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## Image Repair Theory: The Balenciaga Controversy

### Introduction

Making mistakes throughout the course of one's life is inevitable; it's how humans learn, grow, navigate challenges, and they help build the foundation of one's life. Along with that comes hurting people along the way, forgetting what others have done for each other, or occasionally participating in behaviors that conflict with one's moral compass. When pursuing wrong upon others, the morally correct thing to do would be to issue an apology. William Benoit, a well-renowned scholar on the topic of apologia rhetoric, provides many tactics regarding how one may attempt to repair their image both interpersonally and publicly—known formally as Image Repair Theory (IRT). IRT suggests that when one's image is actively threatened (especially publicly), they will typically partake in calculated conveyance in order to rehabilitate public perception. Benoit categorizes these strategies into these five particular categories (which also contain smaller sub-categories): Denial, Evading Responsibility, Reduce Offensiveness, Corrective Action, and Mortification. All of these procedures were implemented in a public apology announced by the luxury fashion brand Balenciaga back in 2022. In spite of Balenciaga's utilization of all five IRT tactics, the brand failed to repair their image due to the apology conveying an appearance of blame shifting and evasion rather than one of taking accountability.

### Situation Background

In the fall of 2022, the luxury fashion house received harsh criticism regarding its recent ad campaigns. The first advertisement for their "Gift Collection" campaign, which was in

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support of the brand's Spring/Summer 2023 Collection that debuted in the fall at Paris Fashion Week, featured an image of a child holding a teddy bear-shaped handbag—a concept that was by no means ironic for the brand as they have always been known for their creative avant-garde style pieces. However, the shock was the way the bear was dressed—draped in bondage, fishnets, ropes, cuffs, etc., and the public (particularly social media users) instantly perceived the campaign as a sexualization of children. To make matters worse, the campaign to follow displayed Supreme Court documents that were connected to child pornography laws and Kim Kardashian (the brand's ambassador of the time) voiced her disapproval of the brand on Twitter. It may seem unsurprising that the similarities between such campaigns led to an outpouring of conspiracy theories on the internet. A few days following the release of the second campaign, Balenciaga took down both ads and quickly released a statement denouncing child exploitation. Numerous apologies were posted to the brand's Instagram page, but the public didn't seem to take to any of it. After all, a brand as enormous as Balenciaga must pass through multiple stages of approval before releasing a campaign of any sort.

#### Audience

The demographic this apology was intended for was certainly loyal customers to the brand, individuals working for the brand directly and/or working in the fashion industry, surely celebrities and/or brand ambassadors, parents, stakeholders, creative professionals who admire the vision Balenciaga projects, etc. However, just because this is a high fashion brand, does not mean it can't affect those unable to afford it. The high fashion space sets the stage for all fashion as contemporary designers and fast-fashion brands follow the trends set by these luxury

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designers. With that in mind, anyone who likes the aesthetic Balenciaga promotes will buy a similar piece from another brand that best suits their economic situation. Therefore, regardless of whether someone is buying directly from them or not, this consumer-base is yet another demographic well-deserving of an apology. These categories of people account for a very large portion of the population, and that says a great deal about the magnitude of the scandal. With the widespread and diverse audience Balenciaga has, it was quite impossible to appease everyone, however, the path taken in their apology satisfied almost no one.

Analysis

This paper will touch on one of the apologies given by Balenciaga via Instagram. In Emma Mayer's article for *Newsweek*, she cites a majority of the remarks from this Instagram post. This first line being evaluated relates to the category 'Evading Responsibility', and the subcategory is defeasibility. The apology reads, "This was a wrong choice by Balenciaga, combined with our failure in assessing and validating images" (Mayer). Reading into this remark, Balenciaga is suggesting that due to a lack of awareness and/or information did their mistake occur. They are attempting to persuade the public that they are sorry, but 'it wasn't necessarily their fault'. That fails to comply with the characteristics of an adequate apology because they did not own up to their mistake within those words, and also because that is such an enormous mistake for an enormous entity to make. That sentence is a direct hit to their credibility (ethos) as a company.

Further down on the post, the brand shifts the blame of the situation entirely onto others (falling underneath Denial in Benoit's IRT). Regarding the photo shoots taken for the campaign,

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the brand claims, “All the items included in this shooting were provided by third parties that confirmed in writing that these props were fake office documents” (Mayer). Not only does this verbiage declare an immature attitude by making excuses, but it also is an example of minimization (a subcategory of Reduce Offensiveness). They slightly aim to downplay their responsibility in the matter because it was ‘not managed by them’ and therefore makes it ‘less of a blow to their duties personally’. Additionally, the incorporation of denial/blame-shifting was a clear dig at Impression Management. Balenciaga believed that by diminishing their responsibility that they made the public think of them in a higher regard. Then again, the brand was not successful in altering that view at that moment.

In relation to the blame of third parties previously mentioned, there is an accident mentioned in the sentence to follow: “They turned out to be real legal papers most likely coming from the filming of a television drama.” This excerpt was an effort to appear sincerely undeserving of liability and subtly asks for empathy surrounding this ‘mistake’. Once more, for staff members to bring in props to the set for this campaign, organize every object the way the photographer wants it to perfection, and not notice the content that these papers contain—that seems incredibly unlikely and an extremely false stance to be taking on the matter. Agreeing with such a point, Kim Kardashian mentioned in her Twitter post that the scandal was “...something that should have never happened to begin with” (Issawi).—an opinion many millions of social media users also aligned themselves with.

Benoit’s strategy of Reducing Offensiveness contains a smaller category relating to bolstering. This section of the apology demonstrates this idea quite well by mentioning that,

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“The inclusion of these unapproved documents was the result of reckless negligence for which Balenciaga has filed a complaint” (Mayer). By mentioning that they had ‘filed a complaint’, they are highlighting the action that they’re taking in hopes that it understates the situation. On the other hand, it is clear that there was a lack of supervision overall from Balenciaga’s team to begin with, which is certainly not a positive reflection on the company.

A better attempt to mend Balenciaga’s reputation following this unfortunate incident was usage of mortification. Located near the bottom of the apology, the company begins wrapping up the post like this: “We take full accountability for our lack of oversight and control of the documents in the background and we could have done things differently” (Mayer). This is perhaps the only somewhat effective anecdote uttered because it is nothing but a complete acknowledgement of wrongdoings. It is a true declaration of regret that tactfully asks its audience for forgiveness and understanding.

The final method the post touches on is Corrective Action. Quite self explanatory in nature, but this technique essentially vows to the audience that the organization is doing its best to fix any problems that may have been caused. Balenciaga makes this promise in the following terms, “We are laying the groundwork with organizations who specialize in child protection and aims at ending child abuse and exploitation” (Mayer). While Balenciaga states that they’re allegedly ‘laying the groundwork’ and are fighting against this tragic cause, this pledge remains relatively ambiguous. They could have instead specified if there are any specific companies, organizations, or charities that they are cooperating with to support the cause. Because it was so

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vague, it led the audience to question if they were actually doing anything at all and ended up hurting their credibility greatly.

#### Overall Recommendations

As a whole, this apology issued by Balenciaga was rather tough to defend from the start because the images in the campaign were astonishingly bizarre. Their biggest mistake was to immediately shift the blame to third parties regarding the photo shoots for the ads—it only made the company appear more guilty. As learned in persuasion, typically the greatest way to defend such a public image is through mortification, mortification, and more mortification. People are much more likely to look past the issues and forgive more quickly when they feel they received a genuine apology. There was an intense lack of that method in the entirety of this Instagram post. Finally, an initiative to give the audience more clarification on what exactly those next steps will be to combat child pornography/child exploitation would be desperately necessary in repairing the image of Balenciaga.

#### Conclusion

Although Balenciaga did make use of several Image Repair Theory techniques, the excessive criticism and excuses thrown at third parties made themselves look worse. They should have focused more heavily on providing their audience with a genuine apology, particularly more mortification, and they perhaps could have received better feedback from the public than they did. The attempt to manipulate Impression Management concentrated more so on what the media thought of them than making sincere reparations. Such a mistake made their customers lose trust in the brand. This entire controversy is an exemplary model on how corporate crisis management

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should not be handled. At the end of the day, authenticity, detail-oriented corrective action, and taking complete responsibility ultimately prevail.

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Appendix



**balenciaga** \*\*\*

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**WE WOULD LIKE TO ADDRESS THE CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING OUR RECENT AD CAMPAIGNS. WE STRONGLY CONDEMN CHILD ABUSE; IT WAS NEVER OUR INTENT TO INCLUDE IT IN OUR NARRATIVE. THE TWO SEPARATE AD CAMPAIGNS IN QUESTION REFLECT A SERIES OF GRIEVOUS ERRORS FOR WHICH BALENCIAGA TAKES RESPONSIBILITY.**

**THE FIRST CAMPAIGN, THE GIFT COLLECTION CAMPAIGN, FEATURED CHILDREN WITH PLUSH BEAR BAGS DRESSED IN WHAT SOME HAVE LABELLED BDSM-INSPIRED OUTFITS. OUR PLUSH BEAR BAGS AND THE GIFT COLLECTION SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN FEATURED WITH CHILDREN. THIS WAS A WRONG CHOICE BY BALENCIAGA, COMBINED WITH OUR FAILURE IN ASSESSING AND VALIDATING IMAGES. THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THIS LIES WITH BALENCIAGA ALONE.**

**THE SECOND, SEPARATE CAMPAIGN FOR SPRING 2023, WHICH WAS MEANT TO REPLICATE A BUSINESS OFFICE ENVIRONMENT, INCLUDED A PHOTO WITH A PAGE IN THE BACKGROUND FROM A SUPREME COURT RULING 'UNITED STATES V. WILLIAMS' 2008 WHICH CONFIRMS AS ILLEGAL AND NOT PROTECTED BY FREEDOM OF SPEECH THE PROMOTION OF CHILD PORNOGRAPHY. ALL THE ITEMS INCLUDED IN THIS SHOOTING WERE PROVIDED BY THIRD PARTIES THAT CONFIRMED IN WRITING THAT THESE PROPS WERE FAKE OFFICE DOCUMENTS. THEY TURNED OUT TO BE REALLEGAL PAPERS MOST LIKELY COMING FROM THE FILMING OF A TELEVISION DRAMA. THE INCLUSION OF THESE UNAPPROVED DOCUMENTS WAS THE RESULT OF RECKLESS NEGLIGENCE FOR WHICH BALENCIAGA HAS FILED A COMPLAINT. WE TAKE FULL ACCOUNTABILITY FOR OUR LACK OF OVERSIGHT AND CONTROL OF THE DOCUMENTS IN THE BACKGROUND AND WE COULD HAVE DONE THINGS DIFFERENTLY.**

**WHILE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL INVESTIGATIONS ARE ONGOING, WE ARE TAKING THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS:**

- WE ARE CLOSELY REVISING OUR ORGANIZATION AND COLLECTIVE WAYS OF WORKING.**
- WE ARE REINFORCING THE STRUCTURES AROUND OUR CREATIVE PROCESSES AND VALIDATION STEPS. WE WANT TO ENSURE THAT NEW CONTROLS MARK A PIVOT AND WILL PREVENT THIS FROM HAPPENING AGAIN.**
- WE ARE LAYING THE GROUNDWORK WITH ORGANIZATIONS WHO SPECIALIZE IN CHILD PROTECTION AND AIMS AT ENDING CHILD ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION.**

**WE WANT TO LEARN FROM OUR MISTAKES AND IDENTIFY WAYS WE CAN CONTRIBUTE. BALENCIAGA REITERATES ITS SINCERE APOLOGIES FOR THE OFFENSE WE HAVE CAUSED AND EXTENDS ITS APOLOGIES TO TALENTS AND PARTNERS.**