

Metaphorical Decoding and Cognitive Mechanisms of Balenciaga's "Ugly Fashion" Narrative

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze how Balenciaga constructs its brand narrative through "ugly fashion" metaphors, providing theoretical support from a cognitive linguistic perspective for understanding contemporary fashion brand semiotic communication and consumer identity construction. Based on Multimodal Metaphor and Conceptual Blending Theory, this paper systematically analyzes how Balenciaga utilizes core metaphors—such as alternative runway designs, extreme garment styling, and the alienation of everyday objects—to emergent brand meaning. These metaphors create cognitive dissonance through the synergy of a series of multimodal signs, subverting the traditional luxury framework of "luxury = perfection + heritage" and reconstructing a new paradigm of "luxury = rebellion + future + authenticity." Furthermore, the study explores how this framework reset participates in the construction of a niche, avant-garde identity for its audience.

KEYWORDS

Multimodal metaphor; Conceptual blending; Framing theory; Balenciaga; Ugly fashion; Identity construction

1 Introduction

In today's social media era, brand value increasingly relies on the stories they tell and the discussions they spark, rather than solely on product functionality. Brands need to generate viral topics to maintain relevance. Traditional luxury brands often create an aura of high-end, luxurious atmosphere through dreamlike imagery and settings. Against this backdrop, Balenciaga, as a phenomenal brand, under the direction of Creative Director Demna Gvasalia, has introduced a series of designs publicly labeled by mass media as "ugly," "ragged," and "awkwardly proportioned." Surprisingly, this has not led to the brand's decline but has instead triggered widespread discussion and achieved significant commercial success. The subversion of traditional aesthetics behind this "ugly fashion" phenomenon warrants in-depth investigation.

Scholars domestically and internationally have conducted extensive research on fashion phenomena from perspectives such as multimodal metaphor, brand narrative, and consumer identity. However, systematic metaphorical decoding and cognitive framework research specifically targeting "ugly fashion" remain relatively scarce. There is a particular lack of interdisciplinary analysis integrating visual grammar, conceptual blending, and identity theory, using Balenciaga as a typical case study.

Building on this foundation, this study intends to systematically decode the multimodal metaphorical mechanisms within Balenciaga's "ugly fashion" visual texts, explore how it reconstructs fashion discourse through strategies like irony, paradox, and negative signs, and construct an analytical framework integrating cognitive linguistics and cultural studies to deepen the understanding of contemporary fashion semiotic practices.

2 Literature review

Domestic research on multimodal metaphor in fashion brands has gradually emerged in recent years. Bai Yun & Chen Chunhua (2025) analyzed multimodal metaphors in AI risk comics from a conceptual blending perspective, providing methodological support for the cognitive interpretation of visual texts. Han Yanfang (2024) systematically reviewed the frontiers and prospects of multimodal metaphor research, pointing out its trend towards digitalization and cross-cultural directions. In fashion and brand research, Zeng Kaiwen (2024) directly focused on Balenciaga's "ugly" designs, noting their challenge to traditional aesthetic standards through rebellious aesthetics. Jiang Zhou (2021) explored the technological narrative in Balenciaga's exhibitions from the perspective of fabric innovation. Lu Xingni (2019) observed a "de-refinement" trend in contemporary fashion from the evolution of "white sneakers" to "dad shoes," highly relevant to the "ugly fashion" phenomenon. In consumer behavior and identity construction, Zhang Haiyan & Lu Chaonan (2022) studied the cultural identity mechanisms in Z Generation's consumption of domestic trends (Guochao), while Cai Qi & Zhou Qing (2022) analyzed laborer identity construction from the perspective of media discourse. These studies provide support for understanding the social psychology behind "ugly fashion."

Preliminary results have also been accumulated in international research on this field. Ye X. (2023), in a study on Balenciaga's innovation strategy, pointed out that the brand breaks traditional aesthetic frameworks through a dual strategy of "subversion and persistence," constructing an anti-conventional fashion language. Catharina R. (2023), from a

cultural criticism perspective, analyzed how Balenciaga challenges fashion norms through "transgressive" acts (such as exaggerated proportions, damaged designs, unconventional materials), thereby prompting public rethinking of "beauty" and "ugliness." Pilyarchuk K. (2024), in the article "Inclusion and Exclusion in Fashion Discourse," further argued that Balenciaga's "ugly fashion" is not merely an aesthetic choice but also an expression of identity politics, constructing a new fashion "in-group" by excluding traditional aesthetic groups. In metaphor and multimodal research, Dyrmo T. (2025) proposed an "Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory," emphasizing the multi-level meaning construction mechanism of metaphor across different modalities (visual, linguistic, auditory, etc.), providing a theoretical tool for this study's analysis of Balenciaga's advertisements, runways, and visual imagery. Xu J. & Yang Z. (2025)'s multimodal metaphor analysis of perfume advertisements demonstrated that the synergy of visual and auditory information can enhance the cognitive effect of metaphors, which also applies to the "ugly fashion" metaphorical system constructed by Balenciaga through multiple elements like imagery, music, and styling.

3 Multimodal metaphor identification and classification

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in 1980, posits that metaphor is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a fundamental cognitive mechanism rooted in human thinking. We understand and experience one conceptual domain (the target domain) in terms of another (the source domain). Traditional research focused primarily on the linguistic modality. With the advent of the digital media age, meaning is no longer constructed solely through text but through various semiotic modalities such as image, sound, text, space, and gesture. Forceville and others extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory into this area, proposing Multimodal Metaphor: a metaphor where the source and target domains are represented primarily in two or more different modalities.

Multimodal metaphor theory is often used in fields requiring cross-sensory experiences to shape emotions or cultural identity. Today, in the fashion field, brand narrative is no longer embodied by a single product but requires more topics and stories to support its expression. Balenciaga's narrative is a typical multimodal text. Its metaphorical meaning is transmitted through the synergistic effect of product design, runway setup, advertisements, social media texts, etc. The resulting discussions are all intentionally integrated by the brand through a series of multimodal sign systems (visual, auditory, spatial, etc.) to construct a metaphorical narrative, breaking the constraints of traditional linguistic metaphors and translating abstract, complex brand concepts into concrete sensory experiences. Balenciaga infinitely amplifies this point to increase brand attention, conveying metaphors through extremely bold and alternative presentations. This chapter aims to identify and systematically classify three recurring and foundational core metaphors in its narrative through a detailed multimodal analysis of Balenciaga's promotional materials.

3.1 "Post-apocalyptic" runway settings



Figure 1 Spring-Summer 2023 Collection



Figure 2 Autumn/Winter 2022 Collection



Figure 3 Autumn/Winter 2020 Collection (<https://www.showstudio.com/>)

As shown in Figure 1, the runway setup for Balenciaga's Spring-Summer 2023 collection was covered in mud, with models walking the runway in trenches filled with slurry while wearing the new season's collection. Visually, the mud replaced what should have been a bright, clean stage, resetting the runway space into a "post-apocalyptic ruin" -like scene. The exquisite haute couture clothing appeared incongruous against this primitive, natural backdrop, which was precisely the intention of Creative Director Demna—implying that true luxury and beauty do not float upon ethereal refinement but can express the most authentic self even when returning to the most primitive state. The stark contrast between the models' luxurious clothing and the mud-splattered stains, forcibly merging the two, broke the traditional luxury values of perfection and newness, creating the most direct cognitive dissonance. Audibly, the runway music was no longer rhythmic fashion accompaniment but employed industrial noise and ambient sound effects, reinforcing the "apocalyptic" atmosphere with a repetitive, urgent soundscape. Simultaneously, the models' footsteps were amplified by the mud, enhancing the immersive and authentic feel of the scene, complementing the visual modality to jointly construct the meaning space Demna intended to create. The smell emitted by the mud could also serve as a potential olfactory modality, directly stimulating the audience, making this show an invasive, embodied experience.

Combined with Demna's statement released for the show: "It takes courage and persistence to be your true self. Every day is a battlefield to defend your unique identity." "Packing luxury fashion into beautiful, unique, and visually expensive boxes is limiting and rather old-fashioned." "This show's set is a metaphor for digging for truth and being down-to-earth. Let's allow everyone to be anybody, loving each other, not making war." It is evident that Demna utilizes the interweaving and superposition of multiple modalities, aiming to reconstruct the skeleton of luxury and fashion.

Such "elaborate settings" had already appeared in the Fall-Winter 2020 and 2022 collection runways, using natural backgrounds like blizzards and water routes coupled with sound and light effects. These not only output Demna's personal attitude towards fashion but also constituted a perfect metaphorical cluster. Using concrete images like mud and nature as the source domain to understand abstract concepts like fashion and luxury in the target domain. This metaphor, by reconstructing the space and environment where fashion occurs, reshapes traditional concepts like "runway" and "metropolis" into a decaying, virtual, or post-apocalyptic landscape, challenging the traditional context of luxury being glamorous and spotless, endowing it with critical depth.

3.2 "Unusual" styling design



Figure 4 Balenciaga Summer2024 (<https://cn.fashionnetwork.com/>)

Unlike the precise stitching and gorgeous designs of other luxury brands, Balenciaga extensively uses extreme oversize, asymmetry, and bizarrely cut garment styles. This is not merely a simple design preference but behind it lies a more systematic core metaphor. Wide suits, ragged vests, and patchwork pants—these exaggerated proportions directly challenge the traditional fashion ideal of "fit." The clothing exists as an independent sign, not a "subsidiary" tailored to the body's form. The silhouettes are bulky, huge, sometimes even threatening, enveloping the body's curves and reshaping it

into a "geometric form"-like structure. The incongruity between the garment design and the model is precisely the core meaning of the metaphor. Using these grotesque styles as a starting point to understand beauty questions the perfectionism standard of the fashion industry under traditional aesthetics.

Not only is the styling alternative, but Demna also breaks standards in model selection. As shown in the images from the Balenciaga Summer 24 collection show, models from various walks of life took to the runway wearing these fashions. They did not resemble clothes hangers displaying garments but more like "real people". Some were casual, some slightly nervous, others displayed personality. In commentary on the Spring 24 collection, the author noted that Demna is creating haute couture for the real Paris streets.



Figure 5 (<https://www.trendhunter.com/trends/balenciaga-ss18>)

Furthermore, to create a real yet somewhat off-kilter world, Balenciaga has a tradition of using non-fashion photographers. As shown in Figure above, for the promotion of Balenciaga's Spring-Summer 2018 ready-to-wear collection, the photos shared on social media included strangely stretched, distorted, and blurred images, which also convey metaphors potentially. Everything seems "deviant from the norm," yet everything conveys a signal: be your true self.

3.3 "Alienated" everyday objects



Figure 6 (<https://www.balenciaga.com/en-gb/gaffer-bangle--matte-transparent-804365TZ01R2584.html>)



Figure 7 (<https://www.showstudio.com/>)



Figure 8 (<https://www.balenciaga.cn>)

Balenciaga's transformation of mundane or functional everyday objects into high-priced luxury items is far more than design; it is a profound semiotic practice. Using everyday items like tape bracelets, chip bag phone holders, and the Trash Pouch as the source domain guides the audience to understand the essence and value of luxury. Through such exaggeration and alienation, the form and reference of the object itself are altered, forcibly juxtaposing the two concepts of "luxury item" and "everyday waste," creating cognitive dissonance.

In fact, taking the Trash Pouch as an example, the bag's material is not polyethylene but calfskin. This visual "cheapness" strongly contrasts with the tactile "luxury feel," prompting the audience to ponder: does the value of a luxury good reside in the object itself or its symbolic meaning? The bag's name directly uses the word "Trash," actively emphasizing alienation and guiding the interpretation direction. Simultaneously, the high price tag and the exquisite space of the boutique counter undoubtedly bestow upon these items the aura of luxury, further highlighting the absurd effect this metaphor intends to create.

This metaphor is constructed through the strong conflict of multiple modalities: the object itself (visual, material), naming (linguistic), and marketing context (spatial), conveying to the audience that luxury is mundane stuff endowed with value.

4 Paradoxical meaning generation——cognitive mechanism of conceptual blending networks

Conceptual Blending Theory, proposed by cognitive linguists Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner in the 1990s, is a core theory in cognitive linguistics aimed at explaining how humans create new meanings by integrating different mental spaces. The theory posits that human understanding and creation are not a simple "input-output" process but a dynamic, complex networked cognitive operation. Conceptual blending typically involves four interconnected mental spaces. First, two Input Spaces serve as the raw material for blending. They originate from different domains but share some connection. The Generic Space contains the common features of the two input spaces, establishing a framework for correspondence and mapping between them. Finally, the Blended Space selectively extracts partial elements from the two input spaces and, through operations like composition, completion, and elaboration, merges them into a new structure. This new structure possesses emergent meaning, properties, and logic not explicitly present in the input spaces. It is the newly created meaning, attributes, and logic generated through the blending process.

This chapter will use the three aforementioned metaphor types as examples, applying Conceptual Blending Theory to analyze specific cases and explore the underlying operational mechanisms.

4.1 Case 1: Meaning construction of the "muddy runway"

Table 1

Input Space I	Traditional Fashion Runway: glamorous catwalk, lighting, dreamlike sense, luxury feel
Input Space II	Natural Elements: mud, filth, models struggling forward, sense of destruction, authenticity, primal feel
Generic Space	A space where an event is occurring; interaction between people and environment
Blended Space	Luxury is not detached from reality; critique of hypocritical perfection; fashion can provoke reflection

The refinement and luxury of the traditional fashion runway blend with the primal impact of nature and ruin-like imagery in the Generic Space, producing a new meaning space——fashion is a primal expression detached from hypocritical glamour. Beauty and value do not exist detached from reality but are revealed in the process of confronting and integrating with the rough reality; the mud-splattered haute couture suit is a direct rebuttal and satire of the excessive embellishment and false perfection of the social media era; the viewing experience is more immersive, placing the audience literally in the mud to feel, endowing fashion with a reflectiveness it never had before. The generation of this

meaning resets the framework of the traditional fashion show, allowing the audience to perceive another possibility of fashion and further highlighting Balenciaga's individual expression.

4.2 Case 2: Reconstruction of body aesthetics through "extreme oversize suit"

Table 2

Input Space I	Traditional Power Attire (Suit): tailored fit, high-quality fabric; sense of authority
Input Space II	Clumsy Dressing like "wearing adults' clothes": Oversize, ill-fitting, sloppy; sense of disconnect
Generic Space	Clothing worn on the body; relationship between clothing and body
Blended Space	Power attire is ridiculous; self-expression under constraint

The juxtaposition of the power symbolism of traditional formal wear with clumsiness and ill-fittingness suggests that these so-called "power symbols" are essentially constructed, performable, even ridiculous; the ill-fitting state of the oversized clothing reveals that identity is an ongoing, struggling process, but even under such constraints, we can still boldly express ourselves. Choosing an extreme oversize suit is not a childish pretending to be mature but, in a society as oppressive as a huge volume enveloping the body, daring to choose to face oneself and display it conspicuously, telling others: I choose to dress like this.

4.3 Case 3: Meaning construction of the "trash pouch"

Table 3

Input Space I	Traditional Luxury Handbag: exquisite craftsmanship, brand heritage, high price, aesthetics, sense of preciousness
Input Space II	Everyday Functional Object: rough workmanship, mass production, purely functional, unbranded, discarded, sense of cheapness
Generic Space	A container for holding items
Space	
Blended	
Space	The essence of luxury is conceptual rather than material; critique of consumerism; brand power

The high-end craftsmanship of the traditional luxury handbag is juxtaposed with the mundanity and sense of discard associated with the "trash bag." The value of the object is no longer determined by its own form but entirely by the concept and narrative injected by the brand. This is the most naked revelation of the nature of the luxury industry; the brand completes its satire of blind consumption and logo worship by selling an extremely expensive piece of "trash." If the audience is willing to pay an absurd price for a label, to some extent, this purchase consumes the critique itself, thereby displaying one's own "intelligence." Balenciaga, through this act, declares its possession of the power of "naming is creating." It defines what luxury is, without having to follow traditional rules. This is also the ultimate expression of brand authority.

5 Discussion: Framework subversion and identity construction

The previous two chapters systematically analyzed how Balenciaga constructs its narrative through multimodal metaphors and revealed how these metaphors generate paradoxical new meanings through the cognitive mechanism of conceptual blending. However, the generation of these meanings is not the ultimate goal; their macro effect is the systematic subversion of the cognitive framework of the entire luxury field. Based on this, a new identity is constructed for a specific audience group. This chapter will use this as a starting point, employing Lakoff's Framing Theory, to explore in depth how Balenciaga's "ugly fashion" narrative successfully completes the cognitive revolution from deconstruction to reconstruction and to analyze the socio-cultural impact of this process.

5.1 From metaphor to framework subversion

According to Lakoff's theory, "frames" are cognitive structures deeply ingrained in our brains that shape how we understand the world. Under the traditional luxury industry concept, the frame is luxury = perfection + heritage. This frame is activated and reinforced by glamorous advertisements, flawless craftsmanship, long history, and exclusive experiences. It sells more of an aspirational dream.

Balenciaga uses multimodal metaphors as tools; each core metaphor is a step towards dismantling the traditional frame. Filth vs. cleanliness, clumsiness vs. elegance, mundanity vs. preciousness—these metaphors, through conceptual blending, create intense cognitive dissonance in the audience's mind, making people realize that the established frame of "luxury" is not a natural truth but a social construct that can be challenged and questioned. From then on, Balenciaga successfully constructs its own unique new brand framework—luxury = rebellion + future + authenticity.

5.2 Audience identity construction

To enhance the credibility of the discussion, this study collected online questionnaire data from 20 Balenciaga consumers. Regarding the description of Balenciaga's overall brand style, 85% chose "avant-garde, rebellious, experimental"; 60% believed that the group who purchases and wears Balenciaga products typically possesses the trait of "focusing on self-expression"; on the question of the primary motivation for purchasing brand products, 60% chose "identifying with the concepts and attitudes represented by the brand (identity value)," indicating that the brand narrative does indeed strengthen consumers' value identification to a certain extent.

Thus, it can be seen that the subversion and resetting of the framework ultimately serve a deeper purpose: the construction of identity. The audience capable of understanding and accepting Balenciaga's new framework completes a clear identity construction through consumption behavior. Firstly, "decoding" the brand's narrative metaphors serves as the first threshold. Consumers are no longer a passively accepting group but active "code-breakers," "initiates" who can cross this threshold automatically gain a sense of intellectual superiority. Subsequently, this small group automatically forms a so-called "intelligent" circle, obtaining an avant-garde, niche identity. At this point, external negative evaluations or criticisms appear to be a negation of the new framework but actually reactivate it, strengthening the group's identity and establishing a deeper connection with the brand. In fact, when the audience participates in this "metaphorical experience" designed by Balenciaga, they are aware of the irony involved. They are not fooled but actively participate and conspire in this critique of consumerism. Ultimately, their identity is no longer just that of "decoders" who understand the brand metaphors but becomes "accomplices" in the brand narrative, thereby achieving a higher level of loyalty and spiritual connection to the brand.

6 Conclusion

By combining multimodal metaphor analysis with Conceptual Blending Theory, this study broadens the application boundaries of the theory and clearly delineates how Balenciaga, starting from microscopic metaphor construction, ultimately achieves macroscopic framework subversion and identity construction. This research expands the interdisciplinary field of cognitive linguistics and visual culture studies, particularly strengthening the cognitive interpretation ability of phenomena like "ugly fashion"; it provides theoretical support for the innovative communication strategies of fashion brands, especially luxury brands, helping to understand the cultural identity and aesthetic shifts of Z Generation consumers, possessing significant commercial and cultural practical guidance value; it provides a cognitive science basis for brand narrative strategies, offering reference value particularly for luxury brands pursuing differentiation.

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