

Balenciaga's Inferno:
a Rhetorical Analysis of the 2022 "BDSM Teddy Bear" Balenciaga Holiday Gift Collection

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Since the dawn of civilization, children have worked. During the Neolithic Era, children hunted, fished, and gathered berries alongside their parents. In Colonial America, children became apprentices or performed domestic work to ensure they would not become burdens to society (Schuman, 2017). Throughout the Great Depression, children toiled in sweatshops, avoided rat droppings and bile while meatpacking, and bloodied their fingers as they weaved fabric and sewed clothing for long hours with little pay. The working children of today may not break their backs and strain their eyesight while threading needles, but they share an alarming similarity with some populations of children from the past: exploitation. In recent years, family-focused influencers, sometimes avaricious parents, and edgy companies alike thrust cameras, entertainment opportunities, pageantry, and modeling jobs in the faces of children and forget to think about the consequences. One harrowing example is Balenciaga's 2022 Holiday Gifting Campaign, which included multiple photos of young, toddler-aged children standing and laying down on beds and couches holding monikered "BDSM teddy bears" clothed in harnesses, spiked collars, and chains (Galimberti, 2022). A rhetorical analysis of the objects in the photograph, from the flask labeled "H₂O" to the long yellow rope, all contribute to a disturbing, harmful story that perpetuates the ongoing exploitation of children, even if that was not the supposed intention of the photographer or the brand. By contextualizing the objects, clothing, and children in this image from Balenciaga's 2022 Holiday Gifting Campaign with research concerning the events around this campaign, the mission of Balenciaga, and the history of child exploitation in American media, an appalling narrative comes to light.

The gifting campaign involved photos of many children, from toddlers to elementary school-aged children standing on beds, couches, stools, or carpets with mostly solemn, sad faces surrounded by a range of disturbing items, such as duct tape, chains, leashes, and spiked collars.

It was first launched on November 16th, 2022, with a series of posts on Instagram and taken down soon after. Intended for the rich fashion influencers that run rampant on social media, the children featured in this campaign left a sour taste in the mouths of Balenciaga's intended audience. There is one brunette toddler with her hands in fists at her sides, a child clad in a blue shirt and a pair of shorts holding a periwinkle gifting bear, a smiling little girl standing with her arms wrapped around herself, an uneasy boy precariously balancing on one foot with his hands in his pockets, and another kid standing with his feet far apart while angrily staring at the camera. These children all seemed scared, unsure, or worried according to the placement of their hands, the stance of their feet, the tilt of their heads, or the look in their eyes.

Figure 1

Toy Stories



Note. By G. Galimberti, 2022, photograph, 2022 Balenciaga Holiday Gifting Campaign

Yet the photograph that was most quickly the subject of public disdain is pictured above in Figure 1, depicting a young redheaded girl dressed in head-to-toe black with a mournful frown on her face, resigned blank eyes staring straight ahead, and a tilted head curving to the side. She is holding a silk tie attached to a teddy bear wearing a mesh tank top reminiscent of rave vogue, a lock around its neck, piercings on its nose and ears, leather belts with silver loops as bracelets and anklets on all four of its limbs. That teddy bear symbolizes many sexually explicit themes that are attuned to an innovative and often risk-taking fashion house like Balenciaga, but wholly misplaced in the hands of a child. Many of the motifs found on the teddy bear are similar to other pieces created by Balenciaga, like their chain necklaces, naked mesh shirts, and their use of widely sexualized celebrity silhouettes as fashion statements. The objects around the child raise similar alarms. There is a flask, a yellow rope, and multiple single-link chains with decidedly adult undertones, weaving a story aligning with the bondage conveyed by the tied-up teddy bear.

Photographer Gabriele Galimberti is best known for his project *Toy Stories*, in which he photographs children and their toys from all over the world, whether they have “a veritable fleet of miniature cars or a single stuffed monkey” to showcase the pride and love they have for their possessions (Galimberti, n.d.). Yet there is no evidence of pride or love on the face of that little girl or anywhere in that photo. Only possession. Not her possession of the so-called toys placed around her, but the viewers’ possession of her as another toy, a gift to be unwrapped from the Balenciaga Holiday Collection. The girl is centered with many objects around her akin to Galimberti’s other work, but the similarities stop there. The left side of this photo includes a pair of baby pink shoes on a millennial pink side table followed by a plush headboard, culminating in the warm red hues of the child’s hair. These blush colors are juxtaposed against the array of gray,

black, silver, and white objects littered on the bed and the big, black blanket folded on the stool to the right of the girl. They show two sides at which the girl is at the center, a pink dream of childhood and a more hellish, darker, and adult future. It places a child in a coming of age narrative they do not yet belong in. Undeniably, these toys would not be found in any daycare, school, or playroom. Even the decals stuck on the wall behind her try to portray some fairytale with the silhouettes of dragons, but their effect is lost when paired with the array of dark and metallic objects laid out on the bed. This girl is like the white rabbit statuette placed to her left, an innocent surrounded by creeping darkness.

This begs the question: who is responsible for keeping working children safe? Is it their parents who should refrain from prioritizing money and clout over safety, the consumers who should boycott companies who seek to make millions off of innocent children or law enforcement who should restrain marketing giants who display predatory behavior? An anonymous father of one of the models affirmed that “No parent would actively encourage the child to take part in something which was pornographic, and I think the publicity surrounding what happened has been blown out of all proportion,” giving up any semblance of responsibility (Gilchrist, 2022). While most parents would never knowingly put their children in such harmful situations, a sense of caution should be principal when children are posing, selling, and acting as the face of such controversial industries. However, in this case, the company, the photographer behind the work, and their marketing teams all faced flack. On November 23rd, Galimberti issued a statement on Instagram, citing that for commercial shoots, photographers have no control over the products or models included but rather the style they take the photo. He essentially avoids the notion of fault, seeing no issue with the content of the shoot. In the coming weeks, Balenciaga issued their own statements, first passing the blame onto hired campaign

production companies and later assuming responsibility after facing more backlash from the public and even the faces of their brand, like Kim Kardashian and Bella Hadid.

Child exploitation is nothing new in American media. Precocious starlets like Shirley Temple, Brooke Shields, Mary-Kate, and Ashley Olsen were widely sexualized on and off the camera. Producers in Hollywood exposed themselves to Temple and tried to assault her multiple times when she was a minor. Shields was subject to being a part of horrifyingly sexual storylines with nude scenes in her films *Lolita* and *The Blue Lagoon* as a mere seven and fourteen-year-old opposite much older cast members. Multiple websites were dedicated to a countdown until the Olsen Twins' eighteenth birthday. Considering the outrage those events caused, it is mind-boggling how sexual themes can be present in a marketing campaign centered on child models. On Twitter, American conservative activist and commentator CJ Pearson wrote that "Balenciaga severed their ties with @kanyewest due to a tweet. Yet they expect us to just "accept their apology" after they get caught up sexualizing children? They're not apologizing because they're sorry. They're apologizing because they got caught" (Gilchrist, 2022).

Unfortunately, the public may never learn about the true intentions of Gabriele Galimberti, the production company that helped create this campaign or the brand that it represents. The *Toy Stories* campaign will live on in the internet, subjecting child models like that young redheaded girl to an unsafe online environment. The interpretation and backlash will completely and irrevocably change the lives of the children involved and hopefully ensure that huge brands with thousands of employees check their campaigns and marketing campaigns with even greater oversight. This new age of technology may not require children to give their blood, sweat, and tears in hard labor like they did in the Industrial Revolution, but they are forced to give up their autonomy, innocence, and privacy. It is a societal responsibility to protect children

from hateful parts of the world, so it is imperative that parents, guardians, and companies alike refrain from exploiting children and instead uplift, support, and help them achieve success and happiness.

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