

The Balenciaga Children Scandal (Late 2022)

In November 2022, the luxury fashion brand Balenciaga launched an advertising campaign that outraged many in the public's perception. The image that elicited the most outrage was one of the ads depicting young children holding teddy bears adorned with bondage-type flourishes, including leather harnesses and studs. In a concurrent campaign, another photo featured printed legal documents referencing the U.S. Supreme Court case, *United States v. Williams* (2008), which is linked to child pornography.

The combination of these visual prompts led to significant backlash globally. It was largely interpreted as an inappropriate suggestion of the exploitation of children and raised questions about how such content passed through the escalated internal brand approval process. The rapidly evolving scandal spread further and faster on social media, now called out under hashtags like #CancelBalenciaga, which trended nationally and internationally.

The parties of interest included those on the creative team, particularly under the leadership of Demna Gvasalia, Balenciaga's creative director. The photographer Gabriele Galimberti, who was attached to shoot one of the campaigns, indicated in a public statement that he had no control over the creative direction of the campaigns and that he was hired specifically to photograph participation in preexisting sets of imagery. This reservation of responsibility was not shared publicly, which ultimately ascribed culpability to both the brand and its associated collaborators. Many public figures, celebrities, and influencers condemned the campaign and called for people to boycott the brand.

In the aftermath, Balenciaga issued a series of public apologies, removed the contentious campaign images, and filed a \$25 million lawsuit against the production company involved, though this lawsuit was later withdrawn. Balenciaga then established new internal procedures, including a more rigorous approval process that involved forming associations with children's rights organisations to rectify the damage done. This is a classic example of a serious internal lapse in oversight and ethical judgment. It revealed weaknesses in Balenciaga's review of campaigns and raised questions about whether Balenciaga prioritised shock value over responsibility.

Although the fashion house ultimately acknowledged the error, the delayed recognition, along with a lack of direct accountability regarding when employees could expect to see public censure, may have diminished the credibility of their public apology. To prevent such negative backlash, Balenciaga could have reviewed and considered the conceptual direction before approving the campaign, monitored the campaign at all stages of execution for alignment with ethical expectations, and conducted proper market testing or sentiment analysis prior to releasing it to the public to gauge the anticipated response.

Following or aligning with trending controversial content in the quest for virality may cause unintended consequences and irreparable brand damage. Balenciaga could have also recognised that in some instances, adhering to classic and elegant creative work is more feasible, and objectively more innovative, than indecent attempts to elicit reactionary behaviour through “edgy” or shocking content.

Balenciaga's brand image may remain damaged today, particularly in markets where the scandal first broke and consumer trust and profitability were damaged. Media reporting, and subsequent consumer behaviour, from late 2022 suggest that scepticism can persist long after the initial outrage. In this case, chasing relevance with provocation resulted in long-lasting harm to Balenciaga's reputation.

Balenciaga's social media response was initially vague and failed to connect with the public. The apologies were vague and seemed to shift accountability, which only worsened public anger. A more effective approach would have been to include a video apology directly from the Creative Director addressing the controversy, a specific timeline of events and decisions leading up to the campaign and allow the public to engage in real-time by hosting an Instagram Q&A or Twitter Spaces. This would indicate a measure of openness and accountability.

The brand should issue a “post-mortem” report detailing to its audience, investors, and stakeholders exactly what happened, along with how it will prevent the same mistakes in the future. Even something as small as having some sort of digital series on ethics for brands, responsibility in creativity, and consumer safety when advertising to children would lend some credibility to the brand. Initiatives to restore the community, including forums online, or virtual listening sessions

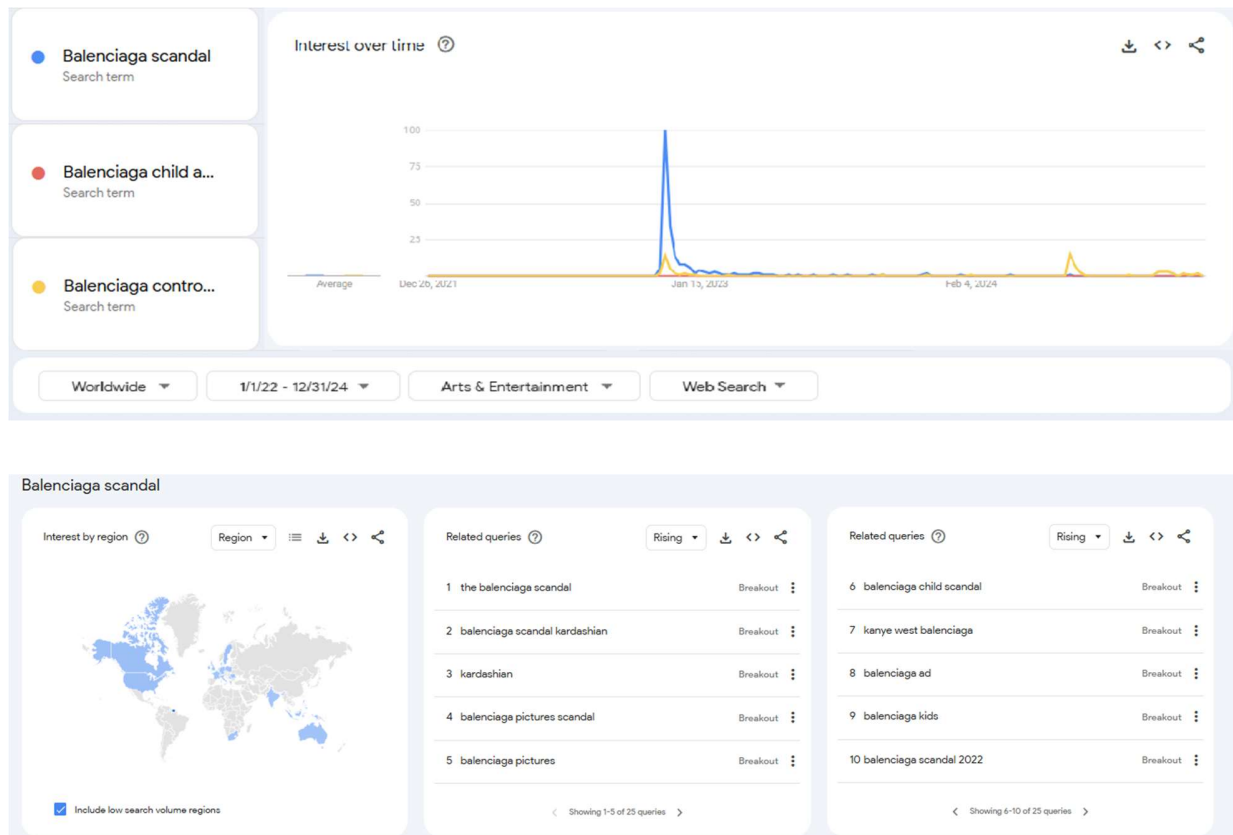
with parents, educators and child safety experts, would also improve brand credibility. Regular monthly updates moving forward regarding internal policy changes, ethics committee discussions, and social responsibility initiatives will show long-term commitment.

In terms of mitigating future crises, Balenciaga needs to implement pre-launch ethical audits on all marketing materials. They should have an established, standing ethics review board with some external experts for added objectivity. Social media and campaign teams should be trained in recognizing crises in real-time, and they should have an established “pause and review protocol” before publishing any material on a global scale.

The Balenciaga scandal from late 2022 serves as a cautionary tale for companies working in the ever-changing and risky world of luxury fashion and marketing on a global scale. A single creative choice made without enough foresight and with no ethical framework can lead to significant brand damage. In the instant response arena of the digital world, a brand must set out to be more than provocative, it must be beneficial.

Balenciaga's failure to sensitively address the situation demonstrated not just the fragility of public trust but the essential need for a communications framework that is honest, transparent, and culturally enlightened. As luxury companies navigate a saturated market and increasingly socially conscious agenda, the salient lesson is that trendiness should never take precedence over responsibility.

Trends Graph



Google Trends data shows a notable global increase in searches for the phrase "Balenciaga scandal" between late November and early December 2022, showcasing the peak moment of public outrage after the campaign went viral. This marked increase was considerable and dramatically surpassed compared to the related phrases "Balenciaga child ad" and "Balenciaga controversy", highlighting how framing by calling it a "scandal" influenced public perception.

The Interest by Region map indicates that the highest levels of engagement came from countries like Sweden, Romania, Denmark, and the Philippines, pointing to where the backlash was strongest and culturally relevant.

Related to this, the Related Queries surfaced breakout phrases "Kardashian", "Balenciaga pictures scandal" and "Balenciaga child scandal", suggesting how the narrative extended beyond the campaign to celebrity, and visual scandal. All of this provides a good reminder of the importance of a brand making timely and transparent responses regarding viral public criticism.

Survey for Balenciaga - Consumer Perception

To gain a clearer understanding of the public response to the Balenciaga controversy and to investigate whether and how trust in brand perception has shifted since the Balenciaga scandal, a brief survey was developed concerning brand perception, ethical accountability, and ethical communication. The outcomes are intended to provide valuable feedback for brands across all industries, particularly those in politically or ethically sensitive fields, to enhance their crisis intervention and response strategies in the future.

Along with questions meant to evaluate ethical accountability and brand trust, we also asked publicly available demographic questions to add to the context of their reply, such as age, location, gender and purchasing practices/behaviours while providing more thoughtful segmentation of the results.

Survey link:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfGqdbOyMfZaihEdndPHE9_J1jTdjcamc3-tyxy3nCdUolWfA/viewform?usp=header

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