

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Chinese netizens turn on Balenciaga's latest campaign, but to what end?

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Many netizens label Balenciaga's new Qixi campaign "tasteless" and even "insulting of Chinese culture," a few are saying that it's "simply ugly."
Image credit: Balenciaga

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What Happened: For Qixi (China's version of Valentine's Day), Balenciaga has released four limited-edition [Hourglass handbags](#) at the brand's Tmall flagship store.

In its campaign picture, a male model is giving a red "Hourglass" handbag with Chinese characters that read, "He Loves Me" written on the flap to a female model, who looks at the present with awe. The duo are standing before a waterfall backdrop that is flanked by red roses and hearts.

The campaign's four bags, which come in red, black, pink and white with specially designed graffiti fonts exemplify the current "Too Cool" style favored by certain [Gen-Zers](#), but seen as offensive by the rest of the Internet.

The bags mimic styles preferred by China's rural population and have been labeled "tasteless" or even "insulting of Chinese culture" by many netizens while some are saying they are "simply ugly."

By the end of Tuesday in China, the topic [#BalenciagaChineseValentineCampaignTasteless](#) (#) had garnered more than 210,000 discussions and 170 million views on Weibo, and the topic [#BalenciagaInsultsChina](#) ((#) had 15 million-plus views and more than 6,000 discussions.

Jing Take: Chinese netizens are known for finding certain things offensive: sovereignty issues over Hong Kong, Macau, Tibet or Taiwan ([Versace](#), Marc Jacobs, Coach) as well as implicit racial prejudices or racism ([Dolce & Gabbana](#), Philipp Plein).

But to some, even seemingly minor details such as natural freckles on a Chinese model's face ([Zara](#)) and the aesthetic of this campaign cross the line.

With Chinese patriotism at an all-time high thanks to intensifying tensions between China and the West, and anti-consumerist voices growing louder in a recovering post-[COVID-19](#) economy, luxury brands have become easy targets for netizens.

While the campaign pictures have been widely distributed on Weibo and WeChat, the brand only posted them on Tmall, indicating that they were likely only meant for a particular audience and not the whole Internet.

To stand out in a sea of [Qixi campaigns](#), Balenciaga made a commendable effort to learn what Chinese Gen-Zers find cool and designed a unique font for the handbags instead of simply using an existing one such as [Dior did with its customizable Book Tote](#).

Yet, many consumers still think the brand has not done its homework.

While it is important for brands to do social listening and understand other brands' cultural missteps, sometimes it is better to ignore the noise.

After all, a luxury brand was not born to be led by public opinion its job is to set trends.

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