The Power of Consumers on Social Media: A Case Study of Balenciaga's Crisis Communication

Paula Gárgoles(✉) 📷 and Gabriela Ambás 📷

Universidad Panamericana, Ciudad de México, Mexico
{pgargoles,gambas}@up.edu.mx

Abstract. The French luxury brand, Balenciaga, recently faced its most important communication crisis. On November 16th 2022, the brand released its holiday gifting campaign featuring children surrounded by sadomasochism-inspired teddy bears/handbags and received immediate backlash from the public, who accused the brand of sexualizing children and promoting pedophilia. The outrage went viral on social media - mainly on Tiktok - with the hashtags #burnbalenciaga and #cancelbalenciaga, which have accumulated more than 300 million views. Balenciaga suffered an incalculable damage on its reputation, having two flagship stores vandalized and a viral online boycott. This investigation follows the case study methodology, by analyzing the timeline of events, the brand's statements and response, the viral effect of the boycott on social media and the ultimate affectations that the brand underwent due to the crisis. The conclusions reveal that on one hand there are some social anethical boundaries that not even well-positioned and beloved brands can afford to cross, and that slow, unclear and unaccountable answers compose a terrible strategy of crisis management, and on the other hand, the power of consumers on social media has gained enough strength to damage brands like Balenciaga.

Keywords: Balenciaga · communication crisis · consumer · social media · reputation

1 Introduction

Balenciaga, the French luxury brand, has faced the most important crisis of its history. Not only because of the reaction of users on social media but also because of the theme: the firm has been accused of promoting pedophilia and the sexualization of minors. Demna Gvasaglia, Balenciaga's creative director since 2015, has stood out for his controversies in designs and marketing by reaching the limits of what is acceptable [1]. For example, he has sold destroyed old sneakers and luxury bags that looked like chip bags from Lays.

The new controversy has exceeded limits that are difficult to escape unscathed. The accusation of promoting pedophilia and the sexualization of minors with sado-masochistic traits has affected the reputation of the brand and has plunged it into its most important crisis. The spark that ignited the crisis came from Twitter with a tweet

from @shoe0nhead [2], exposing the brand for promoting child pornography. The next day, the tweet appeared on television and spread on social media, especially on Tik-Tok with the hashtags #burnbalenciaga and #cancelbalenciaga, which have accumulated more than 300 million views. The backlash also reached the streets with the vandalization of two flagship stores in Los Angeles and London 3 [1]. The controversy led Balenciaga to an important communication crisis that profoundly damaged the brand's reputation: social media users, media outlets, celebrities and even a lawsuit were involved.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Fashion Crisis Communication

Authors Pearson and Clair [4: 60] define a crisis as "a low probability, high impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made quickly". Additionally, Dubrovski [5: 333] defined a company crisis as a short-term, undesired, unfavorable and critical state in the company, which has derived from both internal and external causes and which directly endangers the further existence and growth of the company. In that sense, crisis management follows two fundamental objectives: firstly stopping adverse trends and handling the crisis situation (survival), and secondly reaching a turning point (redirecting) and ensuring the foundations for new development. In order to analyze crises in a more detailed manner, Mitroff and Pearson [6] identify seven groups of major crisis events: economic attacks, environmental accidents, occupational health diseases, psycho events (e.g., terrorism, sabotage, product tampering), damage to reputation, informational attacks, and breaks (e.g., recalls, product defects, computer breakdowns).

In the fashion field, the reputation-related crises are the most common, where sometimes economic-related crises can also be involved. As Sábada et al. [7: 10] assure: "In fashion, reputation is a business, an asset as long as it is good. This means that brands that have favorable reputation have more loyal customers that are more dedicated and that buy a broader range of products". In general terms, reputation is how an organization is perceived by its public and is a crucial resource worthy of protection and concern during a crisis [8]. Since the late 90 s, an organization's reputation is recognized as a valuable asset [9–11]. If we focus on the crises in the fashion sector, the greater ones have originated from social causes: child exploitation in the case of Nike, the collapse of a factory in Bangladesh or the scandal from the factory in Turkey that had not paid its employees [12], all of which have negatively affected the reputation of brands.

Decades ago, traditional crises had other parameters and, since the rise of digital technologies and social media, their pace, scope and impact have multiplied [13], which means that they can quickly go viral.

Prior to social media and digital platforms, fashion brands allowed themselves to use scandals as marketing or promotional strategies, but now they have become a problem that must be managed and that can damage their reputation if not handled effectively [14, 15]. With the presence of social media, crises in fashion brands have significantly increased in the last 5 years. Some of the most relevant have been those of Dolce &

Gabanna, Prada, Uniqlo or H&M for accusations of racism, and Carolina Herrera and Gucci for cultural appropriation [14–16].

Before the pandemic, the most important social media in the fashion industry was Instagram due to its mostly visual nature, which resulted in brands spending great efforts in creativity and image production, creating a place for fans to get inspired and allowing consumers to interact with one another and create communities [17]. Nevertheless, during and after the pandemic, TikTok came into the digital map and stayed. The chinese social media, TikTok, is the fastest growing app in the post-pandemic era [18]. The format is dynamic and audiovisual, which allows users to post only short videos [19], and the content is focused on entertainment [20]. The target audience of TikTok is teenagers and young adults: 40% of its users vary between the age of 10–19 years [19]. That is why a fashion communication crisis - with a strong target on Generation Z - would have an impact on TikTok. This field of academic research still has scarce literature to review due to its recent appearance. Digital and social media platforms, which act as loudspeakers for committed citizens, require from fashion brands a greater effort to care for different cultures and approaches. It is interesting to observe how fashion "is becoming a place where culture is being discussed, defended, and (re)negotiated among different parties" [16: 120].

2.2 Consumer Empowerment on Social Media

The rise of new digital technologies has brought a shift in the dynamics and interactions between brands, consumers and online communities, leading to the empowerment of the digital consumer. Social media platforms, where the traditional communication model has shifted from a one-to-many scheme towards a many-to-many scheme [21], have changed the balance of power between brands and consumers. The evolution of digital technologies has drastically changed the consumers' wants and needs, who now prefer to interact directly with brands and other consumers, while sharing their opinions and preferences publicly [22]. Designers and brands now face a new digital landscape where the balance of power has tilted towards the consumer, and the sources of information can come from different actors such as customers, competitors, observers, employees and online communities.

User generated content and two-way communication are the most important factors of web 2.0 [22], and have been crucial to the empowerment process of the digital consumers. By creating and participating through comments, reviews, testimonials, videos, texts or animated contents, consumers are capable of influencing the values, attitudes and behaviors of other people in their network. This opportunity of interaction in digital media has been key in how consumers experience empowerment through a wide variety of elements that increase their freedom of choice and action [23]. Furthermore, consumers believe that brands have an important role to play in social conversations in the public sphere, mainly centennials who became by 2020 the most politically active age group on social platforms [24]. As creators and active participants of the digital sphere, consumers have the power to demand, praise and cancel the actions that brands take online and offline. And with such empowerment, online consumers and netizens act as constant *vigilantes* that track every step or misstep of public actors, and are quick to call out anything that doesn't align with their values.

In that sense, anger is the most viral emotion on the Internet [25] due to its long lasting effect, and can lead to a boycott if the crisis is not managed efficiently. Friedman [26: 97] describes boycotts as attempts of one or more parties to accomplish certain objectives by urging individual consumers to abstain from making specific purchases in the market. In the era of social media, boycotts can also have a profound effect on the reputation of a brand. Online consumers can call for boycotts due to diverse issues, such as racial, environmental, human rights and political matters. The reasons may vary, but the social causes that are supported on the public sphere are usually aligned with fundamental moral and ethical values that most netizens share. In the case of the Balenciaga scandal - and boycott - that is analyzed throughout this paper, the brand overlooked and defied one of the most important social agreements that has been established since the XX century [27]: to protect child rights and safeguard their health, safety and morals.

3   Methodology

This research paper was based on the case study methodology under the approach suggested by Robert K. Yin [28: 18], who stated that "a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context" in order to understand its complexity as a social issue. It focuses on describing, understanding and predicting phenomena regarding processes, organizations, groups, industries [29] and managerial practices, among others.

The investigation initiated with a literature review of crisis management in the fashion industry and the empowerment of social media users in the digital sphere. Subsequently, after an exhaustive research based on secondary sources, the main findings and conclusions of the case study were analyzed and reported. A qualitative analysis regarding the timeline of events, the actors involved, and the communication strategies that were taken during Balenciaga's scandal composes the main structure of the article, complemented by a quantitative analysis composed by the compilation of social media posts related to the scandal. Specifically, we focused on the mentions of the most replicated hashtags that included the name of the brand - #burnbalenciaga, #cancelbalenciaga, #balenciagascandal, #boycottbalenciaga, #balenciagagate and #nomorebalenciaga - in TikTok and Instagram from October 20 to December 20, 2022. As well as an analysis of the brand's performance in its official TikTok - @abalenciaga - and Instagram - @balenciaga - accounts during the same period of time.

For the quantitative research, Fanpage Karma was used as a monitoring tool to measure likes, comments, shares and interaction/engagement levels [30]. Fanpage Karma converts raw TikTok and Instagram analytics into a report that highlights essential social media utilization and engagement metrics for social media [31].

4   Results and Analysis

4.1   Balenciaga's Case Study

On November 16th 2022, Balenciaga released its new holiday gifting campaign featuring children posing in their bedrooms alongside the brand's products spread like toys. The campaign was shot by Gabriele Galimberti, a photographer recognized for her images

of people surrounded by their collections of personal objects such as toys, guns and medicines. After a few days of unnoticeable reaction from the public, the campaign started generating angry criticism for the images displaying children with the brand's S&M inspired teddy bears, bringing up accusations and comments about Balenciaga sexualizing children.

The backlash grew even more when some social media users found pedophilic messages in another campaign from the brand's Spring/Summer 2023 collection which was published weeks before and showcased Isabelle Huppert in an office scene with a legal document in her bag that coincided with a Supreme Court decision regarding child pornography [32].

On November 21st, the crisis caught fire when a tweet by social media user @shoe0nhead that read "*the brand "Balenciaga" just did a uh….. Interesting… Photoshoot for their new products recently which included a very purposely poorly hidden court document about 'virtual child porn'…normal stuff*" went viral with the hashtags #burnbalenciaga and #cancelbalenciaga. Up until January 2023, the publication has obtained 33,500 retweets, 11,200 mentions and 127,000 likes [2].

November 22nd, marked the day when the first media outlet picked up the story. *Fox News* commentator, Tucker Carlson, openly accused the brand of promoting child pornography. So, by the next day, Balenciaga released its first apology - which has now been deleted - that read: "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. We apologize for displaying unsettling documents in our campaign" [3]. The brand also announced that it would take legal action against the parties responsible for creating the set.

A few days later, on November 25th, the brand filed a lawsuit for 25 million dollars against North Six Inc. (the campaign's production company) and Nicholas Des Jardins (set designer of the photoshoot). The summons read: "Balenciaga believes that Defendants' inexplicable acts and omissions were malevolent or, at the very least, extraordinarily reckless" [33] and placed all responsibility of the campaign's crisis on the accused. In a statement made by Susan Scafidi of Fordham University's Fashion Law Institute for digital media outlet *Diet Prada*: "Balenciaga filed an immediate, media-worthy lawsuit in order to disavow the campaign in the strongest possible terms and offer the public a different pair of villains in the form of the production company and set designer" [33].

By November 27th, the only celebrity linked to the brand that spoke publicly about the scandal was Kim Kardashian, when she tweeted on her personal account: "I am currently re-evaluating my relationship with the brand, basing it off their willingness to accept accountability for something that should have never happened to begin with - & the actions I am expecting to see them take to protect children" [34]. The next day - after Kim Kardashian's statement - the crisis found its climax with the most Google searches of the words "Balenciaga scandal". The United States, which belongs to Kering's second largest market and generates 34% of its annual income, was the country where most of the searches came from [35].

Indeed, Balenciaga's failure of giving a quick response to the controversy, as well as its initial strategy to portray itself as a victim and place the full blame on the production company and set designer, kindled the anger of the consumers and digital media outlets.

At least two Balenciaga stores - in Los Angeles' Rodeo Drive and London's Bond Street - were vandalized and social media users posted videos destroying the brand's products. As a response, on November 28th, the brand issued a statement admitting "a series of grievous errors for which Balenciaga takes responsibility", and announced ongoing "internal and external investigations" as well as reaching out to "organizations who specialize in child protection and aim at ending child abuse and exploitation" [36].

Finally, on December 2nd, Demna - Balenciaga's creative director - and Cédric Charbit - president and CEO - released separate statements of apology. Demna took responsibility and apologized for "the wrong artistic choice of concept" and stated [37]: "As much as I would sometimes like to provoke a thought through my work, I would NEVER have an intention to do that with such an awful subject as child abuse that I condemn. Period." For his part, Charbit reiterated "my sincere apologies for the offense caused and take my responsibility" [38] and listed an extensive set of actions that the brand would take in order to "learn from our mistakes as an organization", such as new control instances for content validation, a reorganization of their image department, dropping the lawsuit against the third parties involved in the campaign, and donations to organizations that care for children safety.

Since the scandal, Balenciaga has kept a low-profile on social media and public appearances. Demna canceled his appearance in *Business of Fashion*'s VOICES 2022 annual gathering and London's Fashion Awards by the British Fashion Council, where he was initially a candidate for Designer of the Year - but was later dropped from the list for the award [39]. Additionally, Balenciaga will not be in the next Haute Couture show in Paris. The Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode has released its provisional calendar of the fashion shows that will take place from January 23 to 16, 2023 and Balenciaga is absent [40]. The response of celebrities to the crisis has been discreet. Apart from Kim Kardashian's statement, no other has spoken on their social media. The singer Dua Lipa has dispensed with the Balenciaga outfits for her Future Nostalgia concert tour and the model Bella Hadid deleted a photo of the campaign she did with the brand from her Instagram. On the other hand, the actress Nicole Kidman did not remove the photos of the campaign with Balenciaga on her Instagram account, which caused more than 13,000 comments of criticism [41].

4.2 Balenciaga's Performance on Social Media

Creative director, Demna Gvasalia, linked Balenciaga to social media with a strong digital strategy, thus approaching Generation Z to the brand. In a 2018 interview with Highsnobiety, the designer stated that "most of my designs are inspired by the screen" [6]. One day before the publication of the controversial campaign, Balenciaga closed its Twitter account in response to Elon Musk acquiring the company. This was expressed by Demna Gvasaglia on his own Instagram account.

The following tables represent an analysis of the official accounts of Balenciaga on Instagram and TikTok before the crisis (Table 1) and after the crisis (Table 2).

It is striking that after the crisis - which went viral on social media - Balenciaga froze its two most important social media platforms. The brand stopped posting, muted all comments, and didn't speak out. As a consequence, its growth and performance also froze. If we go deeper into Instagram with the number of followers, we can see that they

Table 1. Data one month before the crisis: from October 20, 2022 to November 20, 2022

|	Followers	Followers's growth	Performance index	Engagement	Total of Reactions
Instagram	14.4 M	0.74%	20%	0.58%	2.2 M
TikTok	3.1 M	6.9%	43%	5.9%	1.2 M

Source: Authors with Fanpage Karma

Table 2. Data one month after the crisis: from November 20, 2022 to December 20, 2022

	Followers	Followers's growth	Performance index	Engagement	Total of Reactions
Instagram	14.3 M	−0,43%	2%	0.38%	716.000
TikTok	3.1 M	0%	1%	0.71%	22.000

Source: Authors with Fanpage Karma

lost 100,000 followers after the crisis, and the day they suffered the biggest drop (34,730 less followers) was November 28, 2022 (Fig. 1), which coincides with their last apology and Kim Kardashian's statement from the day before.
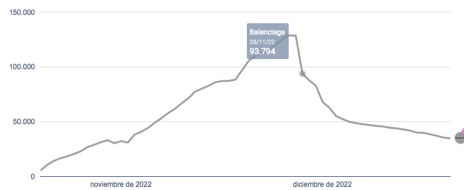
Fig. 1. Chart of Balenciaga's Instagram followers from October 20 to December 20, 2022. Source: Authors with Fanpage Karma

Although TikTok is the second most important social media for the brand, it is the one with the highest growth in followers (6.9%) and above all, highest engagement (5.9%). The chinese app is the social media platform that is mainly targeted to Gen Z and, for Balenciaga, it was a way to connect with this audience. Even if the crisis started on Twitter, it went viral on TikTok, and it has been the first crisis that a luxury brand has undergone on this platform. For the quantitative research, the views of the most important hashtags have been quantified [42] (Table 3) demonstrating the virality of the brand's cancellation process, the boycott and even the burning of Balenciaga products.

In TikTok, the most viral hashtag was #cancelbalenciaga with more than 280 million views, followed by #boycottbalenciaga with more than 180 million views. There is an interesting hashtag that is #balenciagagate, which refers to how the connection between the brand and the sexualization of minors has been uncovered. In total, there are more

than 600 million views of videos on TikTok against Balenciaga. These data measure the magnitude of this unprecedented crisis on TikTok.

Table 3. TikTok hashtags

TIKTOK HASHTAGS	Visualizations
#burnbalenciaga	20.7 M
#cancelbalenciaga	286.5 M
#balenciagascandal	63.8 M
#boycottbalenciaga	186 M
#balenciagagate	62.7 M
#nomorebalenciaga	6.1 M
Total	626.8 M

Source: Authors from the TikTok website

5   Conclusions

Even though Balenciaga, under the direction of Demna Gvasalia since 2015, gained substantial awareness and positioned itself as an interesting and disruptive brand during the past years, the holiday gifting campaign scandal of November - December 2022 proved that there are certain limits that not even beloved and well-positioned brands are allowed to cross. It also demonstrates that a bad response to a communication crisis can cost the reputation of a brand. Balenciaga had a slow and unclear response to the initial backlash that ultimately led to the big crisis. The brand took days to fully address the issue, published several and inconclusive statements - that only made it more viral and media worthy of attention - and failed to assume responsibility.

The brand's reactive strategy was initially a "Deny Response Option", of the scape-goat type: when the crisis manager blames a person or group outside the organization for the crisis [13]. In the case of Balenciaga, tha blame was placed on the producer of the campaign and Nicholas Des Jardins, set designer for the photo-shoot. The brand even sued them in court asking for a compensation of 25 million dollars. The public punished the deflective strategy, since no one believed that the brand was not aware of the props used for the campaign. The last apology was a "Deal Response Option" [13], of the apology type. This happens when a manager or spokesperson indicates that the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness. It is the most convincing option but Balenciaga took too much time to take it: 7 days after the crisis broke out, when the story was already in the media and viral on social media.

The Balenciaga crisis is an example of consumer empowerment on social media. The brand did not realize that linking a fashion campaign with minors and objects related to sadomasochism or child pornography was going to have such a virulent and negative

reaction on social media. If we add up all the views on TikTok with the hashtags against Balenciaga, it reaches more than 600 million. Balenciaga was used to controversies in the media but not among TikTok users, the social media that was growing the most for them. In this sense, the silence on social media also draws attention. The crisis originated there and they did not know how to manage it properly. Since the crisis, Balenciaga has not published anything on TikTok, and it has restricted the comments on their videos. In the case of Instagram, it has only published a post without comments as well. With these actions, Balenciaga has missed an important opportunity of listening and communicating with its followers.

The crisis is very recent and we still have little perspective to understand the consequences that it will have for Balenciaga: both economically and reputation-wise. We only know that it has plunged the brand into unprecedented silence on its social media platforms and that it will not participate in the next Haute Couture show in Paris in January, 2023 [40].

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