FRAMING INNOCENCE AND CONTROVERSY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF BALENCIAGA'S 2022 ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN EXPLOITING CHILDREN

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Abstract:

This study examines the 2022 Balenciaga holiday advertising campaign as a significant illustration of how luxury fashion intentionally utilizes controversy, child imagery, and sexualized aesthetics to garner attention and bolster cultural capital. The research utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), grounded in Fairclough's three-dimensional model and Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar, to analyze a corpus comprising official campaign visuals, corporate statements, news reports, and social media comments. Textual research illustrates how multimodal configurations aestheticize references to bondage culture and judicial discourse while preserving a facade of juvenile innocence. An examination of discursive practices indicates that Balenciaga's framing strategies—particularly via vague apologies and blame-shifting language—function to diminish accountability. Social practice analysis situates the conflict within broad paradigms of neoliberal consumerism, shock marketing, and moral panic. Studies show that public outrage not only opposes the campaign but also unintentionally makes it more well-known, turning moral outrage into digital capital. The paper asserts that the Balenciaga incident illustrates the dynamics of power, representation, and accountability in modern advertising, where transgression functions as a profitable rhetorical tactic. This paper contributes to the discourse on child representation and corporate ethics in high-fashion branding by synthesizing Critical Discourse Analysis with visual semiotics, ultimately promoting the necessity for more stringent ethical review procedures and enhanced critical media literacy to empower audiences to identify and challenge detrimental ideological frameworks.

Keywords:

Critical Discourse Analysis, Balenciaga, Advertising, Ideology, Representation, Power

Introduction

Advertising is more than just a way to sell things; it also creates symbolic meanings, validates ideologies, and shapes how people think about morality, identity, and power. In contemporary consumer culture, advertising operates as multimodal texts that utilize linguistic, visual, and emotional strategies to persuade, normalize, and influence collective perception (Belch & Belch, 2020; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2020). The luxury clothing market has become a major place for trying out new ways of speaking. In a crowded digital space, brands often use images that are controversial and push the limits to stay culturally relevant and get people talking (Harrison & Barthel, 2020). This rise in shock aesthetics has made it harder to tell the difference between artistic innovation and breaking the law, especially when commercial stories involve vulnerable groups like children (Bick & Malhotra, 2023). The ethical ambiguity is what led to the 2022 Balenciaga Christmas ad, which then sparked criticism all over the world.

The Balenciaga event is a key moment in the ongoing conversation about how to show children, who is responsible for what, and who is in charge in fashion advertising. During the campaign, images of young children holding teddy bears with bondage-inspired harnesses were widely shared. Other images hinted at court documents related to child pornography laws. Putting baby purity next to adult fetish culture got a lot of quick and loud criticism. Critics said that the campaign made infancy seem more important, less serious, or even sexualized it in a hidden way, which went against important cultural norms about protecting children and keeping things pure. Luxury marketing often uses transgression to get people interested in culture, but the specific mix of childhood images with BDSM symbols was seen as a careless use of taboo imagery, not as a creative critique. The argument quickly turned into an international moral debate about the responsibilities of businesses, creative directors, photographers, and the fashion industry as a whole in setting ethical standards for visual communication.

This case is important for more than just a mistake in advertising. It shows how deeply divided our consumer culture is, where the commercialization of children meets digital outrage, moral panic, and public discourse that is made better by algorithms. After the campaign came out, social media sites became the main places where people made sense of the photos by changing, reinterpreting, and sharing them to make their points, doubts, or moral claims. The transformation of corporate scandal into an interactive digital spectacle represents a broader cultural shift in which audiences increasingly function as active interpreters and co-creators of moral discourse (Chiluwa & Samoilenko, 2023). Pereira and Queiroz (2021) contend that childhood has transformed into a symbolically contested domain within economic and cultural contexts, with the Balenciaga incident illustrating the vulnerability of this sphere to ideological manipulation in capitalist markets.

This research employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its primary analytical framework to investigate these dynamics. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) views discourse as a social activity interlinked with power dynamics, demonstrating how linguistic and visual choices reflect and sustain ideological frameworks (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Fairclough's three-dimensional model—textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice—enables a methodical investigation of the Balenciaga campaign's meaning production, the dissemination of these meanings through institutional and public discourse, and their relation to broader socio-cultural contexts. The textual dimension enables an exhaustive examination of images, captions, intertextual elements, and symbolic associations. The dimension of discursive practice investigates the ways in which corporate communication, media reporting, and user-generated feedback produce divergent interpretations. The social

practice dimension contextualizes the conflict within the paradigms of neoliberal branding, moral panic, and the political economy of digital outrage.

Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar, alongside Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), provides a multimodal analytical framework for understanding the influence of visual representations on discursive meaning. Gaze, framing, color, composition, and object placement are analyzed as signifying resources that communicate power dynamics and ideological signals. These frameworks are further contextualized through insights from Barthes' semiotics, Van Dijk's ideological structures, and Bourdieu's theories of symbolic capital, facilitating a unified view of the campaign as a locus where meaning, morality, and market logic converge. The incorporation of moral panic theory clarifies the processes through which public outrage escalates, spreads, and solidifies into collective beliefs regarding corporate misconduct.

Although there is a growing academic interest in shock advertising, controversial branding, sexualization in media, and moral panic, there is a lack of research on how high-fashion campaigns employ multimodal rhetoric to either aestheticize or obscure ethically questionable representations, particularly those involving minors. Contemporary studies on child representation in advertising primarily focus on consumer behavior, the effects of sexualization, or regulatory concerns (Brown & Tiggemann, 2021), yet they seldom integrate visual semiotics, corporate discourse strategies, and public reception into a unified analytical framework. Moreover, while fashion controversies such as the Dolce & Gabbana China campaign (2018), Calvin Klein's "S&M"-themed visuals, and Gucci's blackface sweater incident (2019) have received academic attention, there is a lack of comparative analyses investigating how the notions of transgression and ethics are discursively negotiated within and among luxury branding. The Balenciaga case presents a unique opportunity to scrutinize these deficiencies through the analysis of the creation of ethically contentious imagery and its dissemination and metamorphosis within media ecosystems.

This study aims to rectify theoretical and empirical shortcomings by conducting a comprehensive analysis of the 2022 Balenciaga advertising's formulation, distribution, and interpretation of meanings related to infancy, sexuality, and corporate accountability. This research utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and visual semiotics to elucidate the interaction between linguistic and visual components in the normalization of contentious representations, the media's framing of events within moral and ideological frameworks, and the audience's active reinterpretation of imagery that either supports or contests corporate narratives. The analysis emphasizes the cultural conflicts inherent in contemporary visual culture, characterized by constantly shifting standards of acceptability, where controversy functions as a rhetorical tool to augment visibility and economic value.

Three primary objectives guide the investigation:
- To examine the discursive and visual strategies utilized in the 2022 Balenciaga holiday advertisement to derive interpretations related to childhood, sexuality, and power.
- To look at how the public and media organizations understand, question, and change the campaign's visuals and messages.
- To examine how Balenciaga's corporate communication aims to mitigate criticism, maintain legitimacy, and address moral responsibility.

These objectives augment the holistic academic understanding of the ethical, ideological, and representational dimensions of advertising in the luxury fashion sector. This study investigates the formulation and contestation of meanings, underscoring the imperative for enhanced ethical frameworks in fashion communication and demonstrating the importance of discourse analysis in elucidating the socio-cultural ramifications of provocative visual media. This study situates the Balenciaga incident within extensive discourses regarding representation, consumer culture, and corporate influence, demonstrating how luxury branding can both reflect and reshape societal perceptions of innocence, exploitation, and moral responsibility.

Literature Review

The 2022 Balenciaga advertising scandal has become a significant case in the analysis of media discourse, corporate ethics, and multimodal representation. Understanding the symbolic significance and societal consequences of the campaign requires an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), visual semiotics, ideological critique, moral panic theory, and research on child representation in commercial media. This literature analysis synthesizes various scholarly viewpoints into a unified analytical framework and situates the Balenciaga incident within broader trends of controversial branding and public outrage. This study identifies significant shortcomings in the existing literature and clarifies its contribution to the progression of discourse research in the domain of luxury fashion advertising.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Ideological Power in Corporate Communication

Critical Discourse Analysis is a foundational framework for understanding how language and visual media construct and sustain power dynamics. Fairclough's (1992, 1995) three-dimensional model—text, discursive practice, and social practice—remains a significant framework for examining the ideological functions of discourse. This model shows how textual elements like word choice, modality, intertextuality, and visual cues create meanings. It also shows how institutions create and share these meanings through discursive practices, and how social practices put discourse in a larger socio-cultural context. The Balenciaga campaign merits examination due to the brand's linguistic mitigation (e.g., ambiguous apologies, passive constructions) and artistic choices that collectively position innocence, sexuality, and corporate intent within contentious ideological contexts.

Van Dijk's (1998, 2008) theory of ideological discourse elucidates how elite entities, such as companies and media organizations, strategically utilize language to maintain dominance, evade accountability, or influence public opinion. During crises, organizations often use "positive self-presentation" and "strategic avoidance" to keep their credibility. Recent CDA research on Balenciaga's formal apology (Kharismi & Nurhayati, 2024) substantiates these trends, illustrating how linguistic distancing and agent deletion reduce perceived accountability. This aligns with Van Dijk's paradigm, which asserts that institutional discourse systematically governs blame in ways that benefit organizational power.

The CDA has substantially evolved over the past decade to include multimodal strategies, acknowledging that modern advertising conveys ideology through both linguistic and visual elements. Researchers such as Wu (2025), Santikul (2024), and Joy (2024) demonstrate that the integration of linguistic and visual research can reveal significant ideological functions of images, particularly in commercial contexts where textual and visual modalities interact in a mutually dependent manner. These advancements validate the methodological framework of this study, which amalgamates Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis with visual semiotics

to examine how Balenciaga constructs and disseminates meaning across various communication modalities.

Visual Semiotics and the Syntax of Images in Fashion Advertising

CDA focuses on words, but the symbolic power of visual communication is important for looking at campaigns that are controversial. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) grammar of visual design sees images as semiotic tools that are shaped by cultural norms and political beliefs. Visual elements like gaze, salience, composition, modality, color saturation, and object location work together to change how people understand things. These visual traits are very important for high-fashion ads because images are often the main way that brands are known.

Barthes' (1972) semiotic theory, especially his denotation-connotation model, makes this understanding better. Denotation refers to the image's clear meaning, while connotation refers to the cultural meanings that the image brings to mind. In Balenciaga's campaign, the teddy bear represents innocence that has been violated or corrupted, as indicated by the bondage-style harnesses. The integration of Barthes' semiology with Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar enables an advanced examination of the visual representation of innocence, deviance, sexuality, and legal authority.

Machin and Mayr (2012) contend that multimodal elements in advertising often reinforce dominant ideological narratives through symbolic indicators that influence cultural norms. Forceville (2020) underscores the impact of metaphors and visual framing on consumer perception and the establishment of ideological cohesion. Williamson's (1978) primary assertion that advertising transforms objects into ideological symbols is relevant: Balenciaga's campaign not only showcases children with props but also commodifies and aestheticizes the symbolic dichotomy between childhood and adult fetish culture.

This multimodal synthesis—Barthes' connotation, Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar, Fairclough's discourse model, and Van Dijk's ideological structures—presents a unified framework for examining how Balenciaga's images produce meaning and justify aesthetic transgression.

Advertising as Ideological Work: Power, Branding, and Cultural Production

Advertising has a big impact on cultural values because it creates symbolic meaning. Cook (2001) describes advertising as a cultural institution that incorporates ideological principles into everyday consumption practices. Phillips and McQuarrie (2010) assert that advertising narratives influence identity formation by legitimizing cultural myths linked to attractiveness, desirability, and exclusivity. In high-end fashion, these myths are often about how to build an aristocratic identity, improve your taste, and break new ground.

Belch & Belch (2020) assert that advertising legitimizes particular moral and aesthetic standards, often embedding contentious issues within aspirational imagery. Balenciaga's use of shock in this case is a way to keep the brand relevant. Harrison and Barthel (2020) note that high-fashion brands frequently operate on the fringes of societal acceptability to stimulate discourse and achieve cultural significance.

The research conducted by Tam and Lung (2025) illustrates that luxury enterprises are progressively employing digital virality, aesthetic discourse, and algorithmic amplification to sustain engagement. Gárgoles (2023) shows that Balenciaga's brand identity has always used

experimental and provocative aesthetics. This shows that the campaign fits with the company's overall story instead of going against it. These studies show that advertising is very ideological and strategic. When handled correctly, controversy can be a valuable brand asset.

Shock Advertising, Moral Panic, and Digital Outrage Cultures

Shock advertising uses disturbing or controversial images on purpose to get strong emotional reactions. Dahl et al. (2003) stress how these kinds of pictures can affect memory and attention, and they also bring up possible ethical issues. Brown and Tiggemann (2021) assert that sexualized imagery maintains visibility by provoking emotional engagement and perpetuating harmful standards.

Digital media makes it harder for people to understand shock advertising. Walsh (2020) shows that social media makes moral panic worse by quickly spreading images that make people feel strong emotions. Puryear, Vandello, and Grey (2024) demonstrate that outrage is intensified by algorithms that promote emotionally charged content. Gies (2017) refers to this phenomenon as the "commercialization of controversy," where scandal becomes media capital.

Marwick's (2024) notion of the "moral economy of outrage" provides critical insight: public outrage functions as a symbolic commodity exchanged for visibility, social capital, and ideological alignment. This perspective elucidates the factors contributing to the rapid intensification of the Balenciaga response and its enduring significance as a cultural phenomenon over several weeks.

Blitvich (2022) contends that online public shaming fosters collective moral reinforcement, transforming individual outrage into communal moral expression. These observations characterize Balenciaga not merely as an advertising misstep but as a catalyst for a digitally induced moral panic driven by socio-technical motivations.

Child Representation, Commodification, and Exploitation in Media

Research on children in advertising consistently underscores the risks associated with sexualized or commercialized representations. Pereira and Queiroz (2021) assert that the fashion industry increasingly aestheticizes childhood, blurring the lines between innocence and adult themes. Brown and Tiggemann (2021) show that even subtle sexualization affects how people think about kids and keeps harmful norms going.

Bick and Malhotra (2023) call for updated ethical standards in advertising aimed at children, pointing out that societal and financial pressures make regulation harder. Sravanti et al. (2025) underscore the psychological risks associated with children's exposure to adult-themed imagery online, highlighting the imperative for ethical scrutiny.

Clark and Jno-Charles (2025) and Archer and Delmo (2025) elucidate these issues by examining "kidfluencer" societies, where children's labor and identities are commercialized within digital markets. This study emphasizes the imperative to analyze the Balenciaga campaign in relation to broader trends of commodification and symbolic exploitation of children in media.

Comparative Context: Balenciaga in Relation to Other Fashion Controversies

The Balenciaga scandal is not an isolated event. Comparable controversies reveal systemic issues within luxury branding:

Dolce & Gabbana (2018 China Campaign)
A series of ads portraying a Chinese model struggling to eat Italian food with chopsticks sparked accusations of racism and cultural insensitivity. Scholars argue that the campaign exhibited orientalist tropes and ignored global cultural sensibilities.

H&M (2018 "Coolest Monkey in the Jungle" Hoodie)
The ad featuring a Black child in a hoodie with racially loaded text ignited international outrage and accusations of institutional racism. The case demonstrates how symbolic missteps involving children trigger high emotional responses.

Calvin Klein (Multiple controversies)
CK has repeatedly faced backlash for hypersexualised portrayals of minors and thinly veiled eroticisation. These cases highlight recurring tensions between artistic boldness and ethical boundaries.

These comparisons strengthen the argument that transgressive imagery—particularly involving children or vulnerable groups—reflects systemic tendencies within fashion branding rather than isolated creative oversights.

Gaps in the Literature
Despite substantial scholarship, several gaps remain:

1. Limited research on multimodal CDA in luxury-fashion controversies involving children.
   Most studies examine either sexualisation broadly or children's advertising in non-luxury contexts.
2. Insufficient integration of digital outrage theory into advertising discourse.
   Moral panic has been studied, but rarely in direct connection with branding strategies.
3. Lack of research on intertextual semiotics blending legal documents, fetish symbolism, and   childhood   imagery.
   The unique semiotic convergence in Balenciaga's campaign remains underexplored.
4. Limited comparative CDA approaches across multiple controversial fashion campaigns.

This study addresses these gaps by combining CDA, visual semiotics, ideological critique, and digital discourse analysis to examine how meanings of childhood, sexuality, corporate responsibility, and moral panic are constructed, circulated, and contested.

Methodology
This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the development, dissemination, and negotiation of meanings associated with childhood, sexuality, corporate responsibility, and ideological power in the 2022 Balenciaga holiday advertising campaign. A qualitative approach is most appropriate, as the aim is not to quantitatively evaluate audience sentiment, but to investigate the symbolic, emotional, and ideological dimensions of multimodal texts and their reception. Modern luxury advertising relies heavily on visual provocation, intertextual references, and digitally mediated reactions; these components necessitate interpretative depth and contextual awareness that quantitative data alone cannot provide, particularly concerning vulnerable populations such as children.

Design of the Research and Analytical Framework

The principal methodology employed is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), supplemented by multimodal analysis. CDA characterizes discourse as a social practice that simultaneously shapes and is shaped by power dynamics and institutional norms (Fairclough, 1995). Fairclough's three-dimensional model—text, discursive practice, and social practice—constitutes the all-encompassing analytical framework. This study enables an analysis of (1) the textual and visual attributes of the campaign and its related discourse, (2) the mechanisms of production, circulation, and interpretation, and (3) the prevailing socio-cultural and economic contexts that gave rise to the debate.

To address the campaign's prominent visual characteristics, CDA is integrated with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual design language. This integration enables a systematic examination of gaze, composition, color, framing, modality, and symbolic objects as semiotic resources, rather than as neutral aesthetic choices. Barthes' ideas about denotation and connotation help explain this framework by showing how seemingly harmless motifs (like teddy bears and childish stances) can have disturbing meanings when compared to BDSM-inspired accessories and legal intertextuality. These frameworks facilitate an examination of the interaction between verbal and visual modalities in the formation of disputed meanings.

Getting Data and Building a Corpus

The corpus is made up of three parts that are all related: (1) campaign imagery, (2) institutional speech, and (3) mediated and public reception.

Images From the Campaign

The main dataset consists of the official images from Balenciaga's 2022 holiday campaign that were widely shared and then taken down. The pictures show young kids posing with stuffed animals that have bondage-style harnesses on them. There are also other things in the pictures, like alcohol, messy homes, and, in a related campaign, legal documents about child pornography laws. The selection was predicated on two criteria: (a) photographs featured on Balenciaga's official platforms (website, Instagram) during the dispute, and (b) images frequently circulated in news and social media coverage, indicating their significance in public discourse. Examining these graphics as multimodal texts enables a comprehensive analysis of the semiotic interplay between juvenile signifiers and fetish aesthetics.

Institutional Discourse

The second part includes Balenciaga's official responses, such as the first corporate apology, follow-up clarifications, and selected public statements from creative and executive officials. The texts came from Balenciaga's press releases and social media accounts. The analysis concentrates on how the brand situates the event, tackles accountability, and strives to restore legitimacy. The corpus includes selected news releases and comments from relevant creative partners, which help us better understand how institutional actors talk about blame and purpose.

Public And Mediated Reception

The last part looks at how the news media framed the campaign and how people on the internet understood it. A curated selection of stories from international sources (such as fashion magazines, mainstream newspapers, and online news platforms) was compiled to represent diverse editorial viewpoints and geographical regions. For social media analysis, posts from Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok were used as examples. Sampling focused on high-engagement

items (e.g., widely shared tweets, viral videos, and posts with a lot of comments or likes), as well as contributions from important people like fashion experts, celebrities, parents, child-safety advocates, and activists. This method ensures that the dataset includes both well-known points of view and responses from the general public, which means it covers the whole moral debate.

Methods for Audience Segmentation and Analysis

The examination of audience responses utilized an inductive-deductive framework informed by Critical Discourse Analysis and moral panic theory. During the initial coding phase, social media texts and media comments were categorized by stance (supportive, critical, ambivalent) and target audience group. Segmentation used easy-to-understand biographical indicators, self-representations, and environmental data to tell the difference between:

- Fashion experts (designers, editors, influencers, and people who work in the industry)
- Parents and caregivers talking directly about issues related to parenting or keeping kids safe
- Advocates for child rights and religious or moral proponents include activists and commentators who stress ethical or religious issues.
- General customers and onlookers, whose responses centered on brand loyalty, cancel culture, or pervasive cultural decline

This segmentation does not claim demographic precision; rather, it functions as an analytical tool to clarify how differing social standings and psychographic profiles shape the framing of the issue. We looked for common discursive patterns in each part, such as calls for innocence, references to satanic or conspiratorial stories, calls for boycotts, and defenses of artistic freedom.

The analytical process followed Fairclough's three stages. At first, textual analysis focused on both spoken and written words. This process involved identifying essential elements (children, toys, harnesses, documents, household items), their spatial relationships, gaze trajectories, and color schemes, and correlating these with potential connotative interpretations. Institutional texts and media were examined for lexical choices (e.g., "error," "misjudgment," "misinterpretation"), modality (degrees of certainty and obligation), grammatical agency (active versus passive constructions), and evaluative adjectives. Second, discursive practice analysis looked at how these texts were made, spread, and put into new contexts. For example, news coverage cropped or reframed photos, quoted or paraphrased corporate statements, and social media users remixed, captioned, and reinterpreted visual content. Third, social practice analysis connected new patterns to larger conversations about neoliberal branding, turning children into products, moral panic, and the moral economics of anger in digital culture.

Triangulation was consistently employed to enhance validity. A thorough analysis was done of the similarities and differences between campaign visuals, corporate speech, media framing, and audience reactions. Corporate claims of "unintended offense" were examined alongside visual cues that strongly suggest deliberate infringement, as well as audience interpretations that dismissed such justification. This cross-source verification enabled more definitive conclusions regarding ideological operations and accountability.

Methodological Reflexivity and Researcher Positioning

Because the dataset is controversial and raises ethical issues, methodological reflexivity is very important to our research. CDA acknowledges that analysis is interpretive rather than objective; the researcher's perspective, theoretical orientations, and cultural context inherently shape what is prioritized and how meanings are construed. Interacting with images of children alongside fetish-coded items risks either sustaining sensationalism or enforcing moral interpretations that may not be widely endorsed.

The research recognizes that visual grammar is contingent upon cultural contexts. Western-centric narratives influence interpretations of BDSM symbols, childhood innocence, and familial environments, which may be perceived differently in alternative cultural contexts. To mitigate ethnocentric bias, the study cites comparative literature on global fashion controversies and remains attentive to diverse international perspectives in media coverage and social media discussions. The study underscores the necessity of distinguishing the range of interpretations that emerged, rather than assuming a singular "correct" interpretation, and analyzes the power dynamics that privilege specific interpretations over others.

The researcher presents a distinctly critical viewpoint grounded in child-protection ethics and skepticism towards corporate self-justification. This viewpoint inevitably affects evaluations of what constitutes exploitation or inappropriate representation. This conversation makes it clear that there is a difference between descriptive observation (the text or image's content), interpretive inference (its ideological implications), and normative judgment (the reasons it is seen as problematic). Interpretations are, when possible, supported by intertextual evidence—like audience response, previous brand problems, or established research—to avoid interpretations that are too personal.

Third, reflexivity includes how facts are chosen and shown. A limited number of photographs are either reproduced or expanded upon, with descriptions avoiding superfluous sensationalism. The goal is not to make bad content worse, but to break it down and analyze how it was made and spread. Sensitive information is framed within the contexts of authority, accountability, and systematic behaviors, rather than being perceived as isolated provocations.

Limitations

This method has built-in limits. The social media sample, while diverse, fails to fully encapsulate global audience sentiment. Audience segmentation is based on inference and self-presentation signals that may not be complete or real. Different people can have different ideas about what images mean, and these ideas are up for debate. The methodology provides a comprehensive framework for examining how the Balenciaga campaign produced, circulated, and contested interpretations of childhood, sexuality, and power within contemporary digital consumer culture by incorporating Critical Discourse Analysis, visual grammar, and reflexive analysis across diverse data sources.

Findings

The results of this study show that the Balenciaga 2022 holiday advertising campaign is a complicated ideological text where childhood, sexuality, corporate power, and digital moral regulation come together and clash. The analysis, employing Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis and Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar, reveals that the campaign's imagery was not only provocative but also entangled with ideological conflicts concerning innocence, exploitation, and the limits of artistic freedom within neoliberal

consumer culture. The disagreement shows that the meaning of modern advertising is not set by the people who make it, but rather is negotiated, fought over, and redefined through media coverage and public reactions that are connected to each other online.

The ad makes a strange multimodal paradox by putting kids—who are usually seen as innocent and weak—into visual settings that are full of adult fetishism and legal symbolism. The children in the pictures have blank, neutral expressions that make them less unique and less emotional. This neutral effect, which is similar to Barthes' idea of "mythic neutrality," takes the kids away from their lived subjectivity and turns them into symbolic objects meant for aesthetic enjoyment. The lack of childhood affect reduces the cultural and emotional context that typically influences representations of minors. The children stop being warm or playful and instead become symbols without any personal power, subject to the interpretations that the overall visual composition forces on them.

The teddy bears dressed in bondage-style harnesses are the most controversial symbols in the pictures. In standard semiotic language, teddy bears stand for safety, comfort, and purity. However, the use of visual grammar rules shows that adding BDSM-coded accessories goes against these meanings, creating a semiotic conflict. The bear functions as a dual symbol, representing both childhood and eroticized aesthetics. This recontextualization is philosophically significant as it blurs the distinctions that society rigorously maintains between childhood symbolism and adult sexuality. The tension created by this contrast is essential for understanding why the campaign elicited such intense emotional and moral reactions. The visual grammar shown here doesn't just show things; it also sets up a fight between different cultural codes, which shows both provocation and violation.

Lighting, color, and context are other visual elements that make the photos more ideologically powerful. The muted colors, cold lighting, and clinical setting make people feel emotionally distant instead of warm and close to each other. In multimodal terms, the reduced modality diminishes naturalistic cues and heightens the feeling of detachment, depicting the children not as subjects engaged in real environments but as objects positioned within a conceptual aesthetic. This clinical tone emphasizes the symbolic objectification of children and causes visual discomfort. This discomfort is ideologically significant as it contradicts traditional cultural paradigms that associate children with emotional vitality, color, and imaginative play. The mise-en-scène creates a symbolic distance that makes the viewer more aware of the conceptual manipulation at work.

A significant intertextual reference is illustrated in an image featuring a legal document that references United States v. Williams (2008), a case pertaining to child exploitation legislation. The incorporation of legal intertextuality profoundly transforms the interpretative potential of the commercial. Fairclough's notion of intertextuality clarifies the integration of external discourses into texts that possess ideological and institutional importance. The presence of legal discourse obscures the boundary between aesthetic provocation and the legal framework of child protection. Even though it wasn't meant to, the paper tells people to look at the ad through the lenses of legality, deviance, and institutional accountability. The importance of the images becomes linked to larger moral and legal discussions, which makes the public's reaction even more serious.

The words that go with the pictures also change how people make sense of things. Balenciaga's subtitles and product descriptions use short, neutral phrases that don't have any moral or emotional context. Van Dijk calls this linguistic minimalism a way to depoliticize, in which organizations use neutral language to hide their ideological commitments or avoid being held accountable by the public. The clear difference between the emotionally charged images and the clinically detached writing shows that there is a clear difference between aesthetic stimulation and corporate communication. The brand gives the viewer full interpretive responsibility by not framing or putting the visual in context. This makes it easier to deny any wrongdoing while also making money from the visibility created by the controversial aesthetic.

The second level of analysis, discursive practice, shows how the campaign's meaning was talked about, questioned, and changed in different media and public spaces. The first story about the making of the images that Balenciaga and its creative teams told was that they were a philosophical critique that focused on subversion and artistic commentary on consumerism. The brand's planned story was ruined by how quickly the photos spread on social media. Audience interpretations spread quickly and widely, outpacing corporate messaging. This supports Fairclough's claim that meaning comes not only from the text itself but also from the actions of many social agents.

People's responses on Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok turned into complicated conversations about morals, feelings, and ideas. Parents and caregivers examined the photographs through the lens of protective standards, expressing apprehensions regarding the societal consequences of normalizing sexualized imagery in the presence of children. Their answers showed that people still believe in the idea of childhood innocence and the need to keep children away from symbols that are exploitative or meant for adults. Child-protection activists made these views stronger by saying that the images showed that the media and corporations weren't doing a good job of controlling themselves. They used legal and moral language to talk about structural issues, changing the conversation from aesthetic discomfort to systemic responsibility.

People in the fashion industry, on the other hand, had very different reactions. Some people who were part of avant-garde traditions supported the campaign, saying that provocation is a part of the cultural identity of luxury fashion. These defenses illustrate Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital; the ability to recognize and endorse artistic experimentation serves as a form of symbolic authority. Nevertheless, other insiders expressed discomfort, acknowledging that artistic innovation must respect ethical limits concerning children. This internal split shows how the disagreement affected even people who were used to artistic transgression. It shows that the visual combination of childhood and fetish aesthetics goes beyond what is considered acceptable provocation in the industry.

Regular customers, who didn't have the cultural capital of fashion insiders, often came up with resistant interpretations. The pictures showed a lack of responsibility in business, a decline in morals, or a desperate need for attention. Their responses, often expressed through memes or sarcastic comments, helped the story go viral. The humor and cynicism in these responses served both expressive and communal functions, enabling users to articulate skepticism while participating in the formation of a digital community.

Geographical differences also had an effect on the way people talked. Western audiences mainly focused on legal and moral issues, using frameworks for child exploitation as examples. On the other hand, many Asian analysts saw the images as a sign of moral decline in the West,

placing the debate in the context of larger conversations about cultural decline and the spread of immoral aesthetics around the world. This difference shows how cultural contexts shape how people understand symbolic imagery and shows that moral panic works differently in different sociocultural settings.

Journalistic coverage reinforced prevailing moral judgments rather than the innovative narratives desired by the producers. Major news outlets pointed out problems with accountability, lack of internal oversight, and the brand's inability to explain its creative approach. The portrayal was mostly negative, and journalists didn't often talk about Balenciaga's claims of artistic experimentation. The agreement between what the media and the public thought shows that the conversation went beyond just aesthetics to include moral issues.

Balenciaga's crisis communication strategies had a major impact on how people talked about things. The company's apologies always used passive voice and vague language, which made it hard to hold them accountable and shifted the blame to outside partners. These linguistic strategies bolster Van Dijk's concept of elite discursive avoidance, in which institutions maintain symbolic authority through linguistic ambiguity. The public's perception of insincerity intensified backlash, illustrating how corporate communication can exacerbate crises when perceived as evasive or deliberately manipulative.

The last part of the research is about social practice, which shows that the conflict is similar to larger ideological frameworks that are part of a neoliberal consumer society. The campaign shows how high-end brands are using aesthetic transgression more and more as a marketing tool. In an economy where attention is important, visibility—no matter what kind it is—works like capital. Balenciaga's use of provocative images in the past is in line with trends in the fashion industry where controversies about race (Dolce & Gabbana's China campaign), cultural insensitivity (H&M's "coolest monkey" hoodie), and eroticized aesthetics (Calvin Klein's adolescent branding) have sparked global debate. However, the Balenciaga issue is different because it involves children, a symbolic group that needs more moral protection. The public outcry shows that many people are against attempts to make child-related material look good or sell it in ways that adults can understand.

The results show that digital media ecosystems help people work on their moral boundaries. Anger can turn into both an emotional response and a way to show who you are and what you believe in. Users are very vocal about their opposition to the plan to strengthen moral values, gain social capital, and work together to enforce norms. As a result, moral panic becomes a digital phenomenon that people can take part in, thanks to algorithmic amplification and collective moral economies.

The Balenciaga incident exemplifies the ideological tensions between artistic freedom, corporate responsibility, and child protection. Luxury fashion often tries to break cultural rules by coming up with new ways to look good, but people seem to think that some symbolic boundaries, especially those related to childhood, are still off-limits. The disagreement shows that in today's visual culture, authority is not only held by businesses or creative elites, but is always being challenged by the way people feel, the way the media frames things, and digital activism.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the Balenciaga 2022 Christmas campaign serves as a focal point of substantial ideological conflict, where meaning is challenged through the interplay of visual provocation, institutional rhetoric, media framing, and public moral judgment. The disagreement goes beyond a simple mistake in creative choice; it shows how pictures of kids challenge long-held cultural norms and show how hard it is to come up with new ways to communicate in business. By synthesizing the perspectives of Fairclough, Barthes, Van Dijk, Bourdieu, and visual grammar theory, a unified analytical framework is created: one in which taboo imagery provokes public outrage specifically because it undermines dominant narratives surrounding innocence, power, and the ethical responsibilities of global brands.

The dispute revolves around the semiotic fusion of childhood imagery and fetishized commodities. Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar posits that the children's neutral expressions and clinically organized environments negate their subjectivity, transforming them into symbolic artifacts. Barthes' denotation-connotation paradigm clarifies the significant semiotic disruption caused by the transformation of teddy bears from comforting childhood symbols to fetishized hybrids. This break is not just visual; it is also intellectual because it challenges the culturally accepted lines between childlike innocence and adult sexuality. Fairclough's approach clarifies that this multimodal creation is not standalone but rather interconnected within broader discourses of morality, protection, and exploitation. The Balenciaga imagery functions as a discursive phenomenon that exposes challenges in society's ongoing discourse regarding representation and the legitimacy of its selection.

The ethical consequences of this semiotic tension are significant. Research on advertising ethics shows that children are a vulnerable group that needs to be represented with extra care because pictures can have a powerful symbolic and psychological effect. The campaign's juxtaposition of juvenile symbols with sexualized aesthetics jeopardizes the normalization of associations that cultural norms explicitly prohibit. The link to legal intertextuality, which happened when a Supreme Court ruling about child exploitation was used without meaning to, made ethical concerns even stronger. Regardless of intent, such imagery cannot be construed as value-neutral; its existence underscores the fragile boundary between creative critique and symbolic harm. In a global economy, businesses encounter both commercial risks and ethical obligations stemming from failures in representational judgments, as their images navigate diverse cultural and regulatory frameworks, each with unique expectations for corporate conduct.

Hall's encoding/decoding theory clarifies the substantial disparity between Balenciaga's intended narrative and public perception. Hall asserts that creators embed texts with intended meanings, whereas audiences interpret them according to their unique cultural contexts and personal experiences. Balenciaga put the pictures into a fashion avant-garde tradition that often uses irony, provocation, and shock to criticize consumerism and inconsistencies in society. Still, most of the people who watched took an adversarial view. Instead of seeing the campaign as conceptual art, they looked at it through moral, legal, and emotional lenses based on ideas about keeping kids safe. This disagreement over interpretation shows how little power corporate goals have in the digital age, when the public can change meanings and impose moral frameworks on institutional texts in ways that have never been possible before. The Balenciaga case shows that when creators don't think about how people will interpret photos of vulnerable characters, it's the digital audience, not the artistic directors, who will decide what the campaign means to culture.

The scandal shows how rhetoric can either make institutional power seem real or hide it. Van Dijk's study of elite discourse sheds light on the language strategies used in Balenciaga's apologies. Repeated passive constructions, depersonalized allusions to "oversight," and vague expressions of regret function to obscure agency and protect symbolic capital. The brand wanted to keep institutional power and lower accountability by blaming outside production companies or problems with the process. In a media landscape where people are more involved, these kinds of methods are becoming less effective because people are more likely to question corporate stories and respond with skepticism to rhetorical evasions. This breakdown in discourse shows a shift in power: the public is now questioning institutional language and demanding ethical transparency, which makes traditional corporate communication strategies less effective.

When looked at from a cross-cultural point of view, the ideological conflicts that the incident showed are clearer. Most Western audiences, especially in the US and Europe, saw the photos in terms of legality and exploitation. Many Asian and Middle Eastern people, on the other hand, saw the fight as a sign of Western moral decline or cultural permissiveness. In Malaysia, the reaction centered on concerns regarding family values, religious tenets, and the symbolic violation of childhood innocence—interpretations grounded in local socio-religious contexts. Responses from the Middle East also showed moral decay and a lack of respect for other cultures. These cross-cultural differences show that visual texts are closely tied to the cultures in which they exist. Aesthetic transgression regarding children, even when justified by avant-garde narratives, fails to resonate in contexts where cultural, religious, and legal norms pertaining to childhood are more stringent. Companies can't rely on just one semiotic framework; they need to think about how different people around the world will understand things.

The Balenciaga issue is different from other fashion controversies because it involves kids. Dolce & Gabbana's 2018 campaign in China caused a stir because it was culturally insensitive. H&M's "coolest monkey" sweatshirt incident was about racial symbols. People have always criticized Calvin Klein for using overly sexual images. However, none of these discussions combined the portrayal of children with adult-coded sexual aesthetics. The symbolic boundary violated by Balenciaga is therefore of a unique dimension. This comparative perspective highlights that certain cultural taboos, especially those concerning children, are universally non-negotiable, regardless of corporate stance or artistic rationale.

The Balenciaga dispute ultimately reveals the limitations of aesthetic transgression within neoliberal branding. Fashion companies often use provocation to stay culturally relevant, working on the idea that being seen is the same as being important. When vulnerable communities are involved, this story shows that too much symbolism makes people turn against it instead of loving it. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital explains why some elite groups tried to defend the campaign on artistic grounds. However, most public discussions put the images in moral and protective contexts, showing that consumers, not brands, now set the moral standards in visual culture.

The conversation shows that the Balenciaga campaign was a place where cultural norms, moral concerns, and institutional authority came together and clashed. The brand wanted people to see the pictures as conceptual art, but people saw them as symbolic violations. The ensuing discourse illustrates that representation is not merely aesthetic but fundamentally ethical and political. It shows that in today's media world, advertising can't rely on shock value alone; it

also has to think about the moral, cultural, and ideological factors that affect how people react. The controversy exemplifies the dynamics of meaning and power in multimodal discourse, underscoring the significant influence of public ethics on the legitimacy and parameters of corporate communication.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Balenciaga 2022 holiday campaign extends beyond mere contentious branding, embodying a significant cultural phenomenon that exposes deep ideological conflicts regarding the portrayal of children, commercial ethics, and corporate accountability in the digital age. The study illustrates that the campaign's imagery derives its disruptive efficacy from the convergence of symbolic systems usually separated by societal norms: the purity of childhood and the aesthetic coding of adult sexual subcultures, employing both Critical Discourse Analysis and visual semiotics. This collision is intentional; it is a product of a broader tradition of visual experimentation in high-fashion advertising, yet its consequences reveal the constraints of artistic provocation when vulnerable populations are involved.

The study theoretically advances discourse scholarship by demonstrating the integration of Fairclough's, Barthes', Van Dijk's, and Bourdieu's frameworks to clarify the ideological effects of visual representation. The neutral expressions and stylized void surrounding the child figures, examined through visual grammar, illustrate the transformation of symbolic meanings as familiar objects—such as teddy bears—are semiotically reconfigured. The use of legal intertextuality makes the visual story more complicated and forces a clash between the beauty of advertising and the public's concerns about exploitation and the law. This study illustrates how advertising functions as a cultural battleground for the continuous contestation of power, ideology, and morality by synthesizing linguistic minimalism, corporate discourse, audience interpretation, and media framing into a unified analytical framework.

The findings demonstrate that child representation remains a rigorously regulated ethical sphere. Despite the increasing public exposure to unsettling imagery, the symbolic sanctity of children persists across cultural contexts. When that limit is crossed, like in this ad, the reaction goes from just not liking the look to being morally outraged based on shared cultural values. The study underscores that portrayals of children carry profound ideological implications, as they invoke narratives of vulnerability and protection that transcend artistic intent. The public's view of the images as exploitative shows that visual texts with children are looked at more closely from an ethical point of view. This shows how important it is to protect childhood as a moral foundation in consumer societies.

The Balenciaga incident highlights the risks of relying on subversive aesthetics as a strategy for raising awareness in luxury branding. Provocation has always been a big part of the fashion business's avant-garde identity, but this case shows that not all types of shock add to cultural wealth. When young people act as tools of provocation, the symbolic cost is greater than any potential commercial gain. The event shows that people expect businesses to act ethically more now that we live in a digital age where meanings spread quickly and are shaped by the public rather than the creators. Brands that ignore these dynamics put their reputation at risk, especially when their images are seen as going against widely accepted moral standards.

The findings demonstrate the discursive manipulation inherent in corporate crisis communication. Balenciaga's reliance on ambiguous language, passive constructions, and intentional vagueness illustrates broader trends in elite rhetoric aimed at diminishing accountability. The public's rejection of these linguistic strategies signifies that institutional authority is increasingly vulnerable to ethically motivated critique, especially when audiences interpret ambiguous language as a form of symbolic harm. The study shows that being open, responsible, and clear about ethics are now important parts of business communication that can be trusted.

These insights have a big effect on how businesses work. Fashion houses and advertising agencies must prioritize ethical scrutiny as a critical component of the creative process, particularly when minors or sensitive symbolic themes are involved. Independent advisory boards, child protection experts, and internal ethics committees may help lower risks by looking at campaigns before they are made public. Moreover, organizations should adopt communication strategies that prioritize accountability and transparency rather than avoidance in the face of ethical dilemmas.

The study emphasizes the imperative for improved media literacy to empower audiences to critically evaluate visual culture, thereby preventing misinformation and unnecessary panic. This call for media literacy does not absolve companies of responsibility; instead, it promotes a more informed and ethically robust public discourse in which genuine harm can be recognized and addressed.

The Balenciaga dispute ultimately illustrates that advertising is fundamentally intertwined with cultural and ethical dimensions. Visual texts are not autonomous; they play a role in shaping societal values, identities, and ideological boundaries. This study contends that contemporary visual culture necessitates a conjunction of creativity and accountability. The campaign's failure shows that combining artistic experimentation with sensitive cultural symbols, especially those related to babies, raises ethical issues. The effects go far beyond one brand, so the fashion industry and beyond need to be more responsible, self-aware, and socially aware when it comes to visual communication.

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