Fashion brand's controversial new campaign and the long history of 'shockvertising'

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Credit: Balenciaga

Kim Kardashian is [refining](#) her [personal brand](#). Right-wing news outlet Fox TV is [gaining viewers](#) through [attention-grabbing headlines](#). Photographer Gabriele Galimberti is [gaining notoriety](#). All this is due to a recent advertising campaign from leading global fashion brand Balenciaga that has caused [widespread controversy](#).

One photograph shows a child in a string vest holding a [bondage gear](#)-clad teddy bear. Another [shows a handbag](#) resting on paperwork about child abuse. [Balenciaga responded](#) to the backlash to its [campaign](#) by issuing an apology that blamed the set designers and photographers for the uncomfortable messages. It has also filed a [US$25 million lawsuit](#) against the campaign's producers.

As an expert in branding who has worked in [advertising](#) for over 25 years, I am wary of Balenciaga's responses. All [major brands](#) have people in place to approve these types of advertising campaigns. The approval process would be especially comprehensive for a [brand](#) like Balenciaga, which spends around [US$100 million a year](#) on publicity.

Advertising is, of course, designed to get attention. According to the [University of Southern California](#), urban consumers see more than 5,000 advertising messages a day but remember only three or four. Brands invest a lot of money with the goal of becoming one of those memorable ads.

One technique used to achieve that goal is "[shockvertising](#)"—an advert that "deliberately, rather than inadvertently, [startles and offends](#) its audience by violating norms for social values and personal ideals". Fashion brands such as Benetton, Calvin Klein and FCUK have all created shocking ads resulting in free media coverage that benefited the brand and those associated with it.

A history of successful fashion shockvertising

From the 1970s through to the early 2000s, Italian clothing brand [Benetton](#) created simple photographic adverts that featured controversial topics. A priest and a nun kissing. A black woman nursing a white baby. A man dying of Aids surrounded by his family.

These adverts, placed in popular magazines and on billboards, were designed to attract attention. The dying man imagery, for example, was published as news broke that Aids had become the leading cause of death for young men in the US. The campaign's creator Oliviero Toscani became world famous and Benetton an even more popular global brand, although it later severed ties with the photographer.

In the early 2000s, French Connection launched a campaign around the acronym FCUK (French Connection United Kingdom). Its slogan "FCUKinkyBugger" caused Britain's advertising watchdog, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), to respond to 132 complaints from the public. French Connection reacted by putting the sign "Sorry FCUK" in its store windows, attracting even more young consumers to their high street stops and increasing sales from £6.4 million to £19m.

In 1980, Calvin Klein released adverts featuring the very young supermodel Brooke Shields modeling the brand's jeans while saying: "Do you know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing."

The print and TV ads placed the 15-year-old in sexually provocative positions and caused an uproar with the public. In the US, ABC network stations banned the TV commercial. However, due to the controversy, Calvin Klein boosted sales and Brooke Shields' career took off. She has since appeared on over 300 magazine covers internationally and starred in Hollywood films.

Who benefits from shockvertising?

As these examples demonstrate, people associated with a shockvertising campaign can take advantage of the news it generates to further their own interests.

Kardashian, who has been something of a muse for Balenciaga in recent

years, published a reaction [on her Instagram](#) to the controversial campaign. This allowed her fanbase to voice their opinions on the matter, an example of Kardashian using controversy to [build up her personal brand](#).

Galimberti, who photographed some of the most controversial images in the Balenciaga campaign, [stated](#): "I was not entitled in whatsoever manner to … choose the products, nor the models, nor the combination of the same." He has since given [several interviews](#) to mainstream media, bringing his name to an even bigger audience and, potentially, the opportunity to gain new clients.

Balenciaga did not respond to our request for comment on whether the campaign may have intentionally courted press coverage. The brand's creative director Demna Gvasalia, however, [issued a public statement](#) on December 2 taking personal responsibility for the campaign.

"As much as I would sometimes like to provoke a thought through my work, I would NEVER have an intention to do that with such an awful subject as child abuse that I condemn," he told his [Instagram followers](#). "It was inappropriate to have kids promote objects that had nothing to do with them."

Shockvertising strategies allow adverts to be seen by millions of potential consumers despite being aired for only a limited amount of time before being taken down. As the current Balenciaga controversy demonstrates, the way to make paid advertising work harder is to get [it talked about for free](#).

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