

Balenciaga: Is there anything worse than not being talked about?

MANAGEMENT DECISIONS

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Balenciaga: a return to the past for the future

The case we have illustrated is very recent (end of 2022), and despite some action taken by the brand, we can consider it as still ongoing. From the moment in which the scandal erupted until today, Balenciaga is suffering both in terms of reputation and stock prices. As of now, only some speculations can be made regarding the brand's future and how it will be able to deal with this problem in the long-term perspective. Balenciaga is slowly starting to go back on track, but uncertainty relies on how their reputation can be restored (or if it can be restored at all after such a dramatic event).

As quickly as the 'Gift Collection' campaign was launched (November 16th, 2022), it was also canceled. In fact, as soon as Balenciaga started to receive heavy backlash because of it, the campaign was removed from the official website and social media platforms.

The first words after the scandal came from the photographer himself. On November 23rd 2022, Gabriele Galimberti posted his statement on Instagram, claiming that he was not in charge of deciding the models, theme, and any details regarding the direction of the campaign. He also emphasized how pedophilia is something "completely different" from what can be seen in his photos and that there is nothing explicit in them. Finally, in the same statement, he declared that he had only taken the pictures for the 'Gift Collection' campaign and that he knew nothing about the others that gave fuel to the situation¹.

One day after the photographer's statement, Balenciaga spoke to acknowledge the controversy (November 24th, 2022). Balenciaga released a brief apology statement both on the official website and on their social media platforms, stating: "*We sincerely apologize for any offense our holiday campaign may have caused. Our Plush Bear Bags should not have been featured with children in this campaign.*".² After this apology, on the same social media platform, another one was issued a few hours later, regarding the campaign that contained the court documents and the infamous book: "*We apologize for displaying unsettling documents in our campaign. We take this matter very seriously and are taking legal action against the parties responsible for creating the set and including unapproved items for our Spring 23 campaign photo shoot. We strongly condemn the abuse of children in any form. We stand for children's safety and well-being.*". Related to this statement, on the 27th of November, the company filed a \$25 million lawsuit against North Six, the production company of the set, and the set designer Nicholas Des Jardins because of their omissions and inexplicable acts. Balenciaga's point was that they were not aware of the presence of both objects in the campaign.

After this exposé, the brand also decided to deactivate their Twitter account (where the polemics were more intense) and to delete all their posts both from Instagram and Facebook, leaving the profiles empty, if not for a picture that was

¹ Gabriele Galimberti via Instagram, 23rd November 2022 [<https://www.instagram.com/p/CIImJLKSvzx/>]

² <https://www.instagram.com/balenciaga/>

posted on the 28th of November 2022. This one recapped their position with both campaigns adding a list of actions that needed to be taken to be able to move forward. Moreover, Balenciaga has removed the possibility to comment on the said post. Could this be seen as a moment of reflection or just as a way of not having to face all the backlash?

On the same day, Business of Fashion, one of the most influential resources in luxury fashion, announced on their Twitter profile that, following Balenciaga's ad scandal, they had revoked the Global Voices Award prize from Balenciaga's creative director, Demna Gvasalia.

A few days later, on the 2nd of December, the creative director Demna went public for the first time by apologizing via Instagram for his involvement in the oversight of the "Gift Collection" campaign. He also admitted that, despite his tendency and preference for always provoking thoughts with his campaigns, he never had the intention to achieve that with such a delicate topic as child abuse. He also adds "*I need to learn from this, listen and engage with child protection organizations to know how I can contribute and help on this terrible subject*³". Soon after, the luxury brand put out another post (coupled with pinned stories on all their social media platforms) listing some practical and concrete steps to pursue both in the short and "hopefully" in the long-term, like dropping the lawsuit against North Six and Des Jardins, devolving a significant amount of money to child-protective organizations, putting more effort into developing a more symbiotic creative process inside of the brand and reorganizing the image department to guarantee an alignment with the corporate guidelines.

After all of this, the brand remained in the shadows for many weeks, until the day it came back into the scene. On the 26th of January 2023, the brand started to slowly publish again on their social media platforms, as well as update their website. The posts are about the new collection that will be launched for the spring, and they were still with the comment section private, showing a calmer and cleaner version of the brand, with a simple photoshoot featuring adult models on a solid color background. No details, no strange poses, no particular theme.

As of today, 23rd of February 2023, everything disappeared from Balenciaga's social media accounts, and the initial attempt to initiate a new 'era' for the brand, was temporarily suppressed. Specifically, the creative director in an interview for Vogue, stated that a fresh start cannot start from a single post on Instagram and that something more is needed in this case. He shared the future plans for the *maison*, saying that a comeback is expected on the 5th of March 2023, for the Paris Fashion Week. With this show, composed just of clothes, music, and lights, with no show-off behaviors, he hopes that people will be able to understand that Balenciaga learned the lesson. Demna spoke again, sharing the new guidelines for the brand: simplicity, elegance, tradition, and focus on the artistic work and not on the spectacle itself. It is basically a return to the pure craftsmanship essence.

³ Demna Gvasalia via Instagram, 2nd December 2022 [<https://www.instagram.com/demna/>]