and his team were straightforward and shed light on the important messages that the brand hopes to inflict into the world.

This whole situation took a turn for the better when family, friends, and fans showed their support and defense for the Virgil Abloh and the Off-White brand. Since over the years the brand has been very loyal and supportive of their following, they had a trust that was built. The company has always tried to be in touch with their following, and this situation just proved that it pays off to be close with your customers. People immediately were backing Abloh up on social media and recognizing his hard work and talent to the max. The company did not spiral down and lose sales like other brands have had to deal with in the past. There was no big apology stated to gain back the support and following of the brand. Off-White simply knew what they had to say without taking fault or acknowledging the backlash, they just restated what their brand

represents, and why they make designs. This is why it is important to be a relatable brand that builds trust and support with its following.

The public shed light on all the issues with race and exclusion in the fashion industry, falling on one person's shoulders. This whole situation in the end brought more attention to the changes that need to be made all around in the fashion industry. The public was criticizing an African American designer because they wanted him to get the job done and make the change in fashion, but that is a lot of pressure to put on one person. People argued that our society expects black designers to fix all the issues of race in the fashion industry, as if they are a savior. So when they do not do so because it is an issue bigger than them, people get irritated and look for ways to tear them down. These fashion designers cannot carry the whole community. Once this argument was made people go very quiet, and the blame for diversity issues and exclusion was not focused on Off-White anymore.

This just proves that Off-White is almost an untouchable respected brand. What Virgil Abloh and the company have built is high end streetwear, that is supported by a loyal following. Abloh spends time posting videos on his social media, to show how his designs are created, and tries to keep his following in the know. Since there is so much trust between the company and the consumers, they were able to solve the whole diversity situation very well, and help bring attention to a bigger issue in the fashion world. Abloh and the company in their statements, owned their business, owned what they stood for, and made no apology or even acted as if they were in the wrong. They handled the situation with confidence and clarity. Compared to other

brands and companies, this was executed perfectly and business never took a fall. This will help set the business up for greater success and support.

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