

# STYLING OVER SUBSTANCE:

## IS BALENCIAGA USING SHOCK MARKETING AND CONTROVERSY TO COVER UP A COMPANY EMPTY OF HERITAGE?

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Balenciaga – the luxury fashion brand encased by controversy, celebrity, and media coverage – is an infamous brand name in pop culture and fashion news. What can be shocking to hear is the intense origins and messy heritage hiding behind the Balenciaga name.

Over the past couple of years, Balenciaga has no doubt been pushing fashion standards and advertising norms; and by uncovering the meaning behind this sudden burst of media coverage and provocative ideas, I have discovered deeper insight into the Balenciaga lore.

The current topic of controversy behind the Balenciaga brand has been catapulted into the public orbit since the Gift Shop Campaign published in

2022, which instantly received global criticism and outrage for the disturbing imagery that depicted children alongside inappropriate items and with overall themes of sexual exploitation. This is what ignited me to explore and answer the article title: Is Balenciaga using shock marketing and controversy to cover up a company empty of heritage?

I will be breaking down insightful research and information in a coherent order to unpack this question and aid a conclusion. By looking into subjects like Balenciaga's heritage history alongside its competitors, defining the concept of shockvertising (especially within the fashion industry) and how Balenciaga structures its relationships with the media, I will explore this topic thoroughly.



To answer the proposed question, it is paramount to understand the heritage of Balenciaga that is in question...

Balenciaga was founded in 1937 by Cristobal Balenciaga, who led an interesting yet sheltered life both in and out of the fashion industry: he had owned several boutiques, dressed royal family members, and was forced to flee his home country of Spain to Paris due to The Spanish Civil War – and this was all before the fashion house was even established!<sup>1</sup>

Not an abundance is known about Cristobal Balenciaga's life except for the fashion legacy he left behind. Only giving one interview in his lifetime, Cristobal was described as a recluse.<sup>2</sup> The mysterious man who remained backstage at all of his shows created an air of secrecy and wonder. Journalists were constantly conspiring about who the man behind the Balenciaga brand name really was. This period of curiosity was short-lived as his lack of presence proves no interest in today's fashion climate.

The end of World War II became a radical turning point for women's fashion which consequently resulted in a resurgence of luxury fashion designers ready to move on from the turmoil and trauma of the previous six years.

Cristobal Balenciaga brought innovation to the world of fashion much like other revolutionary designers; Coco Chanel described Cristobal as:

**“THE ONLY TRUE COUTURIER  
AMONGST US, ABLE TO  
DESIGN, CUT, ASSEMBLE  
AND SEW A DRESS ENTIRELY  
BY HIMSELF.”**

Alongside Dior's ultra-feminine New Look of 1947, Balenciaga was designing and producing other influential styles and iconic silhouettes that are still in circulation today: the babydoll dress and balloon sleeves were both invented by Cristobal in the 1950s,<sup>3</sup> yet he is rarely given the same credit as his fashion counterparts emerging from the same period.

## BALENCIAGA ORIGINS

Cristobal was known for his appreciative yet progressive view on a woman's body, he enjoyed working with all body shapes but especially flourished when designing and dressing women with a fuller body which foreshadowed the very soon-to-be sex appeal for curvy women like Marilyn Monroe.

The Balenciaga fashion house abruptly shut its doors in 1968 after Cristobal declared the fashion industry had become corrupted by the demand for ready-to-wear garments and as a true couture designer he refused to be involved in this new movement of fashion.

Cristobal Balenciaga passed away in 1972 with the strong assumption that the Balenciaga name had gone with him; but 14 years after his death, Balenciaga and all of its company rights were bought and acquired by the perfume and cosmetics company Jacques Bogart;<sup>4</sup> this was the start of a new Balenciaga and the beginning of the founder's legacy being chipped away.

Since Christobal's passing, Balenciaga has seen five creative directors and two parent company acquisitions, all of whom have tried to push Balenciaga in differing directions and style identities. By briefly noting every creative director and the role they played, the brand story and evolution is more comprehensible when discussing their heritage.

The first creative director appointed after the death of Cristobal and the company acquisition was Michel Goma who immediately went against Cristobal's strong distaste for ready-to-wear and created a full collection of it! Michel Goma's direction of Balenciaga was commercially successful due to the new demand for the time, but he still received mixed critic and public review of how he strayed from Balenciaga's design lineage.



Image 1. Twiggy in Balenciaga (1958)

## BALenciAGA ORIGINS

Goma was shortly replaced in 1982 by Josephus Thimister who returned to the structural drama of Christobal Balenciaga's original designs; the constant conversion of brand identity has already started to deteriorate the brand's true heritage.

Thimister was swiftly removed from his creative director title in 1997 after exhibiting Balenciaga's SS98 runway collection – the audience left before the show had even ended due to obnoxiously loud rock music being played.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the collection design had inspiration from political movements which raised some curiosity on the real reason Thimister was pushed out of the company...

Next up to the podium of Balenciaga's creative director role was Nicolas Ghesquiere who served as the longest-running creative director for the fashion brand. Ghesquiere rebuilt Balenciaga by combining Cristobal's love for silhouette with a more current, sleek approach that still referenced the brand's origins of couture fashion. It is admirable how Ghesquiere cared about protecting Balenciaga's core identity and how the impact of Ghesquiere's brand direction can still be seen in aspects of Balenciaga today.

Nicolas Ghesquiere welcomes the millennium with Balenciaga and in 2001, Balenciaga was involved in a substantial luxury fashion buyout when Kering (formally known as The Gucci Group) acquired 90% of the brand alongside other luxury fashion powerhouses such as Alexander McQueen, Bottega Veneta and Yves Saint Laurent.<sup>6</sup> By becoming an asset to such an organisation, it is evident that all these brands are now sitting in a similar position of prioritising profit for Kering rather than pushing fashion innovation like their relevant founders. Nicolas Ghesquiere left Balenciaga in 2012 and reinstated how this buyout was impacting his and the brand's creative passion:

**“EVERYTHING BECAME AN ASSET FOR THE BRAND, TRYING TO MAKE IT EVER MORE CORPORATE – IT WAS ALL ABOUT BRANDING...**

**...I BEGAN TO FEEL AS THOUGH I WAS BEING SUCKED DRY, LIKE THEY WANTED TO STEAL MY IDENTITY WHILE TRYING TO HOMOGENISE THINGS. IT JUST WASN'T FULFILLING ANYMORE.”**

The now-commercialised Balenciaga assigns the recognised designer Alexander Wang as creative director. Wang had already established his own-named label at this point in his career and used his existing founded fame and relationships to connect Balenciaga heavily into celebrity and popular culture. Wang pushed Balenciaga into the mainstream luxury fashion space by dressing celebrities for events such as the MET Gala<sup>11</sup> and working with a new type of reality star celebrity that Balenciaga is still closely tied with.

Alexander Wang only stayed with Balenciaga for three years, but his celebrity connections have remained. The last creative director to note is Demna Gvasalia who is still reigning over the brand today and continues to push the commerciality of Balenciaga by creating unique collections, runways, collaborations, and campaigns that often require intense media coverage. I will be covering Gvasalia's vivid impact on Balenciaga further in this article.



It is evident that Balenciaga has had a complicated upbringing that has lurked in the shadows of fashion history, but this does not make them any more unique than equivalent luxury fashion brands such as the previously mentioned Chanel and Dior whose heritage has conquered longevity despite having their controversies.

The iconic fashion brand Chanel founded in 1918 by Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel is the poster brand for timeless elegance.



Chanel is accountable for many revolutionary garments and products such as Chanel No. 5 Perfume, the iconic tweed suit that pushed gender standards of the time as well as the iconic and world's first Little Black Dress that Vogue declared 'the frock that all the world will wear!'

Gabrielle Chanel's legacy has been immortalised through her brand; she is known as being a successful and independent businesswoman who pushed femininity standards by designing comfortable, uncomplicated clothes. Her renowned legacy has been credited by the Late Karl Lagerfeld who took over as creative director of Chanel for over 35 years.

## COMPETITORS

Behind Gabrielle's fashion influence is her scandalous encounters and opinions which aren't highly publicised; she had connections and involvement with the Nazis as well as being known to be homophobic, make numerous sexist comments, and often body-shamed women<sup>7</sup> which led to a fallout between her and Christobal Balenciaga.

Much like the Balenciaga brand, the luxury fashion house Dior has had a troubled and eventful past which has made it the brand it is today. Dior was founded by Christian Dior in 1946 and not even a year later, Christian Dior showcased one of the most iconic and influential designs ever – Dior's New Look.<sup>8</sup> This timeless silhouette has been referenced in fashion design ever since.

Christian Dior died in 1957 which is shocking that a brand that only had a founder for 11 years still exerts relevance today. Between 1957 and 2017, Dior has gone through five creative directors and three buyouts.

Despite Chanel and Dior's chaotic history, they are both highly regarded as fashion labels brimming with heritage. The lack of awareness around Balenciaga's historical designs and origins makes the brand somewhat of an anomaly in the fashion sphere where other factors must have influenced the secrecy of its past.

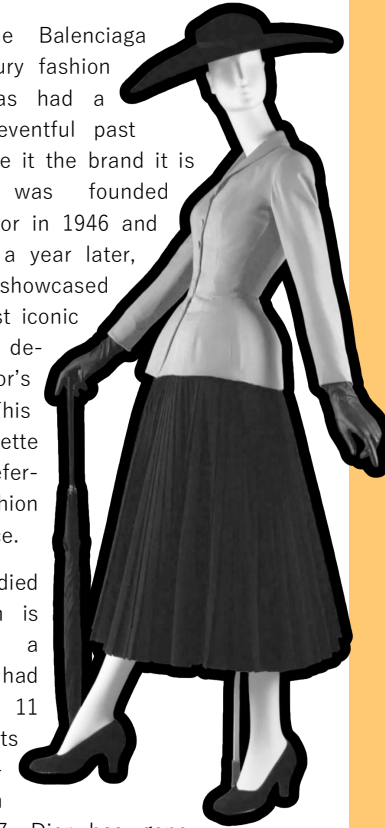


Image 2. Nicolas Ghesquiere for Balenciaga (2004)

Image 3. Chanel No 5 Perfume (2024)

Image 4. Dior's New Look (1947)

Shocking advertising, also known as shockvertising, is an effective advertising method that uses provocative, controversial, and taboo messaging and imagery that challenges the advertising standard, social normality as well as the viewer's morals.

In a world where we subconsciously and consciously see between 6,000 and 10,000 adverts a day<sup>9</sup>, this attention-grabbing tactic holds a significant psychological impact on viewers by creating an intense emotional and passionate response that has the opportunity to make a campaign extremely memorable, iconic, and poignant.

The promise of rupturing through the abundance of adverts sounds enticing to a brand and it does come with its benefits: a lucrative shockvertising campaign can co-ordinate mass exposure to the brand in the form of new customers and audience as well as encourage press coverage and conversation while addressing important topics.

However, the controversial messages depicted through shockvertising has an equal probability of destroying a brand's reputation. An unsuccessful shockvertising can generate seismic backlash and offense which can ruin relationships between potential and existing customers, sever ties with public connections such as

celebrities as well as encourage intense negative media coverage often referred to as a 'cancellation' on social media.

The sheer volume of content we consume and the increased accessibility to media has resulted in a society becoming numb to what once was considered disturbing and shocking. A popular example of desensitisation is through the phenomenon of children playing realistic and graphic video games that involve extreme violence, crime, and war and how this generation is becoming indifferent to real-life violence.<sup>10</sup> This paralyses to outrageous content has led to brands using utterly extreme topics within their shockvertising campaigns.

The use of shockvertising is not limited to the fashion industry but holds the most relevance in this exploration. Balenciaga is not the first luxury fashion brand to use this provoking method and most definitely won't be the last.

When it comes to shockvertising royalty within the fashion sphere, Benetton holds the crown. The Italian fashion label founded in 1965 has produced numerous campaigns with rather grotesque and scandalous themes; their Creative Director, Oliviero Toscani was behind this period of shocking marketing that deliberately targeted sensitive topics of the 1990s.



UNITED COLORS OF BENETTON.

Tuscani tested the waters of the shockvertising tactic in 1990 by releasing a family campaign that included a same-sex, interracial couple holding what seemed to be an adopted baby. In today's standards and progression, this would barely be given a second glance but at the time this was still a somewhat taboo subject.

The success and attraction of this campaign encouraged Tuscani to push Benetton advertisements to new extremes the following year by commenting on the brutality of life with a campaign that featured a newborn baby smeared in blood with an umbilical cord still intact and later releasing a campaign involving religious figures kissing to visually challenge the strict rules and celibacy of religion. Both of these campaigns were refused and banned by many publications. Benetton's most infamous and controversial campaign was released in 1992 and involved a man dying from AIDS surrounded by his grieving family.<sup>11</sup>

In 1994, while the tragedies of The Bosnian War were unfolding, Oliviero Toscani crossed the line of provocation and was removed from the Benetton brand after publishing an advert displaying the bloody and bullet-wounded uniform of a Bosnian soldier.

Image 5. Benetton AIDS Campaign (1992)

Image 6. Sophie Dahl Opium Campaign (2000)

Tuscani could be described as cunning when it came to choosing taboo advertising subjects that would affect the masses, and yet he would rarely show any Benetton products which made the campaigns even more engaging to the viewer. However, it is evident he used stigmatised communities and extreme suffering for brand exposure and profit which resulted in intolerable imagery.

Another notable participant in shockvertising is Tom Ford who bought this brazen approach to Gucci and Yves Saint Laurent in the early 2000s in addition to his self-titled fashion label. Ford is the instigator for one of the most complained about campaigns ever – the 8<sup>th</sup> most complained about campaign in the past 50 years to be exact.<sup>12</sup> An artistic, nude portrait of the model Sophie Dahl was used to promote Yves Saint Laurent's signature Opium perfume in 2000 but was promptly banned from most major publications for being too sexually suggestive and inappropriate.

This didn't stop Tom Ford as he continued to use themes of sexuality and objectification while he was the Creative Director of Gucci. In 2003, Ford orchestrated a campaign that quite literally branded a woman by shaving the notorious 'Gucci G' into her pubic hair and positioned her in a submissive style against a male model who portrayed dominance. The campaign received mass complaints for being too sexual and violent and was consequently banned.



## BALenciAGA AND SHOCKVERTISING

Oliviero Toscani and Tom Ford are not the only creative directors to bring shockvertising to their respected brand: Balenciaga's current Creative Director, Demna Gvasalia, did just that. Since Gvasalia's arrival in 2015, he has unearthed many iconic moments that caused global attention and exposure by redefining how the perception of Balenciaga.

Much like Toscani, Gvasalia tested the waters of shockvertising by releasing a giant blue bag that closely mimicked an IKEA carrier bag – the thought of a luxury fashion house basing their designs on a 75p reusable shopping bag was ludicrous and resulted in many bewildered reports.

Gvasalia continued these comical designs by releasing intensely heeled and platform Crocs (a few years before the rubber clogs became popular). Most of these campaigns and collections were light-hearted yet creative reflections of the serious nature of the fashion industry, these designs imposed no harm yet made great headlines for publications as well as exposure for Balenciaga: they soon became the next brand to push fashion advertising norms.

These gimmick products became apparel surrounded by hype and desire for collection. They acted as a status symbol of what novelty, impractical items a consumer can afford and flaunt which was an unfamiliar concept compared to Balenciaga's origins. This consequently invited a younger, trend-led type of consumer. Gvasalia seemed well aware of the new audience he was attracting

and continued to capture their spending habits by producing more contemporary collections by bringing streetwear to the once couture brand.

Members of Balenciaga's new cult-like following were first exposed to the brand by Gvasalia's securing of iconic collaborations with brands such as The Simpsons and Adidas. Their collaboration with Fortnite introduced young, impressionable players to the brand and gave them the opportunity to purchase a Balenciaga garment for their digital character.

This new type of consumer ignited the transformation of Balenciaga from a couture, sophisticated fashion label to a brand ravenous for attention and quick trend.

Balenciaga remains a luxury brand that hasn't broken through the brick wall that resonates with the wider world like its competing brands – with most people who are not deeply connected or interested in fashion not knowing or ever buying from Balenciaga. In 2022, Gvasalia was determined to change this lack of awareness when he started to accelerate his shocking marketing tactics.

Early in the year, Balenciaga released a campaign featuring extremely worn and dirty trainers. The imagery was supposedly intended to suggest that Balenciaga's trainers could last a lifetime.

However, these images went viral and received very mixed feedback as viewers debated whether this was addressing fast-fashion issues by showcasing the longevity and quality of Balenciaga or glamourizing poverty.



Image 7. Balenciaga 'IKEA' Bag (2017)

Image 8. Balenciaga Extremely Worn Campaign (2022)

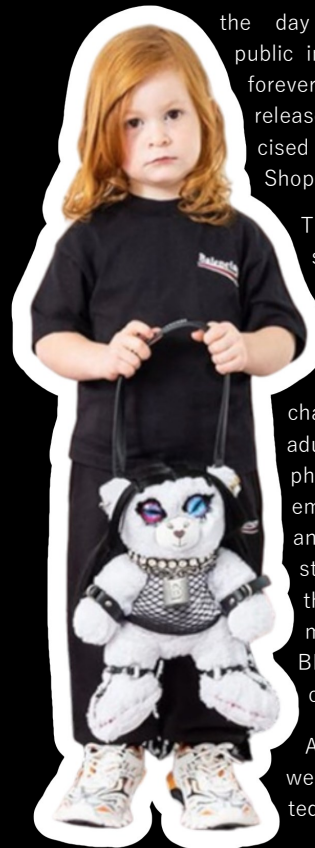
Image 9. Balenciaga x The Simpsons (2022)

## BALenciAGA AND SHOCKVERTISING

Either way, it created global conversation and brand exposure. For \$1850, the exaggeratedly destroyed shoes were available in very limited quantities which were quickly snapped up by the recent influx of hype-led followers.<sup>13</sup>

The divisive trainer campaign inspired Gvasalia's innovation to flourish in the form of his Autumn Winter 2022 Runway which was performed in what could only be described as a muddy snow globe.<sup>14</sup> The fashion show exhibited models stomping through the rain, mud, and snow while carrying large Balenciaga black bin bag-like sacks and wearing whether inappropriate attire. The odd show coincided not long after the start of Russia's attack on Ukraine and the themes of displacement, homelessness and trauma were a skeptical choice at the time.

The 16th of November 2022 marks the day that Balenciaga's public image would change forever when the brand released the heavily criticised and infamous Gift Shop Campaign.



This campaign consisted of a series of unsettling images featuring children surrounded by Balenciaga merchandise in the form of adult and sexual paraphernalia such as empty alcohol glasses and harnesses. The strategic layout of these accessories mimicked that of how BDSM equipment is often displayed.

All of the children were equipped with a teddy bear handbag

wrapped in leather which were quickly labelled 'Bondage bears'. The child models involved in this imagery, who were revealed to be the children of Balenciaga employees,<sup>15</sup> showed expressions of sadness and despair another layer of inappropriate and disturbing viewing. The Gift Shop campaign was instantly critiqued for child exploitation and sexualisation.

Balenciaga contracted Italian photographer, Gabriele Galimberti, to shoot the campaign. There has been debate about which party masterminded and art-directed the model and prop choices, although Galimberti denied having had any creative control.

Galimberti has been published in many notable publications like Vanity Fair and National Geographic; his body of work consists of documentary-style photo series showcasing a broad variety of people alongside some of their most treasured possessions.

Galimberti's successful photographic collection labelled 'Toy Series' is an obvious inspiration to Balenciaga's Gift Shop Campaign. This assortment of images was created over two years and spanned 58 countries; it involved taking thousands of photos of children alongside their favourite toys and games. Overall, it was an extremely wholesome selection of work that explored global wealth, consumption and interests through the joy and gratefulness of children.

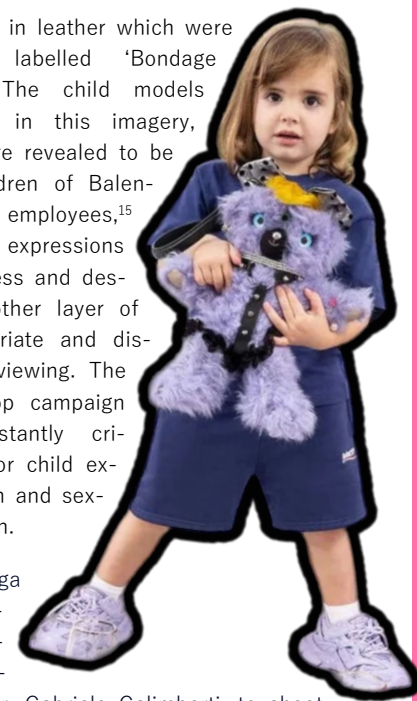


Image 10. Balenciaga Gift Shop Campaign (2022)

Image 11. Balenciaga Gift Shop Campaign (2022)

It is uncertain if Balenciaga investigated any other of Galimberti's work while considering him for this campaign as his other collections have more uncomfortable and troublesome themes, especially regarding child safety. Galimberti released a photo-documentary book called *Ameriguns*; these photographs explored the Second Amendment right that all Americans can bear arms and how this has created a country obsessed with guns. Many photos in this collection include families with children surrounded by these deadly weapons. From a documentation perspective, it is fascinating to see the extent and comfortability of American citizens showcasing their deadly collections although it feels very inappropriate and disturbing to see children surrounded by hundreds of guns while smiling and playing.

Not even one week later, Balenciaga released a second campaign titled *Garde Robe*, on this occasion to advertise a new womenswear collection inspired by office and corporate attire. This campaign featured high-profile celebrities like Bella Hadid and Nicole Kidman. Unfortunately, these talented women were overshadowed by some startling furnishings as two of the campaign images included some surprising props.

A product shoot was released that showcased a new handbag alongside documents referencing the Supreme Court case: *United States vs Williams* which is a case that discusses child sexual abuse and freedom of speech.

In the background of another shot were two disturbing art books: *Fire from the Sun* by Michael Borremans and *The Cremaster Cycle* by Matthew Barney. Both of these books are compiled of un-

settling and grotesque imagery of young children alongside depicting themes of cannibalism, sacrifices, and sex.<sup>16</sup>

The Gift Shop and *Garde Robe* campaign was removed from all platforms alongside a statement of lacklustre apology one week after release.

Balenciaga took some accountability for the irresponsible involvement of children in their campaign imagery yet gave no explanation of how this concept, execution, and publication passed through senior executives and was proudly released to the public. The day after Balenciaga announced their brief statement, the brand issued a \$25 million lawsuit against the production company, North Six, and the set designer, Nicholas Des Jardins<sup>17</sup> which can only be interpreted as a retraction of responsibility.

This collection of provoking and offensive choices achieved Gvasalia's goal of bringing Balenciaga into mainstream knowledge but for all the wrong reasons. Nearly two years on

from this 'misjudgement' in advertising Balenciaga is still referred to as the 'Pedo fashion brand' with many consumers continuing to boycott the company.



Image 12. Balenciaga Garde Robe Bag (2022)  
Image 13. Bella Hadid for Balenciaga Garde Robe Campaign (2022)

Balenciaga has always been intertwined with celebrity culture sometimes to a fault and as the definition of celebrity has evolved so has Balenciaga's relationship with them. Like most other luxury fashion brands, Balenciaga has always prided itself on the celebrities and influential figures seen wearing and supporting the brand but since the introduction of Alexander Wang and Demna Gvasalia, Balenciaga's involvement with celebrities has grown unnatural.

Balenciaga's recent celebrity relationships have blurred the lines between proper endorsement and these figures being represented as senior employees of the brand. This misinterpretation of their celebrity connections was clearly highlighted during the Gift Shop campaign scandal when the public forcefully demanded Kim Kardashian make a statement<sup>18</sup> on behalf of Balenciaga and denounce her professional relationship with them even though she had no involvement in the campaign or any influence on corporate decisions.

The idea of celebrity was once defined as an extraordinary individual with undeniable talent and accomplishments. Cristobal heightened Balenciaga by dressing socialites, fashion icons, and even First Ladies. By adorning individuals like Jackie Kennedy and Ava Gardner, the Balenciaga brand started to mirror the elegant yet progressive values of these women as well as establish Balenciaga as a high-fashion couture label.

Image 14. Kim Kardashian in Balenciaga (2022)



The characterisation of a celebrity figure has dramatically changed over time, significantly in the last 20 years since the introduction and growth of social media. Currently, to gain fame status an individual needs to transform their entire being into a personal brand, into a commodity. As a society, we are constantly bombarded with celebrity culture: on social media, advertising campaigns, traditional media etc. we see their every move. This constant and accessible connection with the rich and famous has created delusional expectations of what we expect from a celebrity and in turn, has created obsessive followings. The heavy involvement of celebrities in our lives has naturally flowed into the fashion industry from collaborations; to modelling; to even becoming creative directors of luxury fashion houses.

Balenciaga has mutated its relationship with celebrities to match this new definition and with Gvasalia's infatuation with attention, Balenciaga are notorious for their celebrity endorsement. Once again, Gvasalia has rebelled against Cristobal's desires to combine the brand with sophisticated figures by carefully selecting celebrities of an outlandish and distasteful nature, such as Cardi B, Kanye West, and The Kardashians, whose fan following mimic Balenciaga's newly founded devoted customers eager to flaunt their lavish lifestyle. This particular celebrity endorsement has become a reflection of the brand's morals and ethics.

It seems Gvasalia has fallen into the cult of celebrity as he tries to become one himself and Balenciaga has suffered significantly from being overshadowed, to the point where the majority of people are unaware of the brand's origins and current designers.

## CONCLUSION

Considering the article question and discussed research, it is evident that Balenciaga is not a brand completely empty of heritage but a fashion brand that has transformed and strayed from its founder's origins and couture approach resulting in a timeline that Balenciaga are not proud to embrace. I am left to wonder what Cristobal Balenciaga would make of his beloved brand.

Through the rapid change of creative directors and their differing visions, Balenciaga has been unable to cement itself as a fashion label synonymous with longevity and a timeless style. In addition, the acquisition of Kering has indoctrinated Balenciaga into a fashion house that solely prioritizes profit and exposure by stripping away any resemblance of Cristobal's essence. This is further highlighted by other luxury fashion houses, like Chanel and Dior, that emerged at a similar time of innovation and have maintained and accomplished solid legacies and societal impact despite also having a troubled past.

Since Gvasalia's ascension to Creative Director in 2015, Balenciaga has relied heavily on shockvertising and controversy to stay relevant in the fashion and media sphere. Gvasalia's hunger for attention has resulted in him pushing the boundaries of scandal to the extreme - themes of child sexual exploitation as a campaign tactic is wholly inappropriate and unethical.

Gvasalia's obsession with celebrity hype has further merged the brand into the unsophisticated nature of popular culture. Gvasalia has roped a new audience to the Balenciaga name, an audience that has no loyalties to the brand heritage and will quickly move onto something new if Gvasalia doesn't keep up with their interests.

A multitude of fashion brands have used shockvertising and taboo topics to elevate their brand awareness and soon Balenciaga will be another establishment on the list with no legacy to fall back on while a fresh brand takes its place of using attention-grabbing tactics.

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