

## How a Shirt Covered in Swastikas Ends Up in a Department Store

### News Article



Retail supply chains are so complex that sometimes a Nazi symbol can slip through the cracks.

The shirt looked, at first glance, quite simple, even humdrum; a short-sleeved, black button-down, from the streetwear label Airwalk, priced at \$12.99, and patterned with tiny, white polka dots.

Except they weren't dots. They were swastikas, roughly 14,000 of them in all.



How exactly a shirt covered in swastikas made it through the design process, much less crammed into a rack in a Ross Dress for Less store in Florida where Bloomberg found it this week, can probably be chalked up to retailers' vast and complex retail supply chains, where errors can often go overlooked.

The shirt had been designed by a company that licensed the Airwalk brand, then manufactured in India, shipped to a U.S. warehouse, and delivered to Ross stores, according to people involved in the process. Apparently nobody flagged it along the way. Ross Stores Inc., a discount clothing chain with more than 1,500 stores across the U.S., said in a statement that it was removing the shirt from stores.

Several layers of quality control are supposed to catch such items before they hit store racks. Many retailers hire auditors to visit factories and inspect the goods; their buyers often host apparel-makers, too, searching through designs to pick out what they want to stock in their stores. Off-price retailers such as Ross, however, often buy from brands and therefore aren't involved in the production process, although they will also order some merchandise manufactured just for them.

The items they pick must then pass through random audits while being transported to warehouses or distribution centres. Final checks are performed in stores, when associates unbox clothes and hang them on racks.

Yet accidental Nazi imagery isn't uncommon in retail, and the swastika, a sacred religious symbol in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism long before the Nazis hijacked it, pops up regularly. Hallmark Cards Inc. recalled Hanukkah gift wrap with swastikas threaded into a pattern. Mango sold a shirt with lightning bolts that evoked

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the SS insignia. Zara, owned by Inditex, the world's largest apparel retailer, has pulled handbags with green swastikas, a children's T-shirt that resembled the clothes Nazis forced Jews to wear, and a skirt festooned with frogs resembling the ones recently co-opted as hate symbols.



Zara's 'Striped Sheriff t-shirt

Then there are those who sell the swastika on purpose, like the T-shirt seller that tried to rebrand it as a "symbol of peace" with \$22 rainbow-swastika shirts this summer. Backlash was swift, and the company pulled the styles.

In the case of the shirt found at Ross, it appears that nobody immediately noticed the thousands of swastikas. In retail, it happens.

"When you're buying off the line, which a lot of big retailers do, it becomes a lot more difficult to track," said Manik Aryapadi, a principal in the retail practice of consulting firm A.T. Kearney Inc. Fashion retailers with their own design houses run into these problems a lot less frequently, if at all, because they create styles themselves and work

with designs so closely, he said. "You don't see a lot of these issues."

The shirt at Ross bore the label of Airwalk, a skateboard footwear and apparel brand that is owned by Authentic Brands Group LLC (ABG), parent company to such other brands as Aeropostale, Juicy Couture and Tapout. Ross Stores declined to share details of how the shirt wound up on its rack, but details from ABG and its supplier shed some light on what did, and didn't, happen before it got there.

A spokesperson for ABG initially said that what turned out to be swastikas were supposed to have been tiny reproductions of Airwalk's "ollie man" logo, one of the brand's trademarks, then later said they were actually a version of a different star pattern. The design was created by a New York-based apparel importer called Fashion Options Inc. that had licensed the Airwalk brand, and it never underwent ABG's approval process.

Typically, a licensee would submit a design to ABG for approval before sending it to production. In this case, that step was skipped because Fashion Options' head of design had recently left the company, said Michael Haddad, the company's chief executive officer. Haddad also said the end product looked different from the design his company had sent to the factory in India. "It was [the factory owner's] mistake, and it became confusingly similar to a swastika," he said. "It was nothing like what we purchased."

The shipment of shirts from the factory abroad arrived in a public warehouse and appears never to

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have been checked before it was sent to Ross stores, Haddad said. He estimated that several thousand pieces were sent out, a small number in mass-market retail and said the problem was brought to his attention about a week ago, after Ross became aware of it.

Fashion Options and Ross agreed to pull the shirts, which Ross will destroy. "There was nothing malicious intended here," said Haddad. "I'm an Orthodox Jew. The problem was contained. It was remedied."

*Source: Bloomberg*

Instances such as these can be avoided by ensuring that a few simple steps are put into place. For example, taking ownership for each step of the process and encouraging people to speak up about issues, prevents responsibility for errors being passed on to the next person.

If your organisation could benefit from process redesign, contact a member of the Linea team who will be happy to assist.

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