

**Branding Positioning in the Digital Age:  
A case of Balenciaga's Digital Creative Partnerships**

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## **Abstract**

The luxury fashion market is one that undergoes constant changes and evolution in all aspects. Though luxury fashion was initially exclusive to royals and aristocrats, modernization has led to its accessibility to a wider audience through digital transformations. However, this process was especially accelerated since the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. As the luxury fashion houses primarily relied in-store interactions with their consumers, the pandemic caused drastic changes in their marketing strategies. A brand that took the opportunity to embrace the use of available digital technology is Balenciaga. In the span of one year they produced four digital works with their digital creative partners: *The Simpsons*, Epic Games, and MPC studio. Hence, this study investigates how Balenciaga positions themselves through digital creative partnerships during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research follows a qualitative research method using thematic content analysis of 40 textual materials to answer the research question. The findings identify that Balenciaga's positions themselves as thinking outside the box, accessible or inclusive, and committed to their brand values. Thinking outside the box entails the brand's experimental, modern, and unconventional nature. Accessibility refers to the brand's bond with their consumers, which leads to their extension to new markets and consumers. The image of committed values discusses their passion to communicate issues regarding sustainability, the pompous fashion industry, and society's homogeneity. The strategy Balenciaga uses to achieve the images is to indulge in their wide imagination. This leads to the strategy to encourage creating art in the expression. Subsequently, symbolic motivations arise which emotionally attract consumers' interests. Lastly, establishing a clear communication about their identity and values led to Balenciaga's positioning statements. Consistent demonstration of the identity and values further enhances the brand image. As this topic is highly understudied, this research will contribute to the development of existing literature and to the knowledge of applicability of the theories.

Keywords: *Digital brand positioning, Luxury brand positioning, Creative partnerships, Digital transformation, Fashion positioning*

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# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1. Context of the problem**

The luxury fashion market is an industry that requires an ever-lasting journey of evolution (Kapferer, 2015). The first documented proof of luxury fashion was already apparent in Ancient Egypt (Kapferer, 2015). For a long period of time luxury fashion was only accessible to royals and aristocrats. However, until the 20th century, luxury began to open its accessibility to a wider consumer group (Kapferer, 2015). Their accessibility especially grows as the modern digital environment advances (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018). In the last decade, the fashion industry has been partaking in the trending process of digital transformation. The movement of the fashion industry's digital transformation was first seen in the transition from physical to online magazines; the creation of web pages; creation of fashion films; and ultimately the shift from physical to online experiences such as fashion shows and shopping (Kalbaska et al., 2019). With this transition, fashion brands have increased their online presence in numerous forms such as social media: Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, etc. Apart from social media, the advancing digital technology has allowed the fashion industry to widen their creativity to communicate with their consumers. This full digital immersion can be exemplified by Gucci's spring campaign in 2018, called the Gucci Hallucination. The 52 of the brand's stores put virtual reality (VR) and artificial reality (AR) installations that invited consumers to directly experience the campaign (Riley, 2018). In these installations, consumers were able to step into a "360 degree panorama of Monreal's campaign artwork" (Riley, 2018, para. 4). For those who could not attend the campaign in the stores, Gucci's artworks were published in magazines and newspapers which were scannable on the Gucci application to emulate a similar AR experience (Riley, 2018). This context proves the necessity for brands to digitally transform themselves in order to stay modern and relevant in the industry.

Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic particularly accelerated the industry's digitalization further. The Covid-19 pandemic detrimentally affected the world from 2019 and still in many countries today. It induced unpredictable lengths of lockdown and self-isolation that affect the success of businesses today (Arora et al., 2020). Many of the affected businesses include luxury fashion houses as this market specifically relied on experiential marketing through in-store

interactions with their consumers (Arora et al., 2020). Due to this, the pandemic prompted changes in all the foundational structures; predicting them to be the new normal (Achille & Zipser, 2020). Though the pandemic caused damages in multiple manners, fashion brands had an optimistic outlook on their future. Many took the advantage of experimenting with the available digital tools to cultivate digital engagement (Achille & Zipser, 2020). A luxury fashion brand that exceptionally stood out during the pandemic was Balenciaga's digital immersion through their digital creative partnerships. Within the span of one year, Balenciaga produced a video game with an interactive entertainment and technology company, Epic Games called *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow* (Epic Games, 2020); avatar skins for characters on Epic Game's operated game, Fortnite (Epic Games, 2020); a deep-fake digital fashion show using CGI models created with MPC studio; and an episode with *The Simpsons*, animated TV show, packed with Balenciaga's on-screen presence (Tashjian, 2021). Though *The Simpsons* is traditionally considered as TV, the Balenciaga episode is considered as digital content as the playful storytelling and digitally designed clothes encourage "play and indeed need to be played by their everyday users" (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2018, p.11). It is apparent that Balenciaga deeply plunged into the digital space with the help of the aforementioned partnered digital creative firms. Due to their partnerships, Balenciaga gained attention by redefining the capabilities and the conducts of fashion (Tashjian, 2021). For this reason, this thesis chooses Balenciaga as the focus of the research as it proves its high digital activity since and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The existing literature presented in the domain of digital transformation emphasizes the demand for normalizing digitalization (Verhoef et al., 2021). In doing so, luxury fashion brands develop innovative systems to be built within their internal structure, communication strategy, and sustainability programs (Alshaketheep et al, 2020; Bertola & Teunissen, 2021; Lee & Kim, 2001; Malchyk et al., 2018; Yoo et al., 2012).

Additionally, the literature on (digital) brand positioning highlights differentiating the brand image, identity, and values from other brands in the market (Semans, 2010). This can be achieved by enhancing consumer awareness and emotional appeal. Increasing consumer awareness aids in maintaining and extending the consumer groups (Knox, 2004; Urde & Koch, 2014). On top of this, emotional appeal attracts the consumers on a psychological level which provides a symbolic motivation for their interest and loyalty (Dion & Arnould, 2011; Jelinek, 2018; Joy et al., 2014; Kapferer, 2015; Mahajan & Wind, 2002). Consistent communication of

symbolic messages will ultimately create a strong positioning statement of the brand (Jacobson, 2020; Rees, 2020; Rowles, 2017).

Furthermore, studies on creative brand partnerships have voiced the debate on brand compatibility and the innovation it can lead to. Some argue that brands must be familiar to the consumers to execute a partnership, but others claim that illogical pairing and unfamiliar brands cause more attraction (Charlton & Cornwell, 2019; Kai, 2021; Simonin & Ruth, 1998; Thompson & Strutton, 2012). Following this ideology, partnerships with other brands especially those that are unfamiliar have a higher chance of creating innovative works (Alexander & Conteras, 2016; Dodourova, 2009; Enkel & Grossman, 2010). The aforementioned framework is thoroughly discussed in the theoretical framework chapter of the thesis.

Though the existing literature lays a foundation to understand the fundamental ideology behind how a brand positions themselves digitally, there are still research gaps that need to be filled. As literature on digital brand positioning especially in the luxury fashion industry is limited, this research will provide insight into how a brand experiments with digital technology to develop their digital positioning strategies (Charlton & Cornwell, 2019; Jelinek, 2018; Moore & Birtwistle, 2004; Urde & Koch, 2014). Extracting analysis and results from one luxury brand provides relevant understanding of the application of positioning processes (Urde & Koch, 2014). Therefore, the research question is presented as: how does Balenciaga position their brand through digital creative partnerships during the Covid-19 pandemic?

To answer this question, this study applies a qualitative method, in a form of thematic content analysis. As this study aims to explore (digital) brand positioning strategies to examine a larger range of thoughts and views (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the analysis will be performed on primary and secondary sources: brand campaign materials, press releases, videos, case studies, and articles and blog posts commenting the related activities.

## **1.2. Relevance of the research**

### **1.2.1. Theoretical relevance**

As mentioned previously, there is a clear research gap in the framework regarding the luxury fashion industry's digital brand positioning strategy (Charlton & Cornwell, 2019; Moore & Birtwistle, 2004). The existing literature poses theoretical suggestions to achieve a strong digital positioning strategy. However, the understudied topic lacks in testing the theories on specific

luxury brands. Therefore, testing the theories on Balenciaga will provide insights on how digital positioning strategies are carried out in reality. Investigating this research is especially relevant as the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the fashion industry at large, forcing brands like Balenciaga to hasten their digital transformation to develop digital marketing strategies. For this reason, performing this research provides theoretical relevance as it contributes to the development of digital brand positioning theories, specifically in the luxury fashion brand sector.

### **1.2.2. Societal relevance**

Additionally, while pandemic restrictions remain unpredictable, it is crucial for brands to strengthen their brand positioning during such circumstances. Investigating Balenciaga's digital brand positioning strategy through digital creative partnerships provides social relevance as it enables other firms to elevate their digital marketing strategies. The pandemic did not only force brands to go through digitalization processes, but it ultimately accelerated the process of doing so. The example of Gucci's AR and VR campaign illustrates the competitive nature of the luxury fashion industry. Thus, luxury fashion brands need to develop their strategies quickly to maintain their consumers (Achille & Zipser, 2020). In addition, this strategy may be applicable outside of the pandemic as luxury consumers have been becoming more digitally inclined due to the advancement of digital technology (Achille & Zipser, 2020). Start-ups, that have especially been established during or after the pandemic, can also benefit from this research as it explores new digital marketing strategies that develop traditional marketing strategies.

## **1.3. Chapter outline**

This section will inform how the research is structured. To provide meaningful results to answer the research question, the thesis consists of four chapters after this introduction: the theoretical framework, methodology, results, and the conclusion and discussion.

The theoretical framework discusses the existing literature on digital transformation, (digital) brand positioning, and creative partnerships. The framework on digital transformation encompasses the overall benefits of digitalization and the innovative communication strategies. Secondly, (digital) brand positioning is discussed to be familiar with literature regarding different processes of brand positioning strategies: pre-digitalization, luxury, luxury fashion, and digital brand positioning. Lastly, literature on creative brand partnerships is explored to perform the same purpose as the previous section. To

comprehend the essence of partnerships and its applicability to Balenciaga's case, this section discusses the following: general brand and inter-industry partnerships.

Furthermore, the methodology chapter introduces the research design of the study. Firstly, it will justify why this research is fit to use qualitative research methods to answer the question. Next, decisions and the type of sample and data collection will be described. This will lead to the explanation of how the discussed theories in the theoretical framework have been operationalized to fit the investigation. Then, there will be a justification on why thematic content analysis is used to analyze the sample as well as a step-by-step explanation of how it is performed. The last section consists of discussing the validity and credibility of the research.

The next chapter presents and explores the results of the analysis. The analysis revealed three findings of how Balenciaga is positioned through their digital creative partnerships: *thinking outside the box*, *accessibility and inclusivity*, and *committed values*. The chapter further elaborates on how these themes arose and their association with the existing literature.

Lastly, the final chapter of this thesis concludes the research with how Balenciaga has positioned themselves through digital creative partnerships during the pandemic. In addition, the chapter communicates the limitations the research faced and the implications for future research.



## **2. Theoretical Framework**

In this section, academic literature on existing research regarding *digital transformation*, *(digital) brand positioning*, and *creative brand partnerships* will be discussed. Firstly, the importance and relevance of firms' digitalization will be discussed. Secondly, theories on *(digital) brand positioning* will be explored. Lastly, the theoretical framework on creative partnerships is considered to also lay a foundation to understanding the context of Balenciaga's motivation and strategy to execute partnerships.

### **2.1. Digital transformation**

#### **2.1.1. Digitalizing firms**

As society moves towards centralizing digital technology, it is pivotal to recognize how the digital transformation of a brand can impact the development of industries such as fashion. Kapferer (2015) admits that for an industry that is in constant work to develop new ideas, the fashion industry immensely lacks modernization. Accordingly, Verhoef et al. (2021) highlights the weight of the impact digital transformations have. Verhoef et al. (2021) continues to describe that digital transformations are usually impacted by the "response to changes in digital technologies, increasing digital competition and resulting digital consumer behavior" (p.895). Verhoef et al. (2021) identify three major factors that motivate the need for digital transformations. Firstly, since the creation of the World Wide Web, the production of advanced technology has increased (Verhoef et al., 2021). This signifies that the heightened demand and normalization of technology calls for firms and brands to make a digital transformation (Verhoef et al., 2021). Secondly, competition amongst firms is caused by the constantly advancing technology which motivates firms to transform digitally. Lastly, Verhoef et al. (2021) claims that "consumer behavior is changing as a response to the digital revolution" (p.891). These behaviors consist of heightened purchases at online stores, co-creation values between the firm and the consumers, and the heightened reliance of digital applications (Verhoef et al., 2021). With that, Verhoef et al. (2021) are adamant about firms going through a digital transformation to become more attractive to consumers and to avoid being replaced by firms that are digitally integrated.

Lee & Kim (2001) observe similar motivations to transform digitally in the fashion industry. They discuss that the heightened use of digital technology and platforms in the sector inevitably influences more fashion brands to adapt to such an environment (Lee & Kim, 2001).

Their paper suggests three categories on how digitalization is implemented in the fashion industry: technological environment, information environment, and business environment. Firstly, the technological environment refers to the automation processes of the fashion production and distribution. The use of advanced technology can be integrated for better productivity and management efficiency. Secondly, information environment refers to how the industry can keep up with the abundant flow of information being produced on a daily basis. Additionally, digitalization makes it convenient to document information; aiding greater efficiency for the operations for the industry. Lastly, the business environment discusses how digitalization leads to the change between a producer-oriented to a consumer-oriented market where the focus is strongly on the consumers. With that, digitalization enables efficient tracking of consumer purchase behaviors such as purchase decisions, influencers, and distribution and transaction processes (Lee & Kim, 2001). These implementations enable brands, like Balenciaga, to achieve strengthened identity as it enables strict management of their managerial, administrative, and operational divisions.

In addition, Bertola & Teunissen (2018) identify key factors that highlight the necessity to adapt to the digital environment: sustainable future, competitive innovation, and widened imagination. Firstly, digital transformation leads to a sustainable future. This is a relevant issue that many of the digital society is becoming aware of as well. Thus, taking advantage of the available technology ultimately enables “a significant reduction of costs, time, and workload with clear benefits in efficiency and sustainability” (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018, p.360). On top of sustainability, the literature describes that fashion is “a system, [that] is about the new – about new colors, new styles again and again – but at the same time is hardly innovative” (p.361). This statement highlights that fashion must move on from simple adjustments of colors and styles and ultimately provide a greater meaning to its consumers. Once other brands become aware of this, there will quickly be a competition for innovation. Because of this, Bertola & Teunissen (2018) advise to use digital technology such as 3D printing and overall digital printers to encourage smart manufacturing to achieve an efficient and advanced innovation system. To extend the scope of smart manufacturing, Bertola & Teunissen (2018) mention the notion of Industry 4.0 – which describes the use of smart technology to maintain the traditional industrial practices – to highlight the current relevance of digitally transforming brands from all industries. Lastly, digital transformation renders a widened imagination as it magnifies the expression of one’s creative

visions; before Industry 4.0, creativity was limited to traditional and uninnovative manners. The abundant digital technologies have a “growing impact on how we are able to perceive, enhance, and monitor our bodies” (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018, p.364).

### **2.1.2. Communication innovation**

Moreover, Bertola & Teunissen’s (2018) relevance and importance of digital transformation is extended by Malchyk et al. (2021) where they explain that digital technology will also enable the development of clear communication between the brand and the consumer. Malchyk et al. (2021) recommend establishing a strong brand image, following with the implementation of the comprehensive strategy to enhance brand promotion to reach the cyberspace audience during the Covid-19 pandemic. The emphasis of the pandemic is crucial because it reflects the time of the drastic increase in “the importance of brand fixation in the digital environment using strategic tools” (Malchyk et al., 2021, p.101). This increase brought attention for brands to be able to clarify their image and values through digital means. Therefore, in order to reach the cyberspace audience, modern marketing strategies must be implemented. Such strategies can involve gamification, advertising, viral marketing, and social media marketing. Most importantly, upkeeping the websites and social media accounts are what communicates the brand’s trademark on the internet space (Malychk et al., 2021). Following this thought, Malychk et al. (2021) emphasize utilizing the wide range of digital marketing tools in order to communicate with partners, investors, as well as with consumers. Therefore, implementing Bertola and Teunissen’s (2018) Industry 4.0 in the fashion industry will provide the opportunity to strengthen the brands’ image. Ultimately, taking advantage of all the available tools presents the brand with a higher quality in search engines and with a wider reach of consumers (Malychk et al., 2021).

In addition, Alshaketheep et al. (2020) also looks into digital marketing and how changing the business models were necessary due to the drastically impacted times of the Covid-19 pandemic. They describe marketing to be an interaction of “mutual understanding, interest appreciation and communication – both of which were dramatically changed during the Covid-19 events for many purchasers and suppliers” (Alshaketheep et al., 2020, p.833). During the pandemic, consumers were frustrated over the limited choice and exposure to goods. Because of this, providing advanced search features, shorter delivery times, higher customer support, and

most importantly providing creative communication set a higher standard in gaining their trust. Making use of the digitization of brands allows new sources of value to develop especially through partnerships, suppliers and consumers (Alshaketheep et al, 2020). Therefore, they believe that a successful business during the pandemic will strive to maintain direct communication with their digital consumers and have a seamless network with their suppliers and partners as well. Alshaketheep et al.'s (2020) contribution supports Bertola & Teunissen's (2018) point on technology allowing the widening of imagination. With the help of digital transformation, brands can find creative ways to gratify consumers' needs and wants as well as creative ways to communicate to the consumers.

Furthermore, Yoo et al. (2012) complements Bertola & Teunissen (2018) and Alshaketheep et al.'s (2020) literature in saying that digitalization provides new "possibilities for creating experiences, relationships, processes, and organizational forms" (p.1399). The extensive opportunity it offers changes the essence of the products or brands' innovations. Yoo et al. (2012) stress the prevalence of digitalization by calling it the invasive digital technology. This is defined by the "incorporation of digital capabilities into objects that previously had a purely physical materiality" (Yoo et al., 2012, p.1398). Digital materiality, in contrast, is then observed as how a software in the physical material can be manipulated into digital representations (Yoo et al., 2012). This whole notion leads to the extension and flexibility of affordances that ultimately guide to the convergence and generativity traits of digital innovation (Yoo et al., 2012). Convergence refers to bringing together separate user experiences and content together, much like a smartphone where one can listen to music, take a photo, and even communicate with multiple people (Yoo et al., 2012). Secondly, generativity goes against the notion that technology is fixed. Instead, Yoo et al. (2012) proposes that it actually provides flexibility and dynamism in digital technology. As digital materials are easily reprogrammable, it offers the possibility of adding new functions and capabilities to them at a later stage. With this, Yoo et al. (2012) identifies three characteristics of innovation with pervasive digital technology. First is the importance of digital technology platforms in advancing a brand's innovation systems; subsequent to its importance, they recognize the emergence of distributed innovation which refers to the competitive nature of digitalization; and lastly, combinatorial innovation is where firms create new products that combine two separate and already existing features together (Yoo et al., 2012).

In summation, the framework on digital transformation aims to provide a foundational background of why Balenciaga has digitally transformed itself especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. From the existing research, it is clear that the main motivation of a firm's digital transformation is to create efficient and creative internal and external systems. Also, as digital technologies are still being developed, this means that there will be greater flexibility and dynamism in its production, distribution, and communication. The research will thus use the aforementioned aggregated theories – by Verhoef et al. (2021), Lee & Rim (2001), Bertola & Teunissen (2018), Malchyk et al. (2021), Alshaketheep et al. (2020), and Yoo et al. (2012) – on digital transformation to provide contextual background on the impact of Balenciaga's partnership strategy. Moreover, the theories on widened imagination will be considered in the analysis in the context of Balenciaga's positioning approach.

## **2.2 (Digital) Brand Positioning**

### **2.2.1. Brand positioning**

According to Semans (2010), brand positioning is defined as “creating a distinct place for your brand in the mind of the consumer and that key messages are derived from that position” (Semans, 2010, p.1), also understood as what a brand would like to be known for. Semans (2010) identifies a successful positioning strategy when a brand has the ability to differentiate themselves amongst its competitors. Semans (2010) claims that a brand with strong positioning follows four ‘positioning filters’: relevance, differentiation, delivery, and communication. In order to stay in the consumers' minds, it is crucial to distinguish the relevance of a brand and ask if they are “important in their purchase decision making” (Semans, 2010, p.3). Secondly, the brand must be able to identify how they differentiate from others and clearly communicate this to the consumers (Semans, 2010). With that, the brand must not only identify and communicate but also demonstrate how they differentiate from others so that consumers are able to identify it themselves as well. This leads to the third filter which is the necessity to deliver or physically give a demonstration of the brand's story and values with clarity (Semans, 2010). Lastly, brands will strengthen their positioning if they carry a clear dialogue with their consumers (Semans, 2010). Semans (2010) says that if one aims to have the consumers change their behavior or if one allows the consumers to change the brand, “you had better plan on having significant resources available to achieve your position” (p.4).

Moreover, Semans' (2010) focus on communication and delivery of a brand's value is also agreed by Urde & Koch (2014). However, they suggest doing so by differentiating between a market-oriented (image) and brand-oriented (mission and values) positioning (Urde & Koch, 2014). Market-oriented positioning refers to how a brand is shaped by what the consumers seek from the brand. This signifies that brands define their identity with an outside-in approach (Urde & Koch, 2014). Therefore, how the brand image is perceived is the center of this positioning type. Additionally, the brand-oriented positioning is an inside-out process. It focuses on defining and implementing "an intended position with brand identity as its point of departure and... satisfying customers' needs and wants occurs within the boundaries of the brand's core identity" (Urde & Koch, 2014, p.482). It is, therefore, important to distinguish the difference between the two positioning types while implementing the two to execute a strong brand positioning.

While Urde & Koch (2014) focus on both positioning approaches, Knox (2004) puts focus on Urde & Koch's (2015) market-oriented positioning by saying that positioning is when a brand can add "values, or brand values, differentiate the offer and provide the basis for customer preference and loyalty" (p.106). Due to this, Knox (2004) proposes that brands must consider developing brand positioning through supply chains rather than just the internal organization. It is suggested to implement the First Direct (FD) monitor to position themselves with set values. The FD model attempts to align with the customer's lifestyle to satisfy the customers' preferences (Knox, 2004). To achieve customer satisfaction, a brand must develop its brand positioning with supply chains through the brand's overall reputation, where consumers desire to see committed values to build trust; product or service performance, where consumers wish their wants are heard and demonstrated; product and customer portfolio, where understanding and identifying the consumer base aids in reaching their needs easily; and lastly through a brand's network with external brands as it reflects their brand values and positioning. Knox (2004) contributes to both Semans (2010) and Urde & Koch's (2014) research by adding the element of identifying the consumer base.

Mahajan & Wind (2002), on the other hand, suggest combining the emotional aspect with the cognitive aspect of brand positioning. They term the emotional aspect as affective positioning where they encourage inducing emotional responses and creating an intimate bond with the consumers (Mahajan & Wind, 2002). It is explained that customers are more appealed by emotions than cognitive information (Mahajan & Wind, 2002). This is ultimately because most

customers are driven by emotions which allows for brands to release messages or values that impact their heart more than their mind (Mahajan & Wind, 2002). Appealing customers with emotional impact ensures the “emotions associated with the brand to become a part of the consumer’s autobiographical memories, making them stronger and more accessible” (Mahajan & Wind, 2004, p.39). However, this does not mean that cognitive positioning should be abandoned. Keeping in mind “problems, solutions, or benefits sought by customers and how the product features help to solve problems or achieve the benefits” (Mahajan & Wind, 2002, p.38) are still an important aspect to strengthen a brand’s positioning strategies. Thus, it should be Mahajan & Wind (2002) suggest implementing a balance between the cognitive and affective positioning. The combination of affective and cognitive positioning approach shows similarity to Urde & Koch’s (2014) combination of market and brand-oriented positioning. While cognitive and market-oriented positioning focuses on the consumers’ needs and wants, the affective and brand-oriented positioning seeks to intentionally implement an experience or emotion, navigated by the brand.

The collected theories on brand partnership will be used as a theoretical framework for this thesis to comprehend how Balenciaga positioned themselves during the digital environment of the Covid-19 pandemic. This framework highlights the acceleration of the increased need for online brand presence during the Covid-19 pandemic. For this reason, Seman’s (2010) four ‘positioning filters’ will be used as a basis to theorize brand positioning while adding Urde & Koch’s (2014) combination of market and brand-oriented positioning; Knox’s (2004) consideration of positioning with the FD model; and Mahajan & Wind’s (2002) affective positioning to add depth to the existing literature. Therefore, these theories will be referred to identify where Balenciaga is placed within the literature of brand position strategies.

### **2.2.2 Luxury Brand Positioning**

In order to delve into the framework of luxury brand positioning, elaborating on the difference between brand positioning and luxury brand positioning is necessary. Kapferer (2014) defines luxury by looking at the root of the word which carries the meaning of overabundance, exceptionality, or beyond human necessity (Kapferer, 2015). In the traditional sense, luxury allowed individuals to “impress crowds by the magnificence of the palaces, horse carriages, dresses, jewels, and so on” (Kapferer, 2014, p.372). In this essence, obtaining luxury items or

lifestyles started to become only accessible to upper-class members such as the aristocrats and royalty (Podolny, 2005). Therefore, luxury brand positioning entails associating brands with exclusivity, craftsmanship, and high quality in the consumers' minds (Fionda & Moore, 2009).

Kapferer (2014) suggests that 'artification' is a strong positioning strategy for luxury brands. 'Artification' is a process in which luxury brands engage in that have led them to be "elevated as strong cultural conveyors of advanced taste" (p.379). As much as luxury is associated with the exclusive upper-class society, luxury brands are now striving to deemphasize this motivation of being an upper-class member, and instead strive to provide a symbolic and meaningful motivation to their consumers (Kapferer, 2015). These symbolic motivations could come from highlighting a brand's "legendary roots, the mythical history that sets them apart" (Kapferer, 2014, p.373) and even the artistic mind behind their work. On this account, Kapferer's (2014) artification is a term used to describe the transformation of a non-art to an art that gives consumers a symbolic reason to value the luxury product. 'Artification' offers constant contemporary evolution of brand image; an advanced cultural agent; the reduction of the obligation to create scarcity or rarity of products; and a semi-porous barrier that welcomes few new consumers (Kapferer, 2015). Welcoming new consumers, in this way, promotes the brand's openness to including consumers out of their target demographics. This is ultimately beneficial for brands as their reach widens.

Moreover, Dion & Arnould's (2011) agree with Kapferer's (2014) notion of luxury as art as they encourage heightening the brand's 'magical' image. Simply, instead of focusing on growing a community, luxury brands focus on generating awe and adoration (Dion & Arnould, 2011). Though a brand's positioning comes from the brand at large, Dion & Arnould (2011) stress the impact the artistic director has in positioning the luxury brand. The artistic director is the 'magician', in this context, where they have the power to rewrite the codes of beauty and fashion as well as the power to create an extensive imaginary world (Dion & Arnould, 2011). Similarly, Joy et al. (2014) make a comparison of the luxury brand stores with an art institution to express that both environments render awe in consumers or visitors. Calling this combination a 'M(Art) World' – a market consisting of art as a main party of the brand's identity – they say that it is important for luxury brands to take on the role of bewitching the consumers to receive artistic adoration from them. Moreover, Jelinek (2018) contributes to this framework by further explaining that consistently using art as a strategic tool leads to an authentic feel, rendering



higher brand positioning. Though Jelinek (2018) sees validation in implementing artification processes in luxury brands, it is highlighted that this process is only successful if the art fits the brand's image and values. However, luxury consumers in their research have expressed that art is not necessarily the focal point of attraction in the short term (Jelinek, 2018). In order for luxury brands to succeed in artification, it is crucial for them to have authenticity; a complementary production of art and collaboration with the artists; availability to an exclusive and specific market; and to have kept in mind the necessity to adapt and transform to future customer tastes and desires (Jelinek, 2018). Therefore, inviting consumers to perceive luxury as a creative industry is how luxury brands are able to grow while maintaining their exclusivity.

Having discussed the importance of perceiving luxury brands as an art connects with Mahajan & Wind's (2004) article, mentioned in the previous section, on appealing to the consumers' emotions. Okonkwo (2007) complements Mahajan & Wind (2004) in stating that (luxury) brands must emphasize "the connection between a brand and the consumer's mind and emotions" (p.116).

This section extends the brand positioning framework to luxury brand positioning to demonstrate applicability to Balenciaga. On top of the aforementioned literature in the previous section, Kapferer's (2014) notion of artification, with additional contributions from Dion & Arnould (2011) and Jelinek (2018), will be referred to when identifying Balenciaga's position strategies in the digital age of Covid-19 pandemic.

### **2.2.3 Luxury Fashion Positioning**

Luxury fashion can be traced all the way back to the Christian Bible but ultimately became prevalent in the ancient Egyptian civilization where the royals dressed in opulence (Okonkwo, 2007). This opulence had been translated over to generations of history where the 17th century Italian and the French royals or high-class especially indulged in it; it was strictly the higher class that could access luxury fashion at this time (Okonkwo, 2007). This signifies that the luxury industry, including luxury fashion, had always been positioned as exclusive to a certain group or class from the beginning of time. Moreover, the idea of the typical traditional luxury fashion perceived today arose when Charles Frederick Worth revolutionized fashion marketing

and invented haute couture which introduced models, private fashion shows, and celebrity endorsements (Okonkwo, 2007).

Before the advanced development of digitalization, real physical environments were the only focal point when marketing to consumers. Rapoport (1982) writes about the relationship between people and their environments. People constantly react to their environments and influence their decision-making in areas like stores (Rapoport, 1982). Both the consumers and designers of the environment make meaning of their environments. However, the consumers' perception or interpretation of the environment should be prioritized (Rapoport, 1982). Bitner (1992) contributes to Rapoport's (1982) ideology by also highlighting "the impact of physical surroundings on the behaviors of both customers and employees" (p.57) in strengthening the brand's positioned image in the consumers' minds. Bitner (1992) terms this marketing concept as *servicescape* as it focuses on the services taking place in an environment. Jiang et al. (2014) use Bitner's (1992) *servicescape* to discuss how luxury fashion brands, Bally and Tods, use this strategy to strengthen their brand image. Jiang et al. (2014) come to a finding that specific details in the environment directly reflect the brand's image. For instance, a "location in a luxury area demonstrates its luxury status... and the store ambience determines both brand image and store image" (Jiang et al., 2014, p.1298). However, because the Covid-19 pandemic led to isolation and quarantine, the fashion industry needed to find new ways to attract consumers.

Although the store's environment is crucial in appealing to the consumers, the modern luxury fashion positioning shifted its focus to the digital space. Ramadan & Nsouli (2021) also find that product sampling and showrooming are important ways to lure the consumers. However, adjusting to the circumstances of the digital age, their study on luxury fashion brands' digital strategies with generation Y consumers find that their digital connectedness leads to the need for the brand's unique and trendy innovation as well as their authenticity. Massi & Mainolfi (2021) agree and contribute to Ramadan & Nsouli's (2021) idea of the necessity for luxury fashion brands to be innovative in the modern digital wave. They mention that the consumer generations are only becoming younger and demand for strategic rethinking (Massi & Mainolfi, 2021). Massi & Mainolfi (2021), thus, suggest that "representing stability, familiarity, and trust can appeal to people in uncertain periods, helping to create an image of authenticity and integrity" (p.202). The literature by Ramadan & Nsouli (2021) and Massi & Mainolfi (2021) associate with Seman's (2010) notion on brand differentiation.

Furthermore, Okonkwo (2007) describes that successful luxury fashion brands exhibit 10 characteristics: innovation, consistent quality delivery, exclusivity, controlled distribution, heritage, distinct brand identity, global reputation, emotional appeal, premium pricing, and high visibility. However, it is highlighted that the most important are to have brand differentiation and to implement emotional appeal to attract the consumer (Okonkwo, 2007). With differentiation, it is crucial for brands to be recognizable. Okonkwo (2007) exemplifies this strategy with Chanel being known for their tweed and pearls, and Bottega Veneta being known for their woven leather bags. Additionally, the emotional aspect connects with the consumer's psychology, ultimately encouraging intimate relationships to occur. Okonkwo's (2007) distinction tightly corresponds with Seman's (2010) views on brand differentiation while the emotional appeal connects with Mahajan & Wind's (2002) literature.

This section extends the previous literature on luxury brand positioning specifically towards the luxury fashion sector to enhance the framework's relevance to Balenciaga. The mentioned literature on traditional views of luxury (Okonkwo, 2007) will be used to compare Balenciaga's modern marketing strategies. Additionally, Bitner's (1992) *servicescape* will be incorporated in the analysis to identify how Balenciaga positions themselves with the ever-changing environment.

#### **2.2.4. Digital Brand Positioning**

In the modern age, the concept of brand positioning as creating a distinct place in the consumers' mind (Semans, 2010) has developed further towards the digital environment. Rowles (2017) explains that the pre-digital age was one-directional while the current digital age allows for a conversation with the consumers. Rowles (2017) thus defines digital brand positioning "as the sum of all experiences that an individual has with a brand' (p.11) in which consumers are particularly enticed by a brand's authenticity; a brand must be certainly clear and authentic with their value proposition. Authenticity is important because the brands can no longer hide behind any walls as the digital tools provide consumers transparency (Rowles, 2017). Rees (2020) complements Rowles' (2017) statement on positioning with authentic values and further adds to it by exploring brand narratives. After performing a broad analysis of renown companies like Apple and Facebook, Rees (2020) comes to a conclusion that a brand must be authentic by "strongly connecting brand narratives and public relations communications to their core brand

values” (p.106). Both Rowles (2017) and Rees (2020) share the same view when saying that a brand must put their words into actions as that is what fundamentally attracts consumers.

Furthermore, acknowledging the growth of usage of digital platforms and tools by brands or companies, Jacobson (2020) looks into how social media managers develop their own personal branding. The article contributes to this theoretical framework by discussing how to perform personal branding onto ‘the future audience’ as well as to keep ‘always-on-the-job’ mentality (Jacobson, 2020). Personal branding refers to “developing, harnessing, and classifying personal information and providing a comprehensive narrative for others to easily understand one’s identity” (Jacobson, 2020, p. 715). Additionally, as ‘the future audience’ is unpredictable, it is necessary for managers to stay ‘always-on-the-job’; meaning they must constantly stay updated with the new audience and even the current events, trends, etc. (Jacobson, 2020). Though this research was performed on social media managers, such as influencers, the theory is still applicable to bigger brands like Balenciaga; theories show that these brands can play into the relatability and approachability factor. Agreeing with Rees’ (2020) discussion on brand narratives, Jacobson’s (2020) notion on personifying a brand allows consumers to connect with the brand further. In addition, Jacobson’s (2020) ‘always-on-the-job’ promotes evolution of brands, allowing for brands to grow and explore what is new in the current. Applying Jacobson’s (2020) concepts allows for consumers to perceive brands to have a coherent and enticing narrative while still being modern.

This section extends the last two sections by exploring to what extent brand positioning can be applied to digital marketing. Therefore, the aggregated theories will be used as a theoretical reference to analyze how Balenciaga’s positions themselves digitally. Specifically, concepts such as brand authenticity (Rowles, 2017; Rees, 2020), brand narrative (Rees, 2020; Jacobson, 2020), and ‘always-on-the-job’ (Jacobson, 2020) will be implemented in researching how Balenciaga develops digital brand positioning in relation to the aforementioned theory.

## **2.3. Creative Brand Partnerships**

### **2.3.1. Brand Partnerships**

Simonin & Ruth (1998) defines brand partnerships as a “short- or long-term association or combination of two or more individual brands, products, and/or other distinctive proprietary asset” (p.30). Results in Simonin & Ruth’s (1998) research demonstrated that successful

partnerships are based on “attitudes toward each partner’s brand and that the strength of these effects is moderated by brand familiarity” (p.31). Furthermore, results show that both product and brand fit were positively considered by consumers as they perceived the outcome of the alliance to be complementary to one another and the product outcome to make sense for the alliance (Simonin & Ruth, 1998). For brands to partner, it is important to evaluate their level of prominence in each of their target groups and to complement each other as it is essential to maintain familiarity to them.

Similarly, Kai (2021) agrees with Simonin & Ruth (1998) in saying that it is necessary for brands to be perceived as relevant and complementary to each other. Kai (2021) looks into the partnership between Louis Vuitton and Supreme to discuss the results that the consumers have enjoyed that the brands were compatible with one another. This is because the time of the alliance arose at a time where street culture and high fashion came together (Kai, 2021). On the other hand, Kai (2021) highlights that the idea of compatibility may be subject to the trends that are circling in the current time; in the case of his research, the trend is street culture.

Though the implementation of brand familiarity is seemingly effective to attain successful partnerships, Thompson & Strutton (2012) contributes a countered perspective. Thompson & Strutton’s (2021) article explores the value of brand alliances to introduce new brand extensions to the consumers. While Thompson & Strutton (2012) agrees with Simonin & Ruth (1998) that a logical brand pairing will make a strong alliance, they also mention that familiarity could potentially “take a back seat when forming alliances” (p.21). There is even a potential situation that two seemingly strange brands partnering is more attractive than a brand that is completely independent (Thompson & Strutton, 2012). In addition, they suggest that an illogical pairing could potentially be a beneficial strategy to extend and link themselves to a new market (Thompson & Strutton, 2012). For this, it is recommended to prioritize the possibilities of extending the brand(s) to new markets as a driving factor for selecting brand partnerships (Thompson & Strutton, 2012).

Lee & Rim (2017) also look into the role of a brand’s familiarity and the consumer’s relevance in the effect of a successful brand partnership. Their results showed that “cause-related marketing yield more favorable attitudinal outcomes when consumers are more familiar with the cause brand” (p.116). This signifies that the consumers in their results showed that they preferred brands that they were familiar with to come together for an alliance (Lee & Rim,

2017). They also tested the importance of consumer's personal relevance in assessing the likeability of the partnerships (Lee & Rim, 2017). Their results revealed that, indeed, when consumers are more connected with the brand's values, style, or products, the partnerships are perceived to be favorable (Lee & Rim, 2017). Therefore, Lee & Rim's (2017) study connects with the aforementioned notion that consumers generally are in favor of familiarity of a brand but are open to seeing others that still coincide with the consumers' personal interests.

Moreover, Charlton & Cornwell (2019) add the importance of brand authenticity with brand familiarity to the theory of successful brand partnerships. They performed a study on authenticity in horizontal marketing partnerships in which their fifth study revealed that "the credibility of the relationship is the most important element in determining how favorably a partnership is viewed by audiences" (Charlton & Cornwell, 2019, p.289). This explains that without honesty and transparency between the two brands and the consumers, it is difficult for the consumers to find the partnership appealing. The trust is, thus, built by how "a partnership delivers to audiences on their role-based promises" (Charlton & Cornwell, 2019, p.282).

The theories on brand partnerships will be used as a theoretical foundation to understand and identify how Balenciaga achieves digital-creative partnerships to position themselves during the pandemic. This section will be considered during the analysis of the research to identify how Balenciaga strategizes their partnerships with digital creative firms. Thus, the idea of the familiarity of both brands in a partnership and consumers' personal relevance to the partnership is taken into consideration when referring to Balenciaga's partnership strategies (Charlton & Cornwell, 2019; Kai, 2021; Lee & Rim, 2017; Simonin & Ruth, 1998; Thompson & Strutton, 2012).

### **2.3.2. Inter-industry partnerships**

Due to the ever-growing number of partnerships between brands and companies, it is crucial to discuss the literature written on strategies of inter-industry partnerships. According to Alexander & Conteras (2016), inter-industry partnerships fit under the category of brand alliance and co-branding in which they define it as "a unique kind of cooperation between business partners from diverse industries" (p.254). They explain that the motivation that drives inter-

industry collaborations is the point of differentiation, the impacted influence it will provide, and the introduction to a new market (Alexander & Conteras, 2016).

Enkel & Grossman (2010) contribute to the framework by explaining that in inter-industry partnerships, “already existing solutions from other industries are creatively imitated and translated to meet the needs of the company’s current markets or products” (p.256). The results of their research showed that cognitive distance is not correlated to the innovation outcome of inter-industry partnerships (Enkel & Grossman, 2010). This signifies that partnerships between different industries does not cause consumers to cope with transnational differences (Enkel & Grossman, 2010). Additionally, their study suggests that inter-industry partnerships may not necessarily lead to radical innovations but may definitely lead to breakthroughs in the market (Enkel & Grossman, 2010).

Furthermore, Dodourova (2009) investigates the motives and success/failure factors behind inter-industry partnerships. She explains that such partnerships open the door to digitalization with minimal risk as it, most likely, brings two experts of two different industries together (Dodourova, 2009). Doing so allows for both industries to smoothly enter the markets of each other (Dodourova, 2009). Additionally, other motivators for firms to partner with another from different industries is the “opportunities for market enlargement through promoting greater choice; international and inter-industry connectivity; product and technology cross-integration within and across industries; and broader availability of lower-cost products” (Dodourova, 2009, p.836). Moreover, Dodourova (2009) identifies that contradicting brand values and the lack of defined core values between the partners are the main reasons for a failed partnership. Thus, a partnership with strict coordination, communication, and commitment is what leads to a successful one (Dodourova, 2009).

The framework on inter-industry partnerships provides a foundation in understanding a specific branch of brand partnerships. As the analyzed partnerships are with firms outside of the fashion industry, it is necessary to lay a foundation on how inter-industry partnerships are studied and perceived. Therefore, discussing the theories supports the understanding of Balenciaga’s formation of partnerships with industries beyond the fashion industry. In doing so, this section will be considered in the operationalization and thematic content analysis of the research to identify Balenciaga’s strategy in partnering with digital creative firms. Accordingly,

through the framework contributed by Alexander & Conteras (2016), Enkel & Grossman (2010), and Dodourova (2009), it is understood that inter-industry partnerships provide the benefit of brand extension and entering new markets.



### **3. Methodology**

This section discusses the research design and provides the justification of the research design choice. Therefore, it explores the qualitative approach of research, sampling, the process of data collection, and the use of thematic content analysis. Discussing these aspects of the research design will give insight into how the research question will be answered.

#### **3.1. Research Design**

##### **3.1.2. Qualitative Approach**

This thesis investigates how Balenciaga positions itself in the digital environment, impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, through creative brand partnerships. As this research focuses on exploring and identifying Balenciaga's digital positioning strategies, it will be based on qualitative analysis as it aims to look for patterns and search for relationships between several elements within the sample (Boeije, 2010). In doing so, identifying such patterns will eventually lead to revealing Balenciaga's brand positioning strategies with digital creative partnerships.

Furthermore, qualitative research allows researchers to touch upon interdisciplinary topics through an interpretative manner supported with a theoretical framework (Brennen, 2017). To examine how Balenciaga's strategies are understood by external and primary sources, it is crucial to anticipate that ideologies need to be unpacked as they are socially constructed and are not built upon an 'objective' point of view as there ultimately is no such perspective. Thus, researching with a qualitative lens allows the extraction of a variety of truths and meanings of an individual's experience. From the aforementioned description of qualitative research, it is therefore clear that using this method will be useful in uncovering Balenciaga's strategies.

This research method offers different types of analysis in which content analysis is one of them. The research will be interpreting textual materials to answer the research question because of the densely packed themes and meanings it offers for exploration. Brennen (2017) explains that textual materials can be considered as "cultural artifacts, material documentary evidence that is used to make sense of our lives... in other words, texts are things that we use to make meaning" (p.204). This method allows researchers to move the readings from text to meanings or representations (Flick, 2014). When the multiple representations, themes, assumptions, etc. are explored, they can reach the clear point of what the content wishes to express. This is important to perform as these representations from the content can be used to identify both the

explicit and implicit messages that may have been overlooked beforehand (Flick, 2014). Additionally, using content analysis can also lead to discovering and describing “issues in the field or structures and processes in routines and practices” (Flick, 2014, pp.5-6) in detail and in both subjective and objective perspectives. Performing a qualitative content analysis regarding this topic would provide the knowledge of how Balenciaga’s partnerships are being perceived or understood by others. Additionally, using this method allows for a better understanding of the context of the development of their strategy and the impact of the extreme demand of digital presence during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, as these perceptions and the aforementioned theory cannot be quantified, this research will take a qualitative approach to understand Balenciaga’s brand positioning with creative partnerships.

Furthermore, qualitative content analysis can take two different approaches: an inductive and deductive approach. An inductive approach is when the research aims to develop a theory from the analysis of data (Wildemuth, 2017). The process ultimately generalizes beyond the data and “moves from the particular to the general” (Wildemuth, 2017, p.41). The inductive approach encourages the researcher to see the broader picture and use a certain extent of creativity to develop a theory. This approach is highly supported by Wildemuth (2017) because of the potential impact it can make on the theoretical framework. However, development of theory will not always be possible or impactful depending on the relation of the data to its theoretical framework. On the other hand, a deductive approach aims to test an already existing theory (Wildemuth, 2017). It encourages researchers to look at the data and assess where the results are placed within the theoretical framework (Wildemuth, 2017). The deductive approach brings just as much importance as the inductive approach as it allows theory to evolve (Wildemuth, 2017). For this, this research will use both the inductive and deductive approach. As the concepts of digital collaborations and digital brand positioning in the context of luxury brands are understudied, it is necessary to perform inductive reasoning. The deductive reasoning will be used to explore the relevance of existing theories on digital positioning but also on brand positioning prior to the existing literature on digital. Researching Balenciaga’s brand positioning strategies, through their digital creative partnerships, will contribute in developing the understanding of such strategies in the fashion industry.

### 3.2. Sample and data collection

As mentioned in the previous section, the research will be following the qualitative content analysis. To perform this research, this thesis will gather a total of 40 data textual materials consisting of primary and secondary sources such as brand campaign materials, press releases, online articles, blog posts commenting on related activities, and transcriptions of video case studies that discuss Balenciaga's partnerships starting from 2020 until the current year, 2022. The video case studies are searched on YouTube where its transcriptions are already provided by YouTube. The analysis, however, will only take part in parts that explicitly discuss Balenciaga's partnered products or events and their strategies behind it. This purpose serves to implement efficiency in retrieving the results.

The sample only considers texts that discuss partnerships with *The Simpsons*, Epic Games, and MPC studio because these partnered events are most relevant to Balenciaga's digital transformation. Additionally, there is an abundance of sample materials about these partnerships which inevitably adds convenience to the sample data collection.

The sample materials can be seen in the Sample Material Table in Appendix A. Additionally, the materials will only include texts that meet the requirement of 300 words. Appendix A displays that the limit of at least 300 words has been met by every textual material; the table shows that all materials are at least 335 words and above. Though the sample gathered mostly consists of secondary sources, it is important to include primary sources to the sample as it diversifies the materials. Gathering heterogeneous materials gives the purpose of capturing "major variations rather than to identify a common core, although the latter may also emerge in the analysis" (Patton, 2015, p.462). Thus, for this research, primary sources will provide an understanding of Balenciaga's perspectives on their strategies. Meanwhile, the secondary sources give interpretations that unpacks how Balenciaga's strategies are being described and perceived.

In addition, the two-year time frame will be investigated as it reflects the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and Balenciaga's highest point of focus in immersing itself into the digital environment. It will look into the texts from until 2022, the current time of the thesis, as there are possibilities for more partnerships to be launched during the period and for more perspectives to be expressed.

The data collection process will use a non-probability purposive sampling method as it will rely on the researcher's evaluation to decide which material will be included in the study (Boeije,

2010). Non-probability sampling method is commonly sought as the most cost-efficient and convenient method for researchers (Sarstedt et al., 2018). This sampling method uses “personal judgment and convenience, rather than random process” (Sarstedt et al., 2018, p.2) to determine which materials will be used in the research. Due to its unsystematic nature, the samples are restricted to the researcher’s judgment, lacking representativeness and generalizability (Sarstedt et al., 2018). Therefore, the probability of each textual material being drawn from the sample does not reflect the true probability (Sarstedt et al., 2018).

Within non-probability sampling, there are several methods in which purposive sampling will be specifically used. Purposive sampling, also referred to as judgmental sampling, allows the researchers to select the sample elements they believe are most appropriate for the research using their judgment and expertise (Sarstedt et al., 2018). Though most non-probability sampling generally gathers unrepresentative samples, purposive sampling may lead to representative samples if the researcher has a wide range of knowledge on the topic prior to the data collection (Sarstedt et al., 2018). However, in exploratory research, gathering a representative sample is nearly impossible as it is not possible for researchers to obtain such a wide range of prior knowledge (Sarstedt et al., 2018). In this case, non-probability purposive sampling is effective for the research as the influenced sample composition can be specifically tailored to the research (Sarstedt et al., 2018). For this reason, this sample method is used in this thesis because it is based on exploratory research where relevant articles must be chosen to interpret Balenciaga’s brand positioning strategies.

For this thesis, the appropriate textual materials will be selected by judging its relevance to Balenciaga’s digital creative partnerships starting from 2020, after reading the articles or the transcripts of videos. The criteria for choosing data materials for the research will be based on searching for texts within the timeframe of 2020 to 2022 to retrieve texts relevant to Balenciaga’s partnerships; texts that are originally written in English to correspond with the language of this research; and texts that discuss Balenciaga’s positioning strategy and partnerships with *The Simpsons*, Epic Games, and MPC studio.

### **3.3 Operationalization**

The research question of this thesis focuses on how Balenciaga positioned themselves during the digital environment heightened by the Covid-19 pandemic. To identify the themes that

reveal Balenciaga’s strategies, the study follows both an inductive and deductive approach. The assembled table of operationalization, as seen in Table 1 below, reflects the summarization of the theoretical framework on *digital transformation*, *(digital) brand positioning*, and *creative partnerships*. A deductive approach was taken when building the categories and subcategories of the operationalization table as the study will test the concepts and theories mentioned in the theoretical framework. However, an inductive approach was performed to adjust the theories to become more clear and condense so that it is easily applicable to the study. For this reason, the operationalized concepts in Table 1 will be used as a basis in order to identify if Balenciaga’s strategies fits within or outside of the mentioned categories.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Subcategory</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Innovation	Digital efficiency	Brand’s digital transformation showing signs of internal and external communication and innovation system efficiency.
	Widened imagination	Brand’s digital partnerships provide unlimited creative brand expression, communication, and products.
	Sustainable future	Brand’s digital transformation through partnerships leads to a sustainable future through reduction of costs, time, and workload because of digital technology.
	Modern marketing strategies	Brand’s digital transformation leads to the cyberspace audience through digital tools such as interactive activities and viral marketing.
	New markets	Brand’s digital partnerships led to the introduction of new markets and consumers.
Brand Differentiation	Relevance	Brand being presented as relevant in and outside of the fashion industry.

	Delivery	Brand actively delivers the brand's identity and values with clarity.
	Communication	Brand carries an active and clear dialogue with the consumers on their identity, products, and values.
Consumer Awareness	Brand perception	Brand focuses on satisfying the consumer by shaping their brand identity, product, and values towards their needs.
	Aligning with consumer lifestyle	Brand is aware of their consumers' portfolio and aligns with their needs for gratification.
Emotional Appeal	Artification	Brand appeals to the consumers through art expression; causing awe and magical feeling.
	Symbolic motivation	Brand implements symbolic and meaningful motivation, instead of exclusivity, to attract the consumers.
	Authenticity	Brand appeals to the consumers with transparency and authenticity in the brand's communication and portrayal of their value.
	Brand narrative	Brand builds a personal and consistent narrative to connect with the consumers on an intimate level.
Brand compatibility	Familiarity	Brand partners with other brands or firms that are familiar to their current consumers.
	Circling trends	Brand partners with brands or firms that are relevant to the current circulating trends.

	Illogical pairing	Brand partners with brands or firms that are typically perceived as illogical and unfamiliar.
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Table 1. Operationalization table

The *innovation* category is heavily based on Bertola & Teunissen’s (2018) literature. Their concepts of digitalization leading to *widened imagination*, *a sustainable future*, and Industry 4.0 is categorized as innovative as they discuss the new possibilities digital tools can lead to. However, a complementary combination of the deductive and inductive approach led to the addition of Lee & Rim’s (2001) *digital efficiency* and Malchyk et al.’s (2018) *modern marketing strategies* to expand the concepts within the category to increase the applicability of the concept. Malchyk et al. (2018) specifically had to be adjusted by excluding social media advertising as the research does not cover Balenciaga’s social media platforms. Additionally, the subcategory *widened imagination* consists of the theories of creative brand-to-consumer communications by Alshaketheep et al. (2020), flexible affordances by Yoo et al. (2012), as well as Bertola & Teunissen’s (2018) Industry 4.0 and *widened imaginations*. This takes an inductive approach as it condenses the theories into one and adjusts the significance of the term *widened imagination* to have more applicability to the study. Lastly, *new markets* was developed deductively as it tests Alexander & Conteras (2016) and Enkel & Grossman’s (2010) literature on innovation or brand differentiation leading to new markets.

The *brand differentiation* category is based on Semans’ (2010) ‘positioning filters’ with the contribution of Alexander & Conteras (2016) and Okonkwo’s (2007) discussion on the benefit of differentiation, especially through inter-industry partnerships. In addition, the *consumer awareness* category is equally based on both Urde & Koch’s (2014) market-oriented positioning and Knox’s (2004) FD model on product and customer portfolio. This category specifically takes an inductive approach as it creates a developed concept that encompasses essences from the theories from both literature. Therefore, the categories and subcategories are not directly taken from the literature. Instead, they have been developed for research efficiency and applicability.

*Emotional appeal* has been developed with a deductive strategy as it takes concepts from literature and aims to directly test them. The subcategories show all the concepts taken from

different literature regarding *emotional appeal*. However, the foundation of the category and subcategories is inspired by Mahajan & Wind's (2002) concept of affective positioning. Using that as a category, affective positioning or *emotional appeal* can be identified through *artification, symbolic motivation, authenticity, and brand narrative*.

Lastly, developing the category of *brand compatibility* followed both the deductive and inductive approach. Similarly to the *consumer awareness* category, *brand compatibility* was created to reflect the essence of literature that discussed the compatibility or incompatibility of two brands or firms in a partnership. However, the subcategories are concepts that have been taken directly from one or two studies that discuss similar ideas. For instance, *familiarity* is a concept discussed by Simonin & Ruth (1998), Lee & Rim (2017), and Charlton & Cornwell (2019) where they all resulted in showing brand familiarity as most successful in executing a partnership. In the same manner, the ideology behind *circling trends* is directly taken from Kai (2021) and Bitner's (1992) literature, while *illogical pairing* is taken from Thompson & Strutton (2012).

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

To reveal how Balenciaga positions themselves through digital creative partnerships during the pandemic, thematic content analysis is performed on the sample materials. This method of analysis will be used as it distinguishes themes, from coding the sample materials, that help to answer the research question (Boeije, 2010). To get to these themes, it is important to look for the greater meaning beyond the surface of each description and statement and then label aspects of the material to depict "the core topic of a segment" (Boeije, 2010, p.95). The main purpose of coding is to observe whether a code can represent a certain theoretical concept (Boeije, 2010). To perform coding, there are three steps to follow: open, axial, and selective coding.

Firstly, before beginning with the open coding process, it is important to become familiar with the data. The texts have been thoroughly read through before coding begins. Once that is done, open coding is performed. This is the first step taken in the process of thematic content analysis which breaks down information in each segment to be examined and categorized (Boeije, 2010). Breaking down this information requires the researcher to reflect and ask



themselves questions such as what the segment signifies, what is happening, what is the main concern, and so on (Holton, 2007). Breaking down the information in each line forces the researcher to extract all the meaning possible, minimize the chance of missing a category, and ensure its relevance according to the theoretical framework (Holton, 2007). This ultimately avoids hastily jumping into the creation of themes as it enables the researcher to focus on the basic meaning first (Holton, 2007). Additionally, open coding lays a clear organization that can in turn lead to potential themes to answer the research question (Boeije, 2010). Open coding, thus, requires the meticulous examination of text to conceptualize and categorize data (Boeije, 2010). The first step is to fragment the transcription into separate sections according to important themes. Then, each fragment is assigned specific code(s) that represent the main theme of the response (Boeije, 2010). Following these steps of open coding, a list of codes will be collected as a result, also known as the coding scheme (Boeije, 2010).

Secondly, axial coding requires the code list to be assembled into categories to determine dominant elements of the findings (Boeije, 2010). It is an abstract process where instead of coding segments the researcher begins to code each category created as a result of the open coding process. Axial coding is the process of narrowing down the categories made in the previous stage into dominant ones and unimportant ones (Boeije, 2010). Unlike in open coding where the reasoning moves from data to code, axial coding is the opposite where it moves from code to data (Boeije, 2010). Revisiting the codes, the categories “and subcategories can be generated, modified, refined, elaborated or even rejected” (Boeije, 2010, p.108). Ultimately, these categories should be made changes according to their relevance in answering the research question (Boeije, 2010). The axial coding retrieved from the analysis of this research revealed seven themes that can be seen in Table 2.

Lastly, selective coding is a further step to narrowing down to the selection of the most important categories, made during axial coding (Boeije, 2010). This step requires the researcher to select the most relevant and important categories to directly answer the research question (Boeije, 2010). This is done by comparing and connecting the codes to one another to identify the core categories (Boeije, 2010). These categories become themes that are used to compare to one another and to the theoretical framework to find the answer to the research question (Boeije, 2010). The selective process continues until the researcher has thoroughly made theoretical

connections to each category (Holton, 2007). It is crucial to recall that the concepts within the refined categories are constructed by the researcher and their observations throughout the analysis (Boeije, 2010). Therefore, the answer to the research question is answered through the researcher’s subjective observations. From narrowing down the seven axial codes, the thematic content analysis of this research led to three selective codes: *thinking outside the box*, *accessible and inclusive*, and *committed values* (See Table 2).

Selective code	Axial codes
Thinking outside the box	Experimentalism
	Rejecting the traditional and moving towards the modern
Accessible and Inclusive	Expanding the demographics
	Unconventional combination of industries
	Building a relationship with consumers
Committed values	Fighting for sustainability through emotional appeal
	Questioning and confronting the fashion industry

Table 2. Selective and axial codes

### 3.5 Research validity and credibility

Qualitative research requires the research to “yield meaningful and useful results... but unfortunately there is a regrettable lack of tool available” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.386) to facilitate such outcomes. Attride-Stirling (2001) suggests that enhancing a research’s validity can be done by documenting, systematizing, and explicitly exposing the method of analysis so future research can develop the research further. This suggestion is executed through following the step-by-step process of thematic content analysis. In doing so, the research’s validity increases as it is open to development. Additionally, it increases credibility as the organized documentation of the analysis allows for transparency throughout the analysis.

Furthermore, Braun & Clarke (2006) highlight the difficulty in specifying “what interpretative analysis actually entails, particularly as the specifics of it will vary from study to study” (p.23). While thematic content analysis’ flexibility allows all researchers to easily follow the process of the analysis, the flexibility could also lead to incoherent themes from the selective coding (Nowell et al, 2017). The researcher’s credibility, thus, becomes skeptical as interpretations can often be subjective and internalized. However, Nowell et al. (2017) suggests using Braun & Clarke’s (2006) three-step-guide to achieve research validity and credibility. The first phase consists of becoming familiar with the data sample collected. It is ideal to go through the material repeatedly and actively to ensure the meaning of the texts can be understood as much as possible (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). The second phase recommends to generate initial codes as it allows the research to “identify a feature of the data... that appears interesting to the analyst... [and] it is important to retain accounts which depart from the dominant story in the analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp.18-19). Lastly, the third phase consists of searching for themes. When performing this phase, it is necessary to use an organized system to maintain consistency in how the themes are retrieved (Nowell et al., 2017). Thus, using a “web-like network to organize codes and themes” (Nowell et al., 2017, p.8) is the solution to achieve research validity and credibility. In conclusion, Braun & Clarke’s (2003) three-step-guide alludes back to Attride-Stirling’s (2001) suggestion to carefully document each step of the research.

To achieve credibility, the thesis is transparent with the analysis process; the coding tree is present in this thesis (see Appendix B). The ‘web-like networks’ have been manually created to organize the coding scheme in the researcher’s personal system. Additionally, the thesis strives to achieve validity by going through the sample material in depth and attempting to interpret the text without interruptions of biases.

## 4. Results

This research aims to identify Balenciaga’s positioning strategies with their digital creative partnerships, during the Covid-19 pandemic. The question on how Balenciaga positions their brand is answered with three themes: by *thinking outside of the box*, *accessibility and inclusivity*, and *committed values*.

The first theme of *thinking outside the box* contains sub-categories that discusses *experimentalism*, *rejecting the traditional and moving towards modern strategies*, and *unconventional combination of industries*. Secondly, *accessibility and inclusivity* encompasses the sub-categories of *entering a new market and reaching new demographics* and *building a relationship with consumers*. Lastly, Balenciaga’s *committed values* lead to the sub-themes of *fighting for sustainability*, *mocking the pompous fashion industry*, and *confronting society’s homogeneity*. The themes (from selective coding) and sub-themes (from axial coding) are presented in Table 3.

Themes	Thinking Outside the Box	Accessibility and Inclusivity	Committed Values
Sub themes	Experimentalism	Entering a new market and reaching new demographics	Fighting for sustainability
	Rejecting the traditional and moving towards modern strategies	Building a relationship with consumers	Mocking the pompous fashion industry
	Unconventional combination of industries		Confronting society’s homogeneity

Table 3. Table of themes and sub-themes extracted from thematic content analysis.

### 4.1 Thinking Outside the Box

The first theme found from the analysis answers the research question in explaining that Balenciaga positions themselves, with digital creative partnerships during Covid-19 pandemic, by thinking outside the box. Balenciaga shows that they are distancing themselves from the

typically strict boundaries of fashion. Therefore, they dismantle the ordinary by implementing *experimentalism*, *rejecting the traditional and moving towards modern strategies*, and creating *unconventional combination of industries*. Throughout this section, the categories of *widened imagination*, *brand differentiation*, and *brand compatibility* in the operationalization section of the methodology are discussed to support Balenciaga's unconventional strategies. Therefore, *thinking outside of the box* explores how Balenciaga uses their partnerships with digital creative companies to expand their window of possibilities to execute creative ideas.

#### **4.1.1. Experimentalism**

From the articles, it was disclosed that Balenciaga's partnered products and events were experimental with its innovation as it introduced a sight that was never to be seen in the fashion industry before. This category was developed inductively as the interpretations of the observations of Balenciaga's positioning, from the analysis, led to the operationalized concept of *innovation*.

Observations that were frequently mentioned within the materials were Balenciaga's positioning through innovation, futurism, and playfulness. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, Demna Gvasalia, creative director of Balenciaga, consulted with tech experts with the plan to execute an original way of hosting a fashion show (Ahmed, 2021). The *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow* and *Clones Spring 22 Collection* video is one of the many ways Balenciaga expressed their innovative outlook on fashion shows. It is a one-of-a-kind event or video especially as Balenciaga was the first to create a completely digital runway. The purpose of the *Clones Spring 22 Collection* runway video was to express an eerie and surreal feeling. Gvasalia, wittily commented that the video was "a show that never happened... but the clothes are real; they were made" (as cited in Mower, 2021, para. 1). On top of Gvasalia's puzzling comment and humor, the *Clones Spring 22 Collection* video was purposefully challenging to process as it played with the idea of the blurry line between reality and the fake: or in this case, the digital. The combination of Balenciaga's imagination and the use of MPC studio's digital technology (3D printing, scans, etc.) allowed the brand to have fun with avant-garde expressions. Balenciaga's extended imagination facilitated by digital technology resonates with Bertola & Teunissen's (2018) concept of *widened imagination* and *Industry 4.0*. This is because the brand makes use of their partners' digital expertise to produce a realistic video that pretends to have been taken in

real time. The brand opened itself up to the unlimited creative opportunities that lead “to perceive, enhance, and monitor” (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018, p.364) new ways of experiencing fashion shows.

Additionally, as fashion shows are usually taken seriously and seen as highbrow (Okonkwo, 2007), Balenciaga’s *Simpsons* collaboration was meant to be playful and refreshing to the fashion industry. Instead of attentively watching the emotionless models walk the runway, Balenciaga decided to make their audience smile and have a memorable time. Poking fun at the pomp of the fashion industry, demonstrated when Homer Simpson struggles to pronounce the brand’s name (seen in Figure 1), allowed Balenciaga to take themselves less seriously and keep a light-hearted attitude about the industry. With that, Balenciaga wished to provide comfort and unity in an industry that feels strict (D’Asaro, 2021). From these experiences, Balenciaga positions themselves through experimentalism because the brand experiments with new and exciting ways to exhibit their fashion collections. They are ultimately able to do so as their digital creative partners give them access to technology that enables them to create a ‘Balenciaga world’, where everyone is invited to take part and live in. The findings of Balenciaga’s playfulness in their collaboration with *The Simpsons* also connects with Bertola & Teunissen’s (2018) *widened imagination*. Much like their game and digital fashion show, *The Simpsons* video took a new approach in experiencing fashion events; they look at fashion through a comedic lens. Following this notion, Balenciaga’s innovation contributes to redefining the fashion industry and what it stands for. Yoo et al. (2012) state that digitalization allows for flexibility in the affordances, leading to the convergence of experiences. In Balenciaga’s digital collaborations, they converge fashion and TV culture, two industries that do not seem typically complementary with one another, for playful and rebellious purposes.

On these grounds, the theme of *experimentalism*, extracted from selective coding of the analysis, reveals that Balenciaga positions itself through experimental innovation. This connects to theories under the sub-category *widened imagination*, in the operationalization table.



Figure 1. The Simpsons | Balenciaga episode on YouTube

#### **4.1.2. Rejecting the traditional and moving towards modern strategies**

The theme of *thinking outside the box* also encompasses the sub-theme of *rejecting the traditional and moving towards modern strategies* that was drawn out from the analysis. Since the Covid-19 pandemic heavily relied on digital means, articles have expressed that modernization of the industry was necessary. This was progressively becoming visible especially through Balenciaga. Though it was stated that Balenciaga is not the only (luxury) fashion brand that immerses itself in digital transformations, a press release written by Contagious Communications (2021) expressed that Balenciaga consistently stays ahead of the curve.

Balenciaga's modern take on fashion is demonstrated in the combination of the reality and the digital. The combination is seen in *The Simpsons*, *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow*, *Clones Spring 22 Collection*, and in Fortnite where many aspects of reality are replicated in the digital space. Other than taking unique fashion shows onto the digital realm, one could see Balenciaga billboard advertisements, representation of fashion figures, and a very well replicated virtual reality (seen in Figure 2 and 3). Such fashion events are unconventional and highly unfamiliar to the traditional private fashion shows that only consisted of watching models walk

the runway (Okonkwo, 2007). Press release written by Epic Games (2021) have expressed that Balenciaga's digital creative partnerships have been portrayed as out-of-the-ordinary, fun, and creative. This can be identified in their unconventional fashion shows that push the boundaries of fashion. Balenciaga expresses that they are "committed to continuing that [unconventional] pace in the future. What we don't want to ever do is do the same thing again. We want to push the envelope on what we can do" (Anyanwu, 2021, para. 16). Their desire to rebel against the traditional path ultimately sets them apart from other luxury fashion brands. The mentioned observations connect to Semans (2010), Urde & Koch, and Kapferer's (2015) literature. Semans (2010) claims that actively demonstrating the brand's distinction is effective in strengthening one's brand position. Balenciaga does this by being the first luxury fashion brand to create a completely digital 'deep-fake' fashion show, an animated fashion film, and a game. These partnerships were intentional as they were aware of the growing young consumer generation. For this reason, Balenciaga's digital creative partnerships attract younger consumer generations as they provide evolved ideologies of fashion (Urde & Koch, 2014). Balenciaga's consumer satisfaction also corresponds to Kapferer's (2015) ideology of the dismantling of social hierarchies. Instead, Balenciaga focuses on providing an unforgettable experience for all. For these reasons, Balenciaga's modernity and evolution reflects the way they are positioned to be thinking outside the box. This section is connected to the category of *brand differentiation* in the operationalization chapter.

Figure 2. The Simpsons | Balenciaga episode on YouTube







Figure 3. Afterworld: Age of Tomorrow on YouTube

Moreover, Balenciaga has realized that their unconventionality is the best way to appeal to new consumers. It is communicated that one method Balenciaga takes is by bridging fashion with digital entertainment industries: the TV and the gaming industries. Combining the high-brow fashion industry with the low-brow TV and gaming industry ultimately challenges the customs that the fashion industry has built throughout history. Instead of conforming to the normative ways, Balenciaga intentionally partners with firms that seem unconventional and uncomplimentary as they wish to differentiate themselves from others. For this reason, collaborations with *The Simpsons* and Epic Games gained the attention of those within and outside the brand's usual consumer groups. This notion also connects with Kapferer's (2015) rejection of the strict boundaries of social classes and Alexander & Contera's (2016) differentiation leading to entry to new markets. However, the focus of this observation is more strongly associated with the *innovation* category of *widened imagination*. The theory on new inter-industry partnerships (Enkel & Grossman, 2010) explains its potential to have a breakthrough in the industry. In addition, Yoo et al's (2012) flexibility of affordances and generativity allows for new combinations and comprehensions to rise. Merging the two theories together implies that Balenciaga's innovation has allowed them to redefine the fashion industry, ultimately becoming "the vanguard of fashion's digital evolution" (Epic Games, 2021, para.2). Therefore, Balenciaga uses their *widened imagination* to evolve the fashion industry. As a result, Balenciaga breaks social class boundaries and reaches new consumer groups.

### 4.1.3. Unconventional combination of industries

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, Balenciaga consciously took part in unusual partnerships with other digital creative companies. Gvasalia expressed that the collaborations with Epic Games especially made clear sense to him as the game already had clothing lines for gamers to choose from (Anyanwu, 2021). President of Epic Games, Adam Sussman (2021), adds to Gvasalia's comment by saying that Balenciaga is "disrupting the fashion industry and how campaigns are built" (as cited in Anyanwu, 2021, para. 10). Balenciaga's press release on their website also describes that their collaboration with *The Simpsons* "push certain boundaries set up between fashion and other forms of entertainment, culture and technology, shifting the brand away from an easily definable category" (Balenciaga, 2021, para. 2). Gvasalia described the collaboration with the TV show as the highest level of collaboration due to its rarity (Testa, 20221). The brand invites Marge Simpson to be the star of the show because Gvasalia professes that she is exactly the type of woman he wanted to represent Balenciaga's outlandishness (Campbell, 2021). With that, Balenciaga, through Gvasalia, seems to enjoy the commotion they make through their unique partnerships as the brand mysteriously leaves their event to let the consumers discussing intensely. Being aware of the unconventional partnerships, Balenciaga expects to receive negative and positive responses but ultimately cares about their own unique expression of their identity. In this manner, Balenciaga embraces their normalization of their innovative bridge from the real to the digital, and their unique bridge from fashion to other entertainment industries: gaming and TV entertainment.

The aforementioned findings connect to Kai (2021), Thompson & Strutton (2012), and Alexander & Conteras' (2016) literature on brand pairing in partnerships. The three literature explains that illogical brand partnerships are more impactful to the consumers as they highlight a point of differentiation from other brands (Alexander & Conteras, 2016; Thompson & Strutton, 2012). A logical pairing could be exemplified as Balenciaga partnering with another (luxury) fashion brand. But Balenciaga clearly chose to pair 'illogically' to explicitly portray their unconventionality. However, Balenciaga confirms Kai's (2021) theory that such 'illogical pairings' are subjective to the trends that are circling in the moment. As digital games and meme culture are popular, especially during quarantine, Balenciaga's partnerships with digital creatives can shift towards logical pairings as digitalization becomes normalized. Additionally, the brand

strategically chose to partner with digital creative firms that are still familiar to the wide audience; Fortnite and *The Simpsons* have been independently successful for a long time before the beginning of their partnerships. This notion ties with Lee & Rim's (2017) literature on brand familiarity within brand partnerships because consumers generally wish to see brands that they are familiar with but do not necessarily reject ones that are unfamiliar to them either (Lee & Rim, 2017). Having said that, the section is linked to the *brand compatibility* category of the operationalization table as it touches upon *familiarity*, *illogical pairing*, and *circling trends*.

Furthermore, the digital productions Balenciaga and its partners have made (with *The Simpsons*, Epic Games, and MPC studios) are highly relevant for a time where society depends on digital platforms. Balenciaga judged that the partnerships with digital creative firms were a good fit for the time they were situated in during the Covid-19 pandemic (Maguire, 2021). Balenciaga, thus, was able to dabble in creative opportunities that were available to them, during a time that mattered most. A press release written by Epic Games (2021) also expressed that Balenciaga's digital partnerships is the exemplary way to stay relevant in the fashion industry as the outdated industry demands more innovation and new stimulation. The collaboration with *The Simpsons* especially shows relevance in the industry: Balenciaga's playful trolling of the industry (D'Asaro, 2021). For this, *The Simpsons* is a show that is still relevant to millennials and younger generations as it contributes to the digital culture of memes and virality (D'Asaro, 2021). The observations can be identified with Semans' (2010) point of *relevance* within the theory of differentiation. Balenciaga demonstrates their relevance in the industry through Gvasalia's expression and perception of the industry. Balenciaga has a clear view of the circling trends as well as the lacking aspects of the industry. With that, Balenciaga accepts the challenge to play with the digital environment to insert themselves in the society, without necessarily connecting it to fashion. In summary, the observations in this section tightly connect with the category of *brand differentiation* as it discusses how the brand's distinction is relevant to the society. Balenciaga, thus, is positioned as experimental as they find creative ways in staying relevant in the industry.

## **4.2. Accessibility and Inclusivity**

Another main theme that was identified from the analysis was Balenciaga's enhanced accessibility and inclusivity to a greater demographic. The sub-themes under this main theme are

*expanding the demographics and building a relationship with the consumers.* The main themes and sub-themes closely connect to the concept of *emotional appeal, brand differentiation, and consumer awareness* that is discussed in the operationalization section of the methodology. These themes are relevant to discuss as digitalization eased the monotonic period of the Covid-19 pandemic. Balenciaga was quickly aware of the necessity to heighten their digital presence in order to maintain, and potentially extend, their consumers. To do so, Balenciaga eliminated the essence of exclusivity in the fashion industry to promote inclusivity and accessibility to those who are not typically known to be in the ‘high-class’.

#### **4.2.1. Entering a new market and reaching new demographics**

Balenciaga, amongst many other luxury fashion brands, have been portrayed and perceived as exclusively accessible to the high-class and inaccessible to the lower (Aurano, 2020). Therefore, providing easily accessible fashion events for the public to enjoy was the goal. Balenciaga entered the gaming scene with their collaboration with Fortnite, to create avatar skins, and their game *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow* which reaches out to the key demographic group; the young digitally savvy adults, in contrast to the typical older target audience (Epic Games, 2021). Balenciaga, without knowing it, is expanding its demographic to “those who are involved with Xbox or PlayStations or any other gaming console” (Aurano, 2020, 3:20). The CEO and co-founder of the partnered Unreal Engine, Alexander Fernandez (2021), also describes that “working with people from non-games was incredible... we were able to take their ideas and find a way to make it work with the technology” (as cited in Epic Games, 2021, para. 12). Also, as Balenciaga’s branding falls heavily in luxury streetwear, it shares a common ground with Fortnite as “people dress their avatars into high fashion or wild fits” (Richard, 2021, para. 6). Equivalently, Balenciaga taking a step into the TV entertainment industry through *The Simpsons* also allowed a wider audience to enjoy where “fans of the fashion house couldn’t get over the collaboration” (O’Malley, 2021). Having *The Simpsons* characters walk the animated Balenciaga runway communicated “a moment of comfort and unity” (D’Asaro, 2021, para. 4) between all people that were segregated by the definition of high-class and low-class. Following the dismantling of social classes, all the mentioned Balenciaga collaborations can be experienced by anyone who has access to the internet or who has even the slightest interest in the gaming or

TV industry. Unlike the traditional fashion shows that require an exclusive invitation, the mentioned fashion events are open for anyone to enjoy.

Balenciaga wishes to extend their consumer demographic towards the younger generation and be inclusive to those with diverse societal backgrounds; they have been able to identify where these groups are based. The brand does so by demonstrating their awareness of (luxury street) fashion's prevalence in different industries such as gaming and TV entertainment. This connects to Knox's (2004) literature that discusses the importance of building a customer portfolio where the brands align themselves with the audience, inside and outside of the current target audience, to extend the target consumer groups. Balenciaga demonstrates this by showing awareness of the overlap between those who are interested in the gaming and TV industries and with luxury streetwear. Additionally, the innovative events or activities that the partnerships have brought can be considered as a form of *artification* discussed by Kapferer (2015). Newer generations are looking for a deeper meaning than traditions (Kapferer, 2015). Thus, Balenciaga offers their redefined expression of fashion to them. With that, Balenciaga is positioned as inclusive. The aforementioned theory is linked to the category of *consumer awareness*, with the sub-category of *aligning with consumer lifestyle*, and *widened imagination*, under the sub-category of *artification*.

#### **4.2.2. Building a relationship with consumers**

This subcategory discusses Balenciaga's intimate relationship they have built with their consumers. It cannot be stressed enough that the fashion industry used to be exclusive and feel closed off to society. It typically remained mysterious and made their elite essence emphasized (D'Asaro, 2021). However, Balenciaga, during the Covid-19 pandemic, opened to the consumers especially through its partnered project with *The Simpsons* and Epic Games. In the case of *The Simpsons*, Balenciaga has managed to get closer to the consumers by adding Gvasalia's own personal connection to the show; he was influenced by the show since he was a young boy growing up in his hometown, Tbilisi (D'Asaro, 2021). Gvasalia (2021) claims to have always loved *The Simpson's* "tongue in cheek humor, the romance, and the charming naiveness of it" (as cited in Testa, 2021, para.10). Balenciaga's vulnerability opens itself to more consumers as it

tears down the industry's intimidating facade. Afterall, Gvasalia expressed that all he wishes to get out of his partnered events is "a smile and a good dose of fun" (as cited in Testa, 2021, para. 29). This accessibility allows for the consumers to, then, be able to relate to and increase their interest in a brand that was once seen as exclusive and inaccessible.

In addition, the release of Balenciaga skins on Fortnite expresses the brands desire to be engaging and interactive with them and others who are interested in both industries. Balenciaga was aware that Fortnite "is centered around self-expression, player agency and the ability to live out a fantasy of portraying characters and outfits that people want to wear" (Peters, 2021, para. 7). With that, Balenciaga took the opportunity to collaborate with them to not only enter a new market but also to interact with their current and new consumers in a creative way. Similarly, the materials have expressed that *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow* demonstrated relatability of the isolation of the Covid-19 pandemic. The excitement the video game brought eased "a time where it's a little bit difficult because everyone's at home" (Aurano, 2020, 3:03). Also, the interactive element of the game established a bond where it was "more intimate to have newer people, if not the same usual clients, kind of interact with the game firsthand" (Aurano, 2020, 2:36). Therefore, the game's immersion and entertainment during lonely times were "a little bit relatable when it comes to the Covid-19 situation we are in now" (Aurano, 2020, 4:10). Balenciaga encouraged gamers to be more expressive with their avatars, which made them position the brand as inclusive to other groups of consumers.

This sub-category connects to Mahajan & Wind's (2002) *affective positioning* because Balenciaga leans in towards the emotional aspects to pull the current consumers and new consumers toward realizing their interest for the brand. Instead of continuing the old-fashioned ways of showcasing collections, Balenciaga's digitized events encourage the consumers to be more engaged with the content to promote inclusivity to new demographics. As Mahajan & Wind (2002) state that the goal is to win over the consumers' hearts, the texts express that Balenciaga has certainly done so through their relatability, inclusivity, and accessibility. In addition, Alshaketheep et al.'s (2020) literature finds the importance of finding creative ways to communicate with the consumers especially during the limiting times of the Covid-19 pandemic. They say that "consumers prefer the companies to show some empathy towards them, they should listen to their customers... accordingly during the pandemic" (Alshaketheep et al., 2020,

p.838). With that, Balenciaga's diverse communication through videos and games displays their attentiveness of their consumers by attempting to show empathy and brightening their day for a little while. The aforementioned theory connects to the operationalized sub-categories of *artification* within *emotional appeal*; the sub-category of *communication in brand differentiation*; and *aligning with consumer lifestyle* in the main category of *consumer awareness*. Balenciaga can, therefore, be positioned as inclusive through their caring, empathetic, and attentive actions.

### **4.3. Committed values**

The last main theme that has been extracted from the thematic content analysis of the research is Balenciaga's active demonstration of their values. The sub-themes categorized under the main theme of *actively demonstrating values* are the following: *fighting for sustainability*, *mocking the pompous fashion industry*, and *confronting society's homogeneity*. These themes answer the research question in saying that Balenciaga is positioned as a brand that actively commits to their values. Especially during the Covid-19 pandemic where individuals had time to eternally ponder over countless social issues, Balenciaga stepped in with productive messages that touch upon social matters and the flaws of the fashion industry. Therefore, these themes are in connection with the main categories of *emotional appeal*, *brand authenticity*, and *brand differentiation* discussed in the operationalization section of the methodology.

#### **4.3.1. Fighting for sustainability**

From the textual sample materials, it is conveyed that Balenciaga openly raises awareness on sustainability especially through the video game, *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow*. The game introduces a new way of making fashion where Balenciaga is conscious of improving their sustainability project (Tashijan, 2020). In a press release, Balenciaga (2021) explains that they see a future where garments that appear "to serve one function may serve another, seeing as certain materials will be reinterpreted for new uses" (para. 5). Thus, Balenciaga wished to create an interactive game with MPC studios to "present future worlds that have deteriorated as a result of political unrest and climate change" (Samaha, 2020). The gamers' journey goes through "a dystopian Balenciaga store and ascend to environments greener and lovelier" (Tashijan, 2020, para. 2). Figure 4 exhibits some clothings in the Fall 2021 collection that uses garments with

multiple functions. For instance, the avatars closest to the viewers wear plaid coats that were initially made to use as blankets (Hitti, 2020). Other items in the collection consist of clothings that looks as though they are worn to death. Balenciaga executes these looks to insinuate that these pieces represented the future of fashion where garments can be repurposed and preserved for a long period of time (Hitti, 2020). With these observations, it is identified that Balenciaga (2021) encourages their consumers and the general society to “wear our clothes until they fall apart and decay” (as cited in Samaha, 2020, para. 4).



Figure 4. Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow on YouTube

On this account, these results tie with Bertola & Teunissen’s (2018) suggestion that digitalization allows the opportunity for brands to be more efficient in sustainable production modes. The digital creative firms use advanced technology, or also referred to as Industry 4.0 in the literature, that encourages brands to transform into being more sustainable (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018). Balenciaga validates Bertola & Teunissen’s (2018) suggestion to start integrating smart factories and smart networks in the design and consumer-based perspectives to attain a sustainable future. The brand chooses to carry this message with an artistic output using MPC studio’s expertise. Though *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow* is a combination of fashion and a game, its multilayered message regarding sustainability can be perceived as an art form. Dion & Arnould (2011) describes that the goal for luxury brands is to “accumulate symbolic capital” (p.377). In doing so, consumers have an easier time connecting with the brand as they



attach themselves with symbolic and meaningful motivations (Kapferer, 2014). Thus, Balenciaga shifts their focus towards deeper meanings and issues faced in the society by making use of their partners' advanced technology. Using the technology allows them to also communicate their messages in creative and unique forms. Additionally, Mahajan & Wind's (2002) *affective positioning* is identified in Balenciaga's messages regarding sustainability as it emotionally provokes consumers with social issues and with confronting images of a potentially doomed future. Balenciaga puts forward an enlightening perspective of sustainability that portrays their honest concern of the matter. Consequently, Balenciaga's association to the previously described literature is connected to the sub-categories *artification* and *symbolic motivation* under the main category *emotional appeal*, mentioned in the operationalization.

#### **4.3.2. Mocking the pompous fashion industry**

Through the collaborated episode with *The Simpsons*, Balenciaga was able to convey their honest opinion on the fashion industry through their creative use of advanced technology. Instead of the typical case of luxury fashion houses desperately creating an 'intellectually crafted' work, Balenciaga creates an art that can be easily accessed and digested to ridicule the industry's arrogance. The episode was undoubtedly meant to be amusing as it sneaks in mischievous jokes and comments that jabs at the fashion industry every now and then. Figure 5 and 6 exhibits moments where the industry is being mocked for being pompous. In Figure 5, the image displays a scene where the audience has trouble understanding Homer's unsophisticated speech. Therefore, he is given a translator to repeat, or technically 'translate', Homer's words verbatim in English but with a stereotypical French accent. This implies that figures and enthusiasts of the luxury fashion industry think highly of themselves where they cannot or will not stoop below their imaginary pedestal. Secondly, Figure 6 displays an image of Anna Wintour's, a fashion icon, tear being bottled up as a perfume by her assistant. Here, Balenciaga implies that the luxury fashion industry excessively glorifies celebrity figures involved in fashion and fixates on the hyper-trend culture (Hore-Thoreburn, 2021). In essence, they express that the industry takes themselves too seriously.

Seeing these examples, Balenciaga mocks the pompous fashion industry through a humorous episode of *The Simpsons* (Testa, 2021). Balenciaga finds the luxury fashion industry as an excessive culture where the industry takes itself too seriously. The brand fundamentally rejects Kapferer's (2015) definition of luxury as magnificent and abstract. For this, Balenciaga defies the traditional systems by bridging the seemingly highbrow and the lowbrow together (Testa, 2021). It is crucial to highlight that Balenciaga is including itself when mocking the pompous luxury fashion industry. In doing so, they communicate that they are open to self-reflection and transparency to the consumers (Blanks, 2021; Testa, 2021). Balenciaga does not shy away from questions that are difficult to answer. Instead, they take initiative in partaking and dismantling the pompous industry as well.



Figure 5. The Simpsons | Balenciaga episode on YouTube



Figure 6. The Simpsons | Balenciaga episode on YouTube

The finding reveals that Balenciaga's message on the industry portrays their honesty. Rowles (2017) describes consumers to be attracted to a brand's consistent and active authenticity. Because of this, consumers wish to take part in a discussion with the brand regarding their values (Rowles, 2017). Balenciaga's criticism of the fashion industry's authenticity and conceit is not a common comment to be made by a big luxury fashion house. Though it may be risky to mock the industry, their brand identity and value remain strong.

Balenciaga is not afraid to receive backlash as long as they are able to be honest with themselves and with their consumers. In this sense, Balenciaga is positioned as an activist that commits to their values. This section connects tightly with *emotional appeal*, specifically the sub-category of *brand authenticity* in the operationalization table.

#### **4.3.3. Desire to eradicate homogeneity**

Lastly, this sub-theme represents the message that is conveyed through the *Clones Spring 22 Collection* video; Balenciaga's desire to see more individualism in the society. In Balenciaga's press release, they are very direct in expressing that the society is stuck in perceiving the world through a photoshopped filter and that "technology creates alternate realities and identities, a world of digital clones" (para. 1). Balenciaga makes the message verbally obvious that it is a deep fake show but the video itself exhibits otherwise (Mower, 2021). The advanced technology by MPC studio subtly incorporated clones of the model and subtly created the seemingly real, but actually fake, fashion show in the video. This smooth work alludes to the Balenciaga's (2021) statement that "we no longer decipher between unedited and altered, genuine and counterfeit, tangible and conceptual, fact and fiction, fake and deepfake" (para. 1). Additionally, seen in Figure 7, Balenciaga and MPC studio were also able to create audiences watching the runway show through their iPhone screens; this ultimately reminds the consumers of the sad truth about their own reality (O'Neill, 2022). The visual portrays an unsettling perspective of the robotic and homogenous society that exists today. On top of the robotic visuals of the audience and the clones, Balenciaga and MPC studio adds another layer to their message by using an AI generated cover of *La Vie En Rose* by Edith Piaf. Balenciaga adds this touch of detail to emphasize the dystopian world that they believe to be a part of today.



Figure 7. Balenciaga Clones Spring 22 Collection on YouTube

Balenciaga's wish to encourage individualism demonstrates that they are communicative to their consumers and aware of their portfolio. Their clear and transparent communication strongly associates with Rees (2020) and Rowles' (2017) literature that highlights a successful positioning with brand authenticity. Additionally, Seman's (2010) theory states that it is necessary to maintain efficient communication between the brand and the consumers. Balenciaga follows Seman's (2010) *communication* as they communicate their identity clearly. On top of this, the brand initiates a meaningful conversation topic that enables the consumers to continue the discussion. For this reason, Balenciaga is positioned as a brand that commits to their values. The preceding findings is linked to the category of *emotional appeal*, under the sub-category *authenticity*, and *brand differentiation*, under *communication*.

## 5. Conclusion & Discussion

This research explored how Balenciaga positions themselves through digital creative partnerships during the Covid-19 pandemic. A qualitative research method, specifically through thematic content analysis, was performed to answer the research question. The analysis was carried on materials that discussed Balenciaga's partnerships with *The Simpsons*, Epic Games, and MPC studio. This chapter discusses the concluding results of the study, the limitations, and the recommendations for future research.

### 5.1. Summarizing and discussing the main findings

The analysis of this research has led to answering the research question. Balenciaga positions themselves as a brand that thinks outside the box; a brand that is accessible and inclusive to various consumers; and a brand that actively demonstrates and commits to their values. These answers reflect the main themes extracted from selective coding, also reflected in Table 3 in the results section. To achieve the three brand images, Balenciaga mainly uses strategies of *widened imagination*, *communication*, *symbolic motivations*, and *artification*.

Firstly, Balenciaga positioned itself as *thinking outside the box* through their creative range of imagination, rebellion against traditionalism, and unconventional partners. Balenciaga's playful creativity was demonstrated through their innovative work that was the first to be seen in the industry, or at least highly rarely. Partnered works like *The Simpsons'* episode, *Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow*, and *Clones Spring 22 Collection* were Balenciaga's way to test the boundaries of fashion's definition and capabilities. In this sense, Balenciaga also demonstrated their rebellious nature where they wished to move on from the luxury fashion industry's traditionalist habits. The brand does this by rejecting the standard private runway shows and by blurring reality and digitality to update the outdated industry. Balenciaga's ideology on digitality is a forefront of introducing the industry to modernism and new marketing strategies. Their events have heightened the standards of fashion shows as their next moves have been consistently unpredictable. It appears that Balenciaga takes agency in leading the industry instead of conforming to it. Another way this is demonstrated is through partnering with digital creative firms that are typically unfitting to the eyes of fashion enthusiasts. Balenciaga omits the line that segregates the 'high-brow' and 'low-brow' to have some fun with their expression of

fashion. With these intentions, Balenciaga shows that their image comes from their wish to be different from the rest by ultimately expressing their wide imagination. This directly connects to Semans' (2010) brand differentiation and Bertola & Teunissen's (2018) *wide imagination*.

Secondly, Balenciaga is positioned as an accessible and inclusive brand to diverse consumers and markets. This is demonstrated by their extension to new industries and new consumer demographics which leads to the bond they create with the consumers. As stated previously, the unconventional partnerships have opened the gates to the TV and gaming industry. Though it may seem unconventional to consumers, Balenciaga recognized that the consumers of the TV and gaming industry shared an interest in fashion. With their interest in luxury streetwear, Balenciaga took the opportunity to introduce themselves to consumers of the entertainment industry. This caused the luxury brand to become accessible to those who do not fit the portfolio of the typical and traditional consumer. However, this is exactly what Balenciaga strives for: a widened demographic. As the barrier between high and low-class comes down, the more Balenciaga as a luxury brand becomes less intimidating to new consumers. In this manner, Balenciaga initiates a relationship to be built with their current and new consumers. They develop the relationship by being vulnerable through exposing their own flaws and by showing empathy to the tough situation of the Covid-19 pandemic. In doing so, Balenciaga portrays itself as a brand that wishes to be accessible and inclusive to heighten consumers' interest in fashion. Balenciaga's awareness of the target consumers ties with Knox's (2004) FD model on product and customer portfolio as well as Rowles (2017) and Rees' (2020) brand authenticity through honest brand narratives.

Lastly, Balenciaga positions themselves as a brand that actively communicates and demonstrates their values. Balenciaga is specifically passionate in voicing the issues regarding sustainability, the pompous fashion industry, and the homogeneous society. These are exhibited in Balenciaga's playful fashion events produced with their digital creative partners. The messages conveyed in the events are not subtle. The brand's direct articulation of their perspectives on such issues reflects their consistency and authenticity. These messages are not conveyed to please the industry nor their consumers. This behavior reflects the authentic passion they have for specific matters. Moreover, Balenciaga conveys these messages through Kapferer's (2015) *artification* and *symbolic motivation* where they enlighten the consumers with hard-to-

process works. Consequently, Balenciaga's courageous stance also corresponds with Semans' (2010) theory on enhancing brand differentiation through clear *communication*. For this reason, Balenciaga portrays themselves to be committed to their values.

In conclusion, Balenciaga's positioning statement was ultimately achieved through their clear brand differentiation. They do this by going against the grain of the fashion industry's customs. Balenciaga's outlandishness communicates their lack of care for negative responses as they had already predicted it from the beginning. In a way, they wish to receive negative responses to prove that they are establishing individualism by rebelling against the pompous and homogeneous fashion industry. Consequently, Balenciaga's authenticity illuminates from their individualism because it communicates that their morals come from themselves and not from a social trend. This is supported by the meticulous work they produce with their digital creative partners. They carefully place multi-layered meanings of each produced work in a subtle matter. Balenciaga does not explicitly present the issue; they make their consumers work to find the meaning and take time to process it. This fundamentally expresses their passion for their brand values. Thus, Balenciaga's outside-the-box-thinking, accessibility or inclusivity, and committed values have been positioned through their strengthened innovative brand differentiation and psychologically appealing brand authenticity.

## **5.2. Theoretical Relevance**

The result of this thesis contributes to adding value to the understudied field of digital marketing as it presents a clearer understanding of digital brand positioning by luxury fashion houses. For instance, Semans' (2010) four 'positioning filters' (*relevance, differentiation, delivery* and *communication*) was used as a basis to identify Balenciaga's positioning strategies. However, the four filters were rearranged in a way where *differentiation* became the main category that encompasses the rest of the 'positioning filters'. This takes an inductive approach as it makes slight changes in how the theory is interpreted in consideration of the thesis' results. Making such developments allows for the theories to be more applicable to investigating Balenciaga's positioning strategies. This can be exemplified with Balenciaga's execution of brand differentiation at large. In differentiating themselves, they considered *relevance, delivery, and communication* as tools to achieve this goal. For this reason, this thesis contributes to the

existing theory of digital marketing by developing the theory of brand differentiation within brand positioning.

Additionally, this thesis also contributes to the existing literature by validating Kai's (2020) notion on circling trends and partially disagreeing with Jelinek's (2018) suggestion to perform *artificalion* only if it fits the brand. As discussed in the results, Balenciaga pairs themselves with typically unconventional partners that are outside of the industry. Balenciaga's partnerships with digital creatives actually demonstrate the relevance of entering the TV and gaming industry especially during the demand of digital presence during the Covid-19 pandemic. Balenciaga proves that a fitting pair is subjective to the society's demands as well as the circling trends. As a result, the results contribute in minimizing Jelinek's (2018) suggestion and ultimately highlighting Kai's (2020) modern take on brand partnerships. The development of this theory takes a deductive approach as it aims to test the theories available in the existing theoretical framework.

### **5.3. Societal Relevance**

From the contributions this thesis makes to the existing literature of the theoretical framework, new understandings of luxury brand positioning within the digital marketing field has been acquired. Social implications are particularly obtainable as this field of digital marketing is understudied. Additionally, this thesis provides insight in fashion, but more specifically luxury fashion. Luxury fashion, in particular, is a sector that is studied even less as they are originally meant to be scarce in the fashion market to maintain its exclusivity. The insights of digital luxury brand positioning shows societal relevance as it enables (luxury and non-luxury) fashion brands to apply new strategies to market and position their brand in a clearer manner, over the digital space. In this case, Balenciaga's use of *emotional appeal*, *consumer awareness*, *innovation*, and *brand differentiation* to achieve a clear positioning statement can be applied to other fashion brands. Using those strategies can specifically lead other fashion brands to position themselves as experimental, accessible, and committed to their values as Balenciaga did.



## **5.4. Limitations and recommendations for future research**

The research of this thesis presented some limitations within the theoretical framework and decision to use Balenciaga as a focus of the study. Firstly, as mentioned previously, luxury brand positioning within the digital marketing field has been lacking in literature as there is not enough research on it. Because of this, it was difficult to completely base the research on existing literature. For this reason, a mixture of deductive and inductive approaches were used to enhance applicability of the literature to the research. The research would have, thus, benefited from adding a section on the combination of digital luxury brand positioning within the (digital) brand positioning framework. Secondly, the thesis deliberately selects Balenciaga as the focus of the study. Though there are limited luxury fashion brands that demonstrate digital brand positioning, this study presents its limitations in lacking examples from other luxury fashion brands. Analyzing the positioning strategies of other brands could have led to acquiring more insight on the relevance and the success rate of the suggested strategies in the literature. Nevertheless, this research was still able to retrieve significant themes that answers how Balenciaga positions themselves through digital creative partners during the Covid-19 pandemic.

For these aforementioned limitations, it is recommended to expand on the framework on digital luxury brand positioning to obtain a better understanding of existing literature in that sector. Additionally, it can be enlightening to analyze another luxury fashion brand's positioning strategies, perhaps through a comparative study, to test Balenciaga's strategies.

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## **Appendix**

### A. Sample material table

<b>Simpsons</b>			
URL	Word count	Primary/secondary	Type
<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2021/oct/03/balenciaga-the-simpsons-paris-catwalk-fashion">https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2021/oct/03/balenciaga-the-simpsons-paris-catwalk-fashion</a>	617	Secondary	Press article
<a href="#">By partnering with The Simpsons, Balenciaga takes the fashion set by surprise - Vogue Australia</a>	712	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/simpsons-balenciaga-merch/">https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/simpsons-balenciaga-merch/</a>	401	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwnFko13Szs&amp;t=470s&amp;ab_channel=TheFashionArchive">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwnFko13Szs&amp;t=470s&amp;ab_channel=TheFashionArchive</a>	(11:30-13:34) 373	Secondary	Video review
<a href="https://www.nssmag.com/en/fashion/27644/balenciaga-demna-gvasalia-simpson">https://www.nssmag.com/en/fashion/27644/balenciaga-demna-gvasalia-simpson</a>	753	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://manofmany.com/fashion/mens-fashion-trends/the-simpsons-x-balenciaga-release-opinion">https://manofmany.com/fashion/mens-fashion-trends/the-simpsons-x-balenciaga-release-opinion</a>	615	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://www-nytimes-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/2021/10/08/style/homer-simpson-fashion.html">https://www-nytimes-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/2021/10/08/style/homer-simpson-fashion.html</a>	1341	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://www.businessoffash">https://www.businessoffash</a>	654	Secondary	Press article

<a href="#">ion.com/reviews/fashion-week/fashions-favourite-ever-collaboration-balenciaga-and-the-simpsons/</a>			
<a href="https://www.elle.com/uk/fashion/celebrity-style/a37839508/the-simpsons-balenciaga/">https://www.elle.com/uk/fashion/celebrity-style/a37839508/the-simpsons-balenciaga/</a>	386	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://www.balenciaga.com/en-nl/summer-22">https://www.balenciaga.com/en-nl/summer-22</a>	354	Primary	Press release: Show notes

<b>Fortnite Skins</b>			
URL	Word count	Primary/secondary	Type
<a href="https://www.theverge.com/2021/9/20/22679754/fortnite-balenciaga-collaboration-epic-games-unreal-engine">https://www.theverge.com/2021/9/20/22679754/fortnite-balenciaga-collaboration-epic-games-unreal-engine</a>	551	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://www.voguebusiness.com/technology/balenciaga-launches-on-fortnite-what-it-means-for-luxury">https://www.voguebusiness.com/technology/balenciaga-launches-on-fortnite-what-it-means-for-luxury</a>	1018	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://fordhamobserver.com/65078/recent/arts-and-culture/balenciagas-collaboration-with-fortnite-raises-eyebrows/">https://fordhamobserver.com/65078/recent/arts-and-culture/balenciagas-collaboration-with-fortnite-raises-eyebrows/</a>	891	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://www.esportstalk.com/news/balenciaga-partners-with-fortnite-for-in-game-looks-and-real-life-merchandise/">https://www.esportstalk.com/news/balenciaga-partners-with-fortnite-for-in-game-looks-and-real-life-merchandise/</a>	672	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://www.techtimes.com/">https://www.techtimes.com/</a>	460	Secondary	Press article

<a href="https://www.ortnite-balenciaga-collab-bring-digital-physical-outfits-fans-gamers-enjoy%E2%80%94how.htm">articles/265607/20210920/fortnite-balenciaga-collab-bring-digital-physical-outfits-fans-gamers-enjoy%E2%80%94how.htm</a>			
<a href="https://www.contagious.com/news-and-views/campaign-of-the-week-balenciaga-drops-fashion-collection-inside-fortnite">https://www.contagious.com/news-and-views/campaign-of-the-week-balenciaga-drops-fashion-collection-inside-fortnite</a>	978	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/fortnite-balenciaga-collaboration-release-info/">https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/fortnite-balenciaga-collaboration-release-info/</a>	609	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://wwd.com/fashion-news/designer-luxury/balenciaga-and-fortnite-debut-physical-digital-collections-and-hub-1234930335/">https://wwd.com/fashion-news/designer-luxury/balenciaga-and-fortnite-debut-physical-digital-collections-and-hub-1234930335/</a>	755	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://fashinza.com/textile/fashion-industry/balenciaga-fortnite-collaborations-the-story-so-far-and-whats-ahead/">https://fashinza.com/textile/fashion-industry/balenciaga-fortnite-collaborations-the-story-so-far-and-whats-ahead/</a>	1332	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://thred.com/culture/design/what-does-fortnite-x-balenciaga-mean-for-the-future-of-marketing/">https://thred.com/culture/design/what-does-fortnite-x-balenciaga-mean-for-the-future-of-marketing/</a>	836	Secondary	Press article

Clones Spring 22 Collection			
URL	Word count	Primary/secondary	Type
<a href="https://www.technicolor.com/news/digital-clones-walk-runway-wearing-balenciaga-spring-22-collection">https://www.technicolor.com/news/digital-clones-walk-runway-wearing-balenciaga-spring-22-collection</a>	536	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/balenciaga-spring-2022/">https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/balenciaga-spring-2022/</a>	498	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3y2FfHAYacc&amp;ab_channel=BlissFoster">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3y2FfHAYacc&amp;ab_channel=BlissFoster</a>	5:07-6:22 and 10:08-12:40 722	Secondary	Video essay
<a href="https://www.balenciaga.com/en-us/spring-22">https://www.balenciaga.com/en-us/spring-22</a>	705	Primary	Show notes
<a href="https://hypebeast.com/2021/6/balenciaga-spring-2022-collection-runway-video">https://hypebeast.com/2021/6/balenciaga-spring-2022-collection-runway-video</a>	315	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/resort-2022/balenciaga">https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/resort-2022/balenciaga</a>	765	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/akg3bb/balenciaga-ss22-show-review">https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/akg3bb/balenciaga-ss22-show-review</a>	635	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://www.dailycal.org/2021/06/16/balenciagas-clones-explores-fashion-in-liminal-space-between-reality-technology/">https://www.dailycal.org/2021/06/16/balenciagas-clones-explores-fashion-in-liminal-space-between-reality-technology/</a>	672	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/gallery/balenciaga">https://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/gallery/balenciaga</a>	496	Secondary	Press article

<a href="#">-ss22-deepfake-fashion-show</a>			
<a href="https://graziomagazine.com/articles/the-uncanny-valley-of-balenciagas-spring-summer-22-show/">https://graziomagazine.com/articles/the-uncanny-valley-of-balenciagas-spring-summer-22-show/</a>	486	Secondary	Press article

<b>Afterworld: The Age of Tomorrow</b>			
URL	Word count	Primary/secondary	Type
<a href="https://www.polygon.com/2020/12/8/22163302/balenciaga-afterworld-video-game-fashion-show-fall-2021">https://www.polygon.com/2020/12/8/22163302/balenciaga-afterworld-video-game-fashion-show-fall-2021</a>	494	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-scoops/balenciaga-video-game-fashion-show-fall-collection-1234669695/">https://wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-scoops/balenciaga-video-game-fashion-show-fall-collection-1234669695/</a>	341	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/fashion-week/a34892239/baleciaga-video-game-fall-2021-collection/">https://www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/fashion-week/a34892239/baleciaga-video-game-fall-2021-collection/</a>	335	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://www.dezeen.com/2020/12/09/balenciaga-afterworld-the-age-of-tomorrow-video-game/">https://www.dezeen.com/2020/12/09/balenciaga-afterworld-the-age-of-tomorrow-video-game/</a>	686	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://medium.com/market-ing-in-the-age-of-digital/quantum-leap-of-balenciaga-the-revolution-of-fashion-show-728114418c37">https://medium.com/market-ing-in-the-age-of-digital/quantum-leap-of-balenciaga-the-revolution-of-fashion-show-728114418c37</a>	662	Secondary	Press article

<a href="https://www.theverge.com/2020/11/26/21721371/balenciaga-afterworld-the-age-of-tomorrow-fashion-launch-video-game">https://www.theverge.com/2020/11/26/21721371/balenciaga-afterworld-the-age-of-tomorrow-fashion-launch-video-game</a>	408	Secondary	Press article
<a href="https://videogame.balenciaga.com/en/press">https://videogame.balenciaga.com/en/press</a>	741	Primary	Press article
<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEZg3g9m_xk&amp;ab_channel=BlissFoster">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEZg3g9m_xk&amp;ab_channel=BlissFoster</a>	933	Secondary	Video review
<a href="https://www.unrealengine.com/en-US/spotlights/what-balenciaga-s-afterworld-the-age-of-tomorrow-tells-us-about-the-future-of-fashion">https://www.unrealengine.com/en-US/spotlights/what-balenciaga-s-afterworld-the-age-of-tomorrow-tells-us-about-the-future-of-fashion</a>	1559	Primary	press release
<a href="https://www.gq.com/story/balenciaga-video-game">https://www.gq.com/story/balenciaga-video-game</a>	1028	Secondary	Press article



## B. Coding tree acquired from thematic content analysis

RQ: How does Balenciaga position their brand through digital creative partnerships?					
Selective coding	Axial coding	Open coding	Tallies		
Thinking and acting outside of the box	Experimentalism	Balenciaga as innovative/avant garde			
		First to create digital runway			
		Futuristic			
		Up to date			
		Digitally transformed			
		Creatively playful			
		Playing with maximalism and consumerism			
		Dystopian			
		Living in Balenciaga world			
		Merging physical and digital			
		Combining the real and the fake			
		Rejecting the traditional and moving towards the modern	Blurred lines between the real and the (fake) digital world	Pushing the boundaries	
				Unconventional fashion event	
				Setting themselves apart from others	
				Unconventional events are impactful and trending now	
				Subversion of tired cliché	
				Unexpected collaboration	
				Uncomplimentary	
				Opposite brands	
				Balenciaga moving away from conventional narrative of fashion industry	
				Fashion creating a dialogue with their consumers, instead of a one-directional conversation	
				Contributing to extension of virtual fashion	
				Challenging the significance of fashion	
				Balenciaga creating a turning point	
				Balenciaga combining streetwear and high fashion	
		Accessibility and inclusivity	Expanding the demographics	Bridging fashion with entertainment industries	
				lightening the mood of fashion	
Fashion needs to keep up with modern time/environment					
Balenciaga as a vanguard of fashion's digital evolution					
Digital fashion shows as the new normal					
Unconventional combination of industries	Accessible to and for everyone			Achieving a wider demographic	
				Building a new community	
				Acquiring a younger demographic	
				Used to be portrayed as inaccessible but less so now	
				Inserting itself into mass market trends	
		Building a relationship with consumers	Perfect detailed combination of two worlds (real and fake)	Bridging highbrow and lowbrow	
				Combining fashion and technology/digital world	
				Digital clothes	
				Two industries coming together	
				Normalizing digital integration	
Fashion is the cultural core of digital world					
Committed values	Affective positioning through sustainability	Adding personal element of Demna Gvasalia			
		Showing personal interest in the simpsons			
		Being relatable/giving personal experience			
		Interactivity			
		Realistic experience in digital world			
		Brand values is to be spoken out about issues faced in the world			
		Taking responsibility for overproduction			
	Questioning and Confronting the fashion industry	Goals values aren't driven by money	Encouraging and following sustainability		
			Producing transformative clothing		
			Collaborated brands have similar values		
			Balenciaga is self-reflective		
			Making fun off the pompous fashion industry (gag to how expensive luxury clothes are)		
			Fashion as an excessive culture		
			Homogeneity (unoriginal designs, personalities, trends, etc) (lack of individualism)		
Optimistic messages					
World looking through filtered screens					
Authenticity, branding, and appropriation					
Consumerism					
Luxury brand as product of status					
Criticism of society (deteriorating world and criticisms on society's behavior)					