

Balenciaga's Statement on the Ads Campaign Controversy: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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This study aims to explore and analyze Balenciaga brand statements that are sought to assist in responding after controversy suspected regarding Balenciaga for their choice for adoption of pornography and child exploitation principles. This study applies the qualitative descriptive approach using the theory of critical discourse analysis by van Dijk (1993) comprising the dimension of text, social cognition and social context accompanied by Balenciaga's defensive strategies that emerged from Hood (2011) blame-avoidance strategies theory. Data were gathered from the social media narrative of Balenciaga official Instagram account. From the results, there were four strategies that Balenciaga employed in using blame-avoiding strategies of brand image repair which are accepting, downplaying, shifting, and denying.

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Introduction

Discourse analysis in this study emerged as a result of public response to Balenciaga's advertisement. Balenciaga is a well-known fashion brand from Spain, known for its high-end luxury products. Balenciaga's consumer base is spread across the world. In November 2022, Balenciaga released its latest collection in the form of an advertising campaign poster that involved children as models holding a teddy bear wearing BDSM (bondage, dominance, sadism, and masochism) attire, which is closely associated and suspected contain elements of sexual violence and child pornography. This sparked various controversies and opinions in society, with the hashtags such #cancelBalenciaga, #boycottbalenciaga, #balenciagascandal etc. are trending on Twitter and Tik Tok (Gárgoles & Ambás, 2023). The hashtag was used as a form of rejection of the advertisement, which was considered to contain pornographic elements and the exploitation of children. This suspicion is in line with a statement by Adler (2001) that child pornography is a veiled moral violation which had led to national emergency. Furthermore, in December 2022, Balenciaga released an advertisement for a collaboration product with the Adidas brand. Once again, the public criticized Balenciaga due to the appearance of a document from the Supreme Court case *United States v.*

Williams as the photoshoot property, which considered supported laws that enhance federal protection against child pornography. Both campaigns quickly became conservative talking points and gave rise to conspiracy theories among the public about Balenciaga.

In response to the controversies, Cedric Charbit, the CEO of Balenciaga, released an official statement through the social media platform Instagram of Balenciaga. In this study, Balenciaga's statement is considered as discourse to avoid blame. This relates to the strategies employed by Balenciaga to rebuild customer trust amid the consequences of damaged public trust and declining sales. This is not the first time ever that Balenciaga is in such controversies. In 2018, Balenciaga was suspected in ethnic discrimination narration based on a revealed video of Balenciaga's security guards that were forcefully control a Chinese man in Paris. With the same pattern of controversy, a boycott movement was made among Chinese netizens as the biggest consumers of luxury brand. Yet, the boycott was considered ineffective and not long-lasting due to lack of official support. Then, a timeless apology was made, which consistently demonstrated avoidance and prudence in making such claims (Chen, 2022). When consumers lack crucial information or have doubts towards the advertised brand, they tend to evaluate with sensitivity to trust heuristic cues. Trust heuristics refer to the understanding consumers have about a brand's image before deciding to purchase products from that brand. Consumers' doubtful towards the brand is leading to a decrease in their purchase intention if the brand exhibits ambiguous and suspicious behavior. However, when consumers trust the brand, they tend to have confidence and pay less attention to trust heuristic cues. They assume that the brand acts with integrity, resulting in their purchase intention not being influenced by ambiguous and suspicious behavior (Herbst et al., 2012). In order to secure ongoing patronage of their products and services, attract investments in their shares, and discourage any inclination towards adversarial behavior, companies must employ persuasive strategies to convince stakeholders of their unwavering trustworthiness (Fuoli & Hart, 2018). Hence, along with customers trust, advertising plays a crucial role in influencing buying decisions which mostly demonstrated in changing perceptions prior to product consumption (Sinaga et al., 2024).

In this context, stakeholders or public actors' blame-avoiding approach comprises all kinds of efforts meant to deny, downplay or even remove themselves from any possible blame-attracting incidents or errors (Hinterleitner, 2017). Presentational methods aim to prevent or restrict criticism by presenting credible justifications, turning blame into credit, or redirecting public attention to other problems (Sulitzeanu-Kenan & Hood, 2005). CDA in the context of blame-avoiding methods by Balenciaga is identified as discourse as a critical in the enactment or exercise of institution power and in the control over the forms of text and talk. In terms of text and talk, such members of powerful groups can decide on the (possible) discourse genre(s) or speech acts of an event (e.g. press conference or press release, official statement, etc.) (van Dijk, 1998). Even though these approaches is the least effective that surpasses incidents, yet it is the most usually utilized procedure used by recent political power (Kuipers & Brändström, 2020). Stakeholders prefer to respond actively when blame levels are high where they respond public to some extent. Replies from the stakeholders follow the staged retreat pattern and their responses only have a systematic influence on how is the blame-level in public media (Hood et al., 2016).

Several similar studies related to critical discourse analysis of institutional statements in the form of blame-avoiding discourse have been conducted. Firstly, a study by Liu (2023) focused on blame-avoidance strategies in the digital scandal hearing involving Facebook's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, and the Cambridge Analytica controversy. The results of the study showed that Mark Zuckerberg mostly used downplaying strategies and linguistic features that portrayed positive constructions of Facebook and negative constructions of Cambridge Analytica. The apparent goal of Zuckerberg's use of these blame-avoidance techniques and linguistic gimmicks was to divert attention from his personal involvement in the controversy and place it on outside forces or the acts of others.

Pipkins (2019) also conducted a study about applying CDA in discursive strategies to avoiding blame used by police officers. It was attempted for justification for empathy for the murders of unarmed civilian, primarily Black civilians. The strategies used are including ways of arguing, ways of denying, representing social actors and actions, legitimizing and manipulating social cognition, and ways of framing. Next, a study by Johannesson & Weinryb (2021) was about the empirical examination of non-elite initiated blame-games related to pro-migrants campaigns in Sweden. This study shows that blame-making towards the power holders can be a successful strategy to gain policy influence or change it. This is the anticipatory and reactive forms of analysis in the blame-avoidance behaviors.

Beside the institution domain, studies about blame-avoiding theory are also mostly related to political domain. Several studies are conducted by Sten Hansson who expertise in studies related to blame-avoiding strategies. Hansson (2015) discussed discursive strategies of blame avoidance in government which object of the analysis was concrete examples from public statements of UK Governments. Based on the analysis, personal and institutional risk aversion involves the application of certain strategies of argumentation, framing, denial, social actor and action representation, legitimation, and manipulations. Hansson (2018) also conducted a study about defensive semiotic strategies in government in the term of blame avoidance. This study was using multimodal study which examine any possible norm violations that government communicators may have been associated with in the eyes of critical audiences, such as lying, spin doctoring, and using tax money for propaganda campaign. The latest study by Hansson (2024) was about self-defensive ways attempted by government officeholders in the context of the communication of democratic debates. This study shows that blame avoidance may involve coercive impoliteness by using sarcasm and mock politeness by the opponents during a political debate.

Next, a study by Davies & Koller (2012) was about a CDA of a chairman's statement of a UK defense firm which focused on the grammatical devices used to represent organizational activities and outcome. Personalization and evaluation are used to guide interpretations of audience and to legitimize and normalize violence and destruction. Then, Saadeen & AlBzour (2022) investigated Donald Trump's denial speeches of the 2020 United States Presidential Election. The study reveals that Donald Trump used discursive devices such as lexicalization, evidentiality, example/illustration, number game, polarization, actor description, hyperbole, categorization, victimization, and authority. He tried to justify his denial of the election in order to gain empathy of American people by showing a positive image of himself. Trump made an effort to affect the public's perception and question the validity of the election results. The results of this

study expand our knowledge of how public leaders use language to further their objectives and the persuasive power of language in political discourse.

From the explanation above, it is interesting to discuss the official statement of Balenciaga in order to understand how the brand handle the serious allegations happened and how the company rebuild public trust after the damage by using blame-avoiding strategies. This research is conducted to help readers to get insight on understanding how Balenciaga give a certain attitude due to the controversy. Critical Discourse Analysis can evaluate either the statement by Balenciaga was suited to the social norms and morality or it was released to cover up or demean the issues. It also important to highlight Balenciaga as a corporate company, has a responsibility to sustained consumers or even public trust and use their power to rebuilt the “positive us” image after involve on sensitive issues including child abuse and pornography. In short, the researcher wants to expand understanding and public awareness as a responsive action to child abuse issue. It can be considered as a baby step in the term of child protection regarding to fashion industry corporate purposes. Based on several studies that have been described above, there is no research discussed about Balenciaga’s statement regarding the controversy surrounding. Therefore, the purposes of the study are (1) discussing blame-avoiding strategies with CDA approach used by Balenciaga and (2) examining the implication of the statements due to the brand trust and brand loyalty.

Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method. The researcher conducts the analysis by combining Hood’s theory of blame and Teun A. van Dijk’s theory of Critical Discourse Analysis. The data for this study was taken from Balenciaga’s official Instagram account feed and story posts which were published on November 29th and December 3rd, 2022. To analyze the data, the researcher did four steps which are identifying the discourse elements, classifying the data, applying Van Dijk’s CDA combined with theory of blame, and drawing conclusion.

People’s beliefs of the responsible one in a blameworthy event can be taught through discourse (Hood, 2011). To avoid blame, blamed ones could apply strategic discursive acts to manipulate people’s beliefs and knowledge of the responsible agents by reallocating the victimhood and changing the nature of the blameworthy event (Liu, 2023) which can be seen on Table.1.

Table 1

Strategic Discursive Act

Strategies	Works on	Tactics
Accepting	the perceived actors and actions	apology quick acknowledgement positive “us”
Downplaying	the perceived actions, and consequences	restrict information change the subject claim ignorance
Shifting	the perceived actions and consequences	blame the victim

				blame	the
				predecessors or similar	
				groups	
				blame	the other
				agent(s)	
				reverse	
Denying	the perceived	actors		act-denial	
	and actions			control-denial	
				intention-denial	
				goal-denial	
				mitigations	

(Liu, 2023)

These intentional discursive shifts show how discourses and communications are also purposefully constructed strategically to shift perceptions, beliefs and knowledge regarding who is responsible for particular happenings. The ways of retaining the blame are adopted by someone who takes responsibility to generate detouring opinions, misdirect blames and block twists connected with being responsible for such an accident. Individuals and society at large can critically evaluate and interpret public narratives and statements from the many actors involved in blameworthy events by having an understanding of the mechanics of strategic speech in these situations. It highlights the importance of analyzing language and rhetoric that those who want to shift responsibility uses as well as requires a critical approach in media matters including public discourse where one would get more understanding about complex events or circumstances. Instead of manipulating the perception of agency or loss in relation to an event or outcome, blame takers may try to quench the blame-making desire of the disaffected groups by pleasing and complimenting them as well as by presenting themselves in a positive light (Hansson, 2019).

Critical Discourse Analysis is part of critical studies about humanities and social science (Salma, 2018). The goal of CDA can be found through comprehensive technical discussions in the fields of knowledge and social life. Most studies in critical discourse analysis focus on discourse dimensions that expose power abuse, injustice, inequality, and other related issues. In the process of analysis, critical discourse analysis is multidisciplinary, which means it requires support from other disciplines to explore the relationships between discourse text, domination, power, social cognition, society, and culture. In this research, CDA is combined with blame-avoiding theory. There are three main aspects that need to be addressed in CDA using van Dijk's theory. The first aspect is related to the textual dimension, which refers to the formation of events presented in the discourse. The textual dimension can be seen as having semantic content that expresses the negativity of others and the positivity of our own group. The second aspect is the role of social cognition, which involves the shared understanding of social rules, including interpretation, mindset, argumentation, learning processes, and so on. The final aspect is the formation of the social context structure as the basis for the emergence of a discourse.

Result and Discussion

Textual Dimension

1. Accepting

When faced with criticism, Balenciaga as well as companies, frequently first acknowledge that there is a problem before attempting to allay it or at the very least lessen their own responsibility. The idea of blame avoidance would be useless as a theory regarding political and organizational behavior if businesses and elected officials always took responsibility for their actions and apologized.

a) *Balenciaga reiterates its sincere apologies for the offense we have caused and extends its apologies to talents and partners*

(Balenciaga Official Instagram, par5, line2)

Based on data 1(a), the initial activity done by Balenciaga on its statement is apologizing. By mentioning the term “reiterates,” it means that Balenciaga has previously expressed apology or publicly addressed the issue before. In doing so, this means that they are lamenting and apologetics for the crime credited to have been committed. In a company-wide performance that also featured colleagues or business partners and, thus, as an elaborated performer in the harmonic context “we”, Balenciaga used the pronoun “we”. The words “*talents and partners*” denotes that the individuals who are on the same side criminally as Balenciaga or they ought to be. This also means that Balenciaga has a conscious understanding of how their business affects to every person that works for the company as well as models, designers, collaborators and other stakeholders because the problem does not only involve members of the public. The next step aimed at apologies to talents and partners is undertaken by Balenciaga to present regret and acknowledge that some of these particular people or organizations might have been hurt.

b) *I want to personally reiterate my sincere apologies for the offense caused and take my responsibility*

(Balenciaga Official Instagram, par12, line1)

Based on data 1(b), it essentially presents Cedric Charbit as the President and CEO of Balenciaga. Cedric Charbit has taken on personal responsibility to the offense and only shown his real regret. With the help of words “*personally reiterate*”, CEO wants to throw light on as a person who is making this apology once again and accepting mistakes the company did on a personal consent.

The word “*sincere apologies*” portray a true desire to apologize may inadvertently cause. It represents that CEO treat this offence seriously and is committed to dispensing with it by a simple process. The phrase “*take my responsibility*” means that the CEO is willing to accept the actions and its consequences so he or she can apologize in case of some errors. It means responsibility and readiness to take the right steps in order to change things. The message conveys that CEO is taking responsibility for an action and plans to personally apologize. Such honesty, accountability and willingness to make all necessary efforts of confronting the problem is conveyed. The CEO noted that Balenciaga the scandal had awakened the whole world of fashion. He committed to interact with other fashion homes, pushing them into the alliance leading in creating a culture of compassion and understanding among all stakeholder actors throughout the industry.

Before assuming some tangible results of those promises, Charbit's deeds said a lot about his determination to confront the issue and get this organization on the right track with positive transformation. It resulted not only in collective calls for accountability but also promoted a thought-provoking debate on the need of workplace ethics and proper employee treatment contingent upon fastness and stressful environment within the fashion industry.

c) *We strongly condemn child abuse*

(Balenciaga Official Instagram, par1, line2)

From the data 1(c), as a company, Balenciaga is strongly opposed to the mistreatment of children and seeks to dissociate itself from any connection to it. This statement can be interpreted as a direct response to any child abuse-related controversy in which Balenciaga may be involved or in CDA by van Dijk can be considered by their intention to show 'positive us'. As one of the main players in fashion industry, Balenciaga has a big influence in public perspective by using their platform to make a strong moral message. This statement creates a strong impact to the society to rebuilt an image for Balenciaga as a company that has a high moral and social awareness. Yet, it is important to consider that they make the statement after the controversy in order to maintenance their existence in competitive fashion industry.

d) *We have set aside a significant fund for grants to organizations so that we can help make a difference in protecting children*

(Balenciaga Official Instagram, par11, line02)

Data 1(d) implies that Balenciaga is acting in a proactive manner to address the problem and promote children's safety. Balenciaga is saying that they have allocated a substantial amount of funds especially committed to assisting groups concerned in child protection by claiming that they have set aside a significant fund for grants. This suggests that they are actively trying to help the cause and have a good impact. It demonstrates their dedication to addressing the debate over child abuse and their desire to contribute to the solution.

The application of the word "*organizations*" makes it clear that Balenciaga is aware in value with this, they are willing to cooperate top-rated organizations and experts who will ensure their child protection because trusting strangers was a problem. This is an indication of their cooperation with external partners in order to achieve better results from the initiatives they embark upon and also ensure that funds allocated have been utilized most productively. In all, the declaration is testimony to Balenciaga's venture in terms of commitment of resources and actionable steps across various frontiers to protect children. It signifies their perception of the confrontation and committed strive to make things ameliorated. To demonstrate how passionately Balenciaga strives to enable their support of organization that they find actively work towards the preservation, there will be an awarding of funds. In line with this statement, by February 8th 2023, Balenciaga partners with National Children's Alliance (Highsnobiety, 2023). With this partnership, Balenciaga has proved their statement as a practical commitment and concrete action in condemning child abuse.

2. Downplaying

Downplaying is a strategy to downplay and minimize one's risky contribution to a responsible incident. A blameworthy occurrence often has at least two sides, the perpetrator side and the victim side, each with their own demands. Victims concentrate on gathering as much evidence as they can to support accusations against their perpetrators, whereas offenders put a lot of effort towards downplaying and trivializing their negative roles. Both perpetrators and victims must present sufficient proof to support their allegations while blaming and denying. In Balenciaga controversy, they act as perpetrator in dominant.

a) *We take full accountability for our lack of oversight and control of the documents in the background and we could have done things differently*

(Balenciaga Official Instagram, par3, line9)

Data 2(a) identifies that Balenciaga admits that they were ineffective in the management and control process that led to the occurrence. The phrase "*take full accountability*" indicate that Balenciaga is fully blamed for the lack of the papers' monitoring and control. Hence, they know the significance of their participation to the debate and the possible undesirable consequences of the inadequate management of the content. Balenciaga insists that they are not avoiding or underplaying their responsibility.

The reference to "*documents in the background*" implies that the properties could hinge on some undisclosed information or confidential material that was not intended for public access. This implies that Balenciaga values the importance of preserving sensitive data and the repercussions that may arise from their inappropriate handling. The meaning of "*could have done things differently*" is that Balenciaga admits that some better courses of action could have been taken or that different methods could have been applied to avoid or resolve the problem. It also shows that they considered their actions and procedures enough, given also possible thoughts that there could have been better alternatives. Balenciaga admits that they had a fault in monitoring and controlling limited information in the statement. It shows an acknowledgement of responsibility, regret as to their conduct, and an acknowledgement that further action should have been taken to prevent an accident.

b) *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 are laying the groundwork with organizations who specialize in child protection and aims at ending child abuse and exploitation*

(Balenciaga Official Instagram, par4, line1-8)

Data 2(b) indicates that Balenciaga is taking some actions to handle these issues. Acting as the suspected perpetrators, the company delivers their commitment by doing "internal and external investigations" to prevent the same cases happened in the future. Based on this statement, internal investigations are done to identify any possible violations that were committed by certain individuals without any confirmation by the

company while external investigations are done to expand and collect diverse perspectives from outsiders in response to the controversy and build the accountability of the case handling process. These actions can prevent conflicts of interest and potential bias. The following activities by Balenciaga are listed in the statements. Based on the statement *"We are closely revising our organization and collective ways of working"* denotes that they are doing an extensive evaluation of their internal procedures, organizational structure, and overall work culture. They are probably assessing where they can improve and attempting to solve any underlying problems that may have influenced the debate. This implies a dedication to promoting an environment within the organization that is more accountable and responsible. Balenciaga acknowledges the need to reinforce the systems and protocols in place to enable greater control and validation of their creative processes and says, *"We are reinforcing the structures around our creative processes and validation steps."* They want to prevent future incidents and lessen the possibility of related disputes developing in the future by strengthening these structures. The statement *"We are laying the groundwork with organizations who specialize in child protection and aims at ending child abuse and exploitation"* shows that Balenciaga is actively contacting groups with knowledge of child protection. They are displaying their dedication to addressing the problem of child abuse and exploitation by working with such organizations. To create successful plans and activities to address these problems, this may entail looking for advice, support, and forming partnerships.

3. Shifting

Shifting means reframing the social reality. Placing "ordinary people" (or those who can be depicted as such) on advisory committees, focus groups, or as lay members among professionals on governing bodies is one strategy for transferring blame. When criticism of the conduct of such bodies begins to surface, this strategy can assist spread the blame.

a) *All the items included in this shooting were provided by third parties that confirm in writing that these props were fake office documents (shift inside the institution)*

(Balenciaga Official Instagram, par3, line4)

In data 3(a), Balenciaga claimed that the items which used as properties on the advertisement were supplied by the "third party". Thus, it is implying that the brand is distancing itself from acquiring or making the props that were used in the photoshoot. This implies that Balenciaga outsource or work with other partners for the material which indicates the possibility that they do not have direct control over the properties detail. The reference to written approval from third parties generates documentation or proof that the props were assumed to be fictitious office records simulating a fictitious shift. Balenciaga has all the necessary steps to ensure that the props' authenticity and nature are approved by proper outside sources. This can also be understood as the intention of the interview to be able to provide any answers to the doubts that people could have over the shooting or respond to the critics by being transparent and giving supporting evidence. The overall inference on the advertisement depicted is that Balenciaga claims that the props are from third parties as attested by documents about the fake scenario. In this regard, the company expects to clarify any doubts and possible misinterpretations, outlining that the props used in the shoot were provided by certain groups.

4. Denying

Balenciaga's denying strategy involves doing things to avoid or divert the responsibilities for their actions or mistakes that they commit by straightly denying any wrongdoing. It is about denying responsibility and transferring the blame to other people or circumstances.

a) *It was never our intent to include it in our narrative*

(Balenciaga Official Instagram, par1, line2)

Data 4(a) shows that Balenciaga does not claim any intent to include the properties in their advertising concept a specific element or detail. This sentence can be interpreted as a scheme used by the Balenciaga to deny the responsibility. The phrase "*never our intent*" can derail any potential critique to Balenciaga through highlighting that they have no deliberate actions to feature such a controversial thing. It is also worth mentioning that Balenciaga's assertions of ignorance and unintended placing of properties in the ad need further examination. This is because the making of advertisements is carried out by many groups and it is preferred that the team who dreamed the concept be among them. If the Balenciaga statement is correct, a clear statement is needed naming the person responsible for the accident and not a general company statement. Thus, transparency will make it easier for Balenciaga to rehabilitate its good name.

b) *The two separate ad campaigns in question reflect a series of grievous errors for which Balenciaga takes responsibility*

(Balenciaga Official Instagram, par1, line3)

Data 4(b) shows that Balenciaga acknowledges and takes responsibility for the mistakes in the two advertising campaigns. The statement "*reflect a series of grave errors*" means that the projects had multiple serious mistakes. This indicates that the errors were no single occurrences, but rather part of a trend or a sequence of mistakes or wrong doings. The brand states that Balenciaga "*takes responsibility*" for the mistakes seen in the ad campaigns. This indicates that Balenciaga acknowledges their role in the development, implementation, or approval of the campaigns and accepts the accountability for any harm or controversy that arises. Overall, this assertion shows that the brand acknowledges the fact that these two campaigns are quite serious mistakes. This indicates their acceptance of responsibility and their determination to remedy and correct it. Balenciaga intends to show that they are willing to learn from past mistakes by recognizing responsibly for them. This statement depicts Balenciaga's deep intent of developing by being humble and strong-minded. It understands that no firm is error free, but what makes them different is how they deal and learn from those mistakes. Balenciaga defines itself as a brand which is accountable and responsible by taking responsibility, striving to develop, and adapting continuously to the changing fashion industry.

Social Cognition

1. Ideological Stances and Social Relation

Balenciaga's ideological stance is strongly opposed to child abuse and violence. They claimed the innocence to show the 'positive us' which can be seen from data 1(a), 1(b), and 1(c). They reaffirm their commitment to child safety and emphasize their aversion to messages of violence and hatred. Balenciaga tries to develop a positive social interaction and link themselves with organizations and individuals dedicated to protecting children by engaging with child protection organizations, delivering trainings on appropriate communication, and offering donations.

2. Strategies of Legitimization and Power

Balenciaga employs a number of techniques to legitimize their position and wield power. They state their opposition to child abuse, express regret, and accept full responsibility for their mistakes. It can be extracted from downplaying strategies by Balenciaga which can be seen from data 2(a) and 2(b). Balenciaga takes several actions to prove that they are innocent from the idea of child abuse and pornography in their concept of advertisement. With their financial power as a corporate company, they build a partnership with a child protection organization and setting a large budget for grants. With this partnership, they show a full commitment as counseling and prevention efforts in child abusing.

3. Strategies of Attenuation and Distancing

Balenciaga employs attenuation and distancing methods to lessen the negative impact of the controversy by using shifting and denying strategies which can be seen in data 3(a), 4(a), and 4(b). Balenciaga attributes inaccuracies or mistakes to the third parties who failed in reviewing and validating the properties or concept of their advertisement. The company is trying to reduce the negative impression by stating that these mistakes were unintentional. In short, Balenciaga takes the responsibility for the offense to the public and apologizes as a whole company, yet they make it clear that the errors made by specific parties which resolved by on-going external and internal investigations.

Social Context

Balenciaga expects public sympathy in relation to their acknowledgement of campaign production after the brand's boycott was trending on social media and suspected in promoting child abuse and pornography. By showing concern towards child abuse issues and declaring the company responsible for the mistakes committed in the campaigns, the company demonstrates the awareness of the weight of the situation. Balenciaga's measures, including introducing new rules, working with relevant parties, and committing to responsible communication and donations, are evidence that they are taking a proactive approach to resolving the issue and avoiding similar occurrences in the future.

The public's reaction to Balenciaga's statement might differ significantly depending on the specific circumstances, the sincerity of the apology, and the overall sentiment against the brand or company. On the other hand, the responses to apologies on social media are usually a mixture of different responses. Some may accept the apology and praise the brand for its accountability and precise measures to handle the matter. Other participants can be skeptical or doubting and looking for a true proof and

responsibility for the brand in the following period. Forgiveness and desire to buy this brand again is experienced by some, but the attitude is not necessarily shared by all, as some others continue to be non-forgiving and dissatisfied. Users of different perspectives may contribute to an exchange of ideas concerning the brand's reaction by amplifying varied ideas on social media sites. Balenciaga's final balance will be in the ability to keep their promises over time and to show a genuine commitment to ethical conduct if they want to regain the trust and goodwill of society.

Discussion

The purpose of this section is to make clarifications and explanations regarding to the research questions based on the findings of the data. First, it relates to the blame-avoiding strategies used by Balenciaga sourced from their official statement. Second, it relates to the implication of the statements due to the brand trust and brand loyalty in social context, especially public perspectives. The discussion is organized by using Van Dijk (1993) theory of Critical Discourse Analysis approach combine with blame-avoiding theory conducted by Hood (2011).

For discussing about the blame-avoiding strategies, Hood (2011) divided the strategies into four classifications: accepting, downplaying, shifting, and denying. All of these strategies are found in Balenciaga official statement by examining the dimension of text of CDA approach. This textual dimension can examine the semantic meaning of language used in order to show positive image of the preparators. For instance, accepting strategy can be seen from how Balenciaga apologized to public for the offense, either as whole company or personal stance from the CEO, Cedric Chabrit. The company used the pronoun “we” for almost all of the sentences on the statement, representing everyone involved in the company. As the next step of this acceptance, Balenciaga emphasized that the company against the idea of child abuse by the word “*strongly condemn*”. It represents the purpose of the company to build ‘positive us.’ Next, on their statement, the company did a partnership with “organizations” to collect fund in children protection. This is considered as a concrete action conducted by Balenciaga to prove that they have commitment, follow-up from what has been stated and promised to participate in children protection. By February 8th, 2023, Balenciaga did partnership with National Children’s Alliance.

Furthermore, Balenciaga in downplaying strategy acts as a preparators. The company tries to present sufficient proves to reduce their negative roles. On their statement, Balenciaga expresses that they took the responsibilities for the lack control on the content-making of the advertisement. For instance, there are “*external and internal investigations*” going-on in the company. This statement represents how Balenciaga actively build their accountability. Next, shifting strategy used by Balenciaga by using the phrase “*third parties*” whereas can be considered as a strategy of transferring blame to outsiders. As we know that there are so many parties involved in content-making or advertising-making process. Therefore, Balenciaga was distancing itself to the details of the properties used on the photoshoot of the ads campaign. Last, denying strategy used by Balenciaga in order to straightly denying the wrongdoing. For example, the statement “*never our intent*” represents Balenciaga has no deliberate actions to include the idea of child abuse on their ad campaign. These blame-avoiding strategies can be extracted in social cognition for public in CDA approach. The researcher wanted to make it simple for reader to understand how Balenciaga rebuild their positive image in such strategies, which are: (1) make it clear of their ideology opposing child abuse, (2) legitimize their

company image by collecting funds and partnership with children protection organization, (3) distancing itself with the wrongdoing by blaming third parties.

In discussing the implications of the statement due to the brand trust, there are still pros and contras in public. The statement is reliable as the action of Balenciaga to prove itself innocence by participating in children funds, while on the other hand it can be considered as "greenwashing" apology when they took action after the controversies. In CDA perspective, a discourse can definitely strategically used to manipulate public perceptions. Especially in digital economy, the brand image is depending on their awareness of everything that they want to published.

The researcher has mentioned some previous studies with the same framework of CDA in blame avoiding strategies. In comparison, the previous study which has the closest idea with this research is the study of Liu (2023) regarding the same domain of both cases related to digital scandal. From the analysis, this study found that downplaying is being the main blame-avoiding strategy used by Facebook, or Mark Zuckerberg in personal stance. Downplaying in this case, constructed for contexts like "*data protection*", "*data collection*", "*transparency*", "*regulation*" and etc., which involved hard evidence. It can be related in this researcher where Balenciaga used the downplaying strategies with the statement of "*internal and external investigations*" in order to build accountability to involved hard evidence.

In contrast, some previous studies related to political domain of blame-avoiding strategies are using discursive devices. Discursive devices in a study by Saadeen & Albzour (2022) was about Donald Trump's denial speeches in US 2020 presidential elections are including lexicalization, evidentiality, example/illustrations, number game, etc. It can be related to this study by the same purpose of positive self-representation of both Donald Trump and Balenciaga in order to gain the empathy of public. Another study with discursive devices used in political domain is the study of (Hansson, 2015). Yet, the term used was discursive strategies of blame avoidance in government which is the UK government. The blame-avoiding strategies are including ways of arguing, ways of framing, ways of denying, ways of representing actors and actions, ways of legitimizing, and ways of manipulating

Conclusion

In conclusion, Balenciaga's response to the controversies surrounding their brand reflects a mixture of accepting responsibility, downplaying their role, shifting blame, and denying intentional wrongdoing. The statements released by Balenciaga demonstrate their awareness of the issues at hand and their willingness to apologize for any offense caused. The company acknowledges their lack of oversight and control, expressing remorse and accepting personal responsibility for the mistakes made. Additionally, Balenciaga condemns child abuse and highlights their commitment to protecting children through the allocation of significant funds for grants to organizations specializing in child protection. These actions and statements are aimed at legitimizing their position, exercising power, and establishing a positive social relationship with the public.

Balenciaga's response to the controversies involves a combination of strategies aimed at legitimizing their position, exercising power, attenuating the negative impact, and establishing a positive social relationship. The company acknowledges their responsibility and expresses remorse, while also emphasizing their commitment to child protection through collaborations, grants, and donations. Simultaneously, Balenciaga employs strategies of attenuation and distancing by attributing mistakes to third parties

and highlighting their lack of control. The success of their response will depend on the sincerity of their actions, transparency in addressing the concerns, and their ability to rebuild trust with the public and stakeholders. Balenciaga aims to regain public sympathy and prevent similar incidents in the future. Public reactions to their statement may vary, with some appreciating the apology and proactive actions, while others remaining skeptical and calling for tangible changes. The brand's ability to rebuild trust and address the concerns will determine the overall impact of their response.

Therefore, Critical Discourse Analysis can be used to examine the discourse released by such stakeholders in order to manipulate public perceptions. It is interesting to discuss at it gives the reader who indented a deep understanding form implementing CDA in the study of “apology” by stakeholders after digital scandal which somehow can represents blame-avoiding strategy. The next researchers in investigating the same field of CDA combine with blame-avoiding strategies are suggested to fill the gap, to use the data taken from other stake-holders domain such as political, digital, creative industries, campaign, etc. Therefore, in their future analysis, they can conduct a new analysis in CDA that is relevant with this study especially in term of “rebuild positive image after scandal” by using other branch of linguistics field that have not covered on this study.

For readers, learning about blame-avoiding strategy in discourse analysis is recommended, because the findings show that some of the stakeholders can have strategies to manipulate our perspective about their image after making controversies. It is our ability to use our critical thinking to sort information wisely and not being easily manipulated by “positive image”.

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