United Colours of Benetton

Adverts (by Oliviera Toscani)

Body of Work

(Can be used for Independent Oral Presentation or HL Essay)

Contextual Information / Timeline

Oliviero Toscani was born in 1942, in Milan. He is an Italian photographer who has worked with some of the most successful brands and magazines of the world, such as Esprit, Chanel, Fiorucci, Benetton and more. He studied design and photography in Zurich from 1961 to 1965.

Brands all around the world communicate controversial statements through advertisements and promotional campaigns, employing 'shock tactics'. Toscani is one such artist who uses 'shock tactics' to both raise brand awareness and, simultaneously, raise awareness of social, economic or political issues. Represented in his photography are issues such as war, racism, AIDS, capital punishment, famine and religion.

In 1993, he founded Fabrica (an international center for research in the arts of contemporary communication) and commissioned Tadao Ando, a Japanese architect, to design it. The center produced several editorial projects, including TV programs, books and exhibitions for MTV, RAI, La Republica, UNHCR, the United Nations.

He is most famous for creating Benetton's most controversial campaigns from 1982 until his departure in 2000, including ads that showed priests kissing, AIDS activist David Kirby on his deathbed, death row inmates, a newborn baby with umbilical cord still attached, and three hearts overlaid with text saying "White, Black, Yellow". Benetton is an Italian fashion brand; but most of the time Toscani's ads don't features images of Benetton's clothing. Rather he presents a controversial picture with only the logo of the company superimposed somewhere over the image. Through this method, Toscani built the company's brand, identity, and image.

IN 2000, he left his role with Benetton, although he returned to the company in His new campaign for Benetton is decidedly less controversial visually, but does contain a political message. One photo depict a class of 28 children, representing 13 different nationalities from four continents. Another shows ten children, from places like Burkino Faso, the Philippines, Italy and Senegal, gathered round a teacher reading *Pinocchio*. The campaign "returns to a theme of integration that has long been dear to the brand," Benetton says, "imbuing it with new meaning and urgency".

“Integration is a major issue in our world today,” Oliviero says. "The future will hang on how, and to what extent, we use our intelligence to integrate with others and to overcome fear.” This campaign is part of a larger project around integration, which Oliviero will lead; he will also be involved once again with developing the brand’s creative output, starting with a product campaign launching in February 2018.

Over the course of his Benetton tenure Oliviero faced much criticism for using such hard-hitting political and emotive imagery for a fashion brand, though he has a long history of using his craft to raise awareness of important causes. In the 90s he co-founded magazine *Colors* with graphic designer Tibor Kalman, aimed at exploring multiculturalism, and he has recently worked with the Italian Red Cross and the UN high commissioner for Refugees, as well as on campaigns about domestic violence and road safety. In 2005, he made a controversial advertising campaign for *Ra-Re*, a men’s fashion brand, depicting homosexual men, angering groups like Movimento Italiano Genitori, a Catholic parents’ alliance, who felt the ads were offensive and vulgar. In September 2007, Toscani created a campaign with model Isabelle Caro raising awareness of anorexia and eating disorders. The picture portrayed a thin, naked woman whose skeleton is visible underneath her skin.

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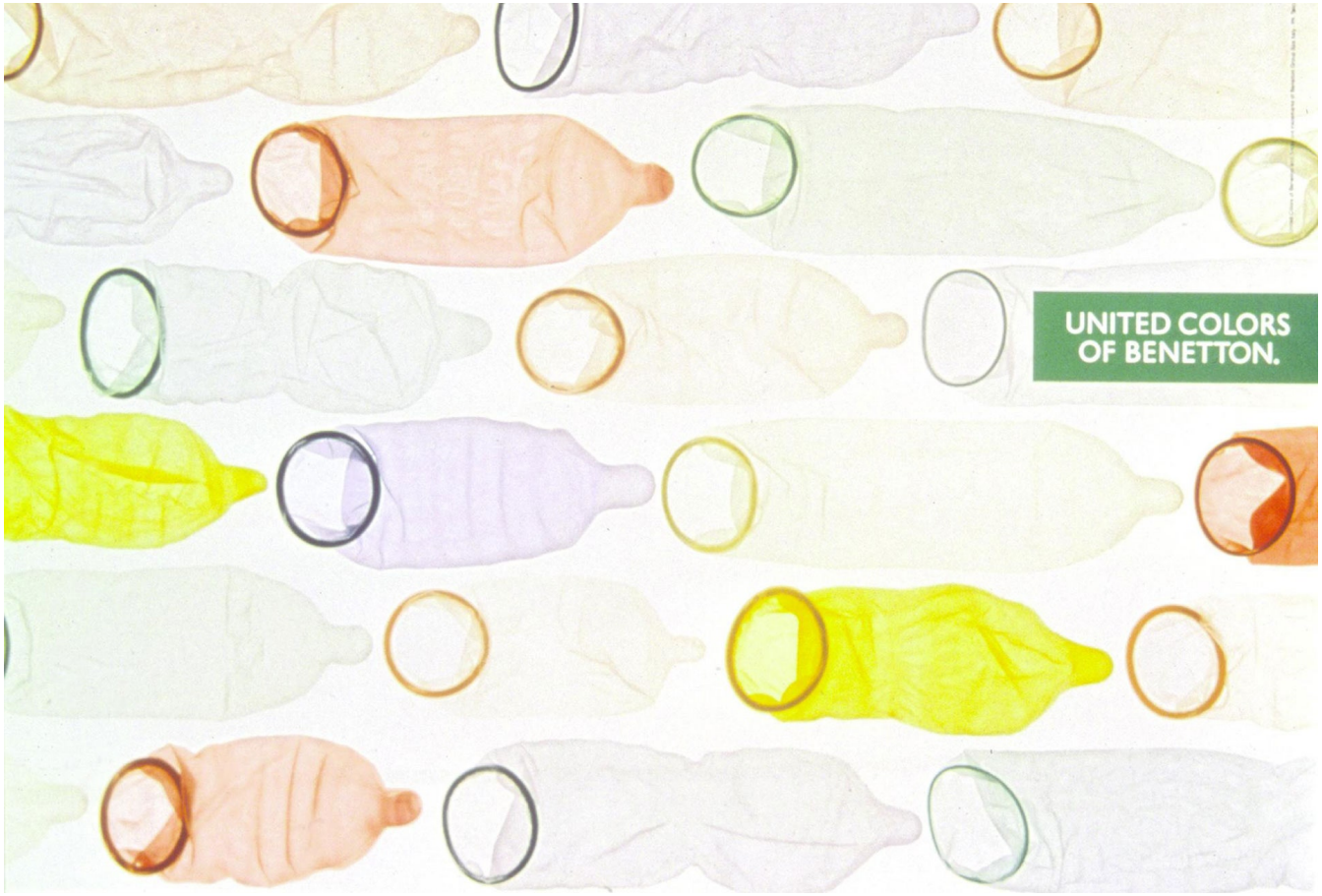
He was fired by Benetton in 2020 for his comments about a bridge collapse that killed 43 people.



1991

The coloured condoms campaign was a nod to the AIDS crisis which was ravaging the younger generations in the late Eighties and early Nineties. In November 1997, Benetton began selling "a complete range of coloured, reliable and up-to-the-minute condoms" in the UK, manufactured and sold under license by Ansell, an Australian company and sold at Boots and in Benetton stores. "I have found out that advertising is the richest and most powerful medium existing today," Toscani told the *New York Times* at the time, "so I feel responsible to do more than to say, 'Our sweater is pretty.' "

1991

This image suggests an interracial, homosexual family at a time when advertising was almost devoid of such depictions. Most images of lesbian relationships used for advertisement to this day are fetishised and heavily sexually suggestive.

1991

Another of Benetton's ads which commented on the religious and sexual conflict of human nature, showing a priest and a nun in clerical vestments, kissing. This sparked outrage from the Roman Catholic Church. Toscani had previously upset the Church for his 1972 Jesus Jeans ad, for a sexually-charged image and name it deemed blasphemous. But as he told the *Times*, the message was intended to reach a younger, core Benetton customer. In Spain, he said, "which is alive with young people, they see the priest-and-nun ad and smile about that. In Italy, where there are still old journalists, old institutions, they are upset."

1991

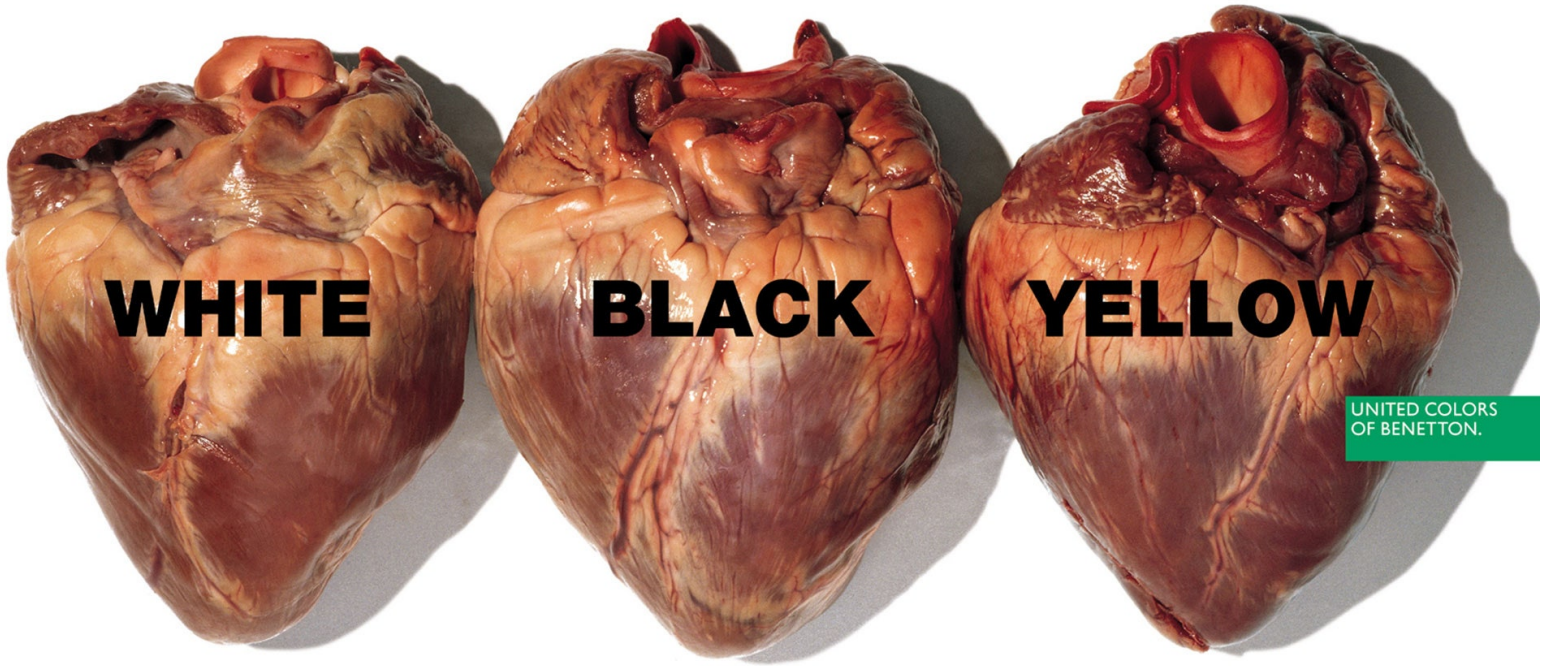
This image of a newborn baby, "Giusy", still attached to the umbilical cord, was intended, according to Benetton, to represent an “anthem to life”, but it was not met with such praise by consumers. This is said to be the company's most censored image.

1992

In November 1990 *LIFE Magazine* published journalism student Therese Frare's image of gay activist and AIDS victim David Kirby as he lay on his death bed. Two years later Benetton used the image, coloured by artist Ann Rhoney with oil paint, for its campaign. Despite a backlash by many AIDS activists who believed it spread fear of sufferers and commoditised suffering, and launched a global campaign to boycott the company, Kirby's father Bill stated, "Benetton is not using us, we're using Benetton…If that photograph helps someone…then it's worth whatever pressure we have to go through." It was, according to Benetton, the first public campaign to address AIDS. That year the disease had become the number one cause of death for US men aged 25 to 44. Benetton claimed it wanted to "go beyond purely preventative measures and touch upon subjects such as solidarity with AIDS patients".

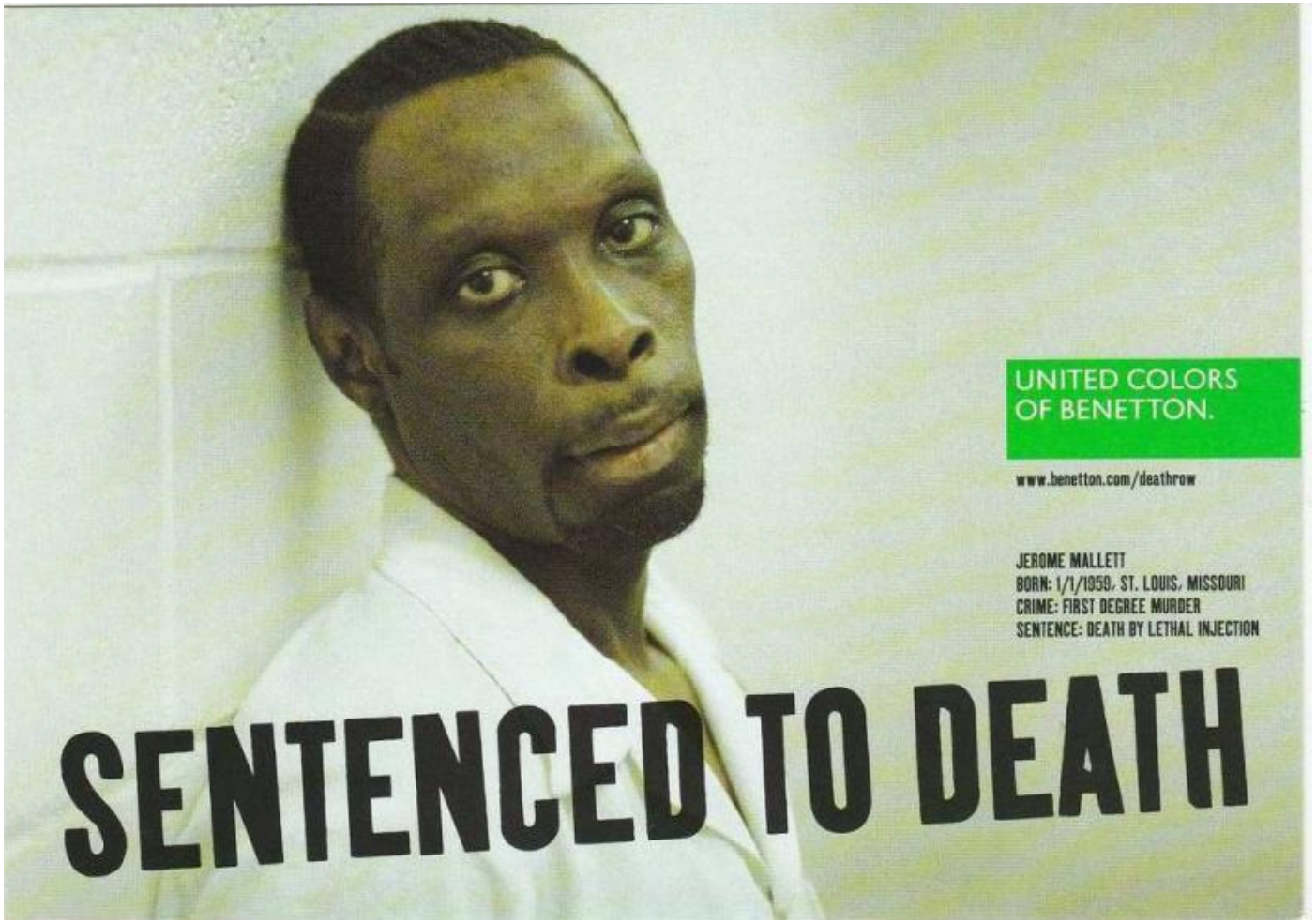
1992

In 1982 the Mafia killing of Benedetto Grado in Palermo, Italy, was captured by Franco Zecchi. Ten years later the image was featured in Benetton's spring/summer 1992 campaign. Various publications refused to publish the image and the dead man's daughter claimed she would sue, asking: "How does my father's death enter into publicity for sweaters?"



1996

These ‘human’ hearts were later revealed to be pig’s hearts but that didn’t stop people all over the world calling the image, taken by Oliviero Toscani himself, racist. Toscani used his advertising to address racism on numerous occasions.



1996

Nobody saw this one coming. 1996 marks a challenge to capital punishment, a subject much more contestable than any we've seen to date. The idea of using convicted criminals as models for a high-end fashion label was controversial in the extreme and led to a fall in Benetton's sales and reputation.

2003

An arresting image of an amputee with a spoon attached to his limb. Benetton said: “The aim was to show how food can be a catalyst for social change, a major engine for peaced and development that can radically change an individual’s future prospects of life.”

Appendix 1

Source: *www.branding.news/2017/05/25/tbt-discover-benettons-controversial-aids-ad/*

This week's #ThrowBrandThurstay takes us back 25 years ago when AIDS infection became the number one cause of mortality among men between 25 – 44 years of age. Discovered in the early 1980s, the disease, originally labelled as "The Gay Plague", stigmatized the homosexual males. At that time, the US government didn't want to have anything to do with the gay community, so the illness was considered unworthy of serious medical attention.

It was during the spring of 1990 when gay activist David Kirby died because of AIDS. With his family by his side, the 32-year-old man passed away and this emotional moment was captured by a young journalist, Therese Frare, in an image that was published in the LIFE magazine. The photo known as "The Face of AIDS" quickly became a symbol of the deadly illness that killed millions of people, and left many families devastated by the loss of their loved ones.

The picture that brought Therese the 2nd prize at World Press Photo somehow inspired the decision of Italian clothing brand Benetton to raise awareness of AIDS. After Kirby's family and the young journalist's approval, the clothing company used the image in an ad campaign that shocked the world in 1992.

Oliviero Toscani, Benetton's Creative Director at that time, saw the true value of the picture, but he considered the image's lack of colors to be a huge problem. Inspired by the fact that colors give a more realistic touch to

a picture, Toscani contacted Tibor Kalman, Editor in Chief of Benetton's COLORS magazines, who called in the colorist Ann Rhoney to paint the haunting scene. "The whole idea of coloring it was to make it look realistic, so there was a lot of pressure to deliver that," said the colorist.

"When I saw Therese's image in LIFE [magazine], I said: 'That's the picture'. [David] looks like Jesus Christ but he's dying of AIDS. It's like a painting," declared Toscani when talking about Frare's moving photo. The Catholic Church was irritated by the picture and considered it inappropriate. The Church thought that the brand was mocking the historical image of Virgin Mary holding Jesus Christ in her arms, following his crucifixion.

The former creative director believed his role was to create advertising campaigns inspired by mankind's real problems, issues that other advertisers wouldn't have the courage to approach, mainly because they want to avoid the public's negative reviews.

Provocative enough, the heartbreaking image, which included the Benetton logo, enraged both AIDS and gay activists, who called for a boycott of the brand. They were furious about the fact that the company used death and grief to sell its garments.

Therese Frare's image and Benetton's ad made people see the real truth about AIDS, at a time when there were no new drugs to battle the disease. Kirby's family felt this was their opportunity to make people aware of the deadly disease. "Benetton didn't use us, or exploit us. We used them. Because of them, [Therese's] photo was seen all over the world, and that's exactly what David wanted," concluded Bill Kirby, the activist's father.

Appendix 2

Source: https://blogs.library.duke.edu/rubenstein/2019/04/08/benetton-fashioning-controversy/

Benetton & Fashioning Controversy

APRIL 8, 2019 KATE COLLINS

Fashion advertising has never shied away from provocative imagery. One of the first clothing brands to consistently court controversy through advertising was the Italian sportswear brand Benetton. A family owned company established in 1965, Benetton became one of the most successful sportswear brands in Europe in the 1980s. That same decade, Benetton decided to enter the United States market and hired J. Walter Thompson (JWT)

as their advertising agency to better reach US consumers. JWT would remain with the Italian brand from 1983 to 1992 and the Benetton advertisements in the JWT archives at the Hartman Center offer a unique look into the evolution of advertising conventions in the fashion industry.

With the Italian photographer Oliviero Toscani as the creator of its advertisements, Benetton launched a series of ads in 1983 that were designed to be explicit celebrations of diversity and inclusivity. These ads, like the one seen above that was featured in the magazine *Mademoiselle* in 1983, were part of a campaign called "All the Colors of the World." With their messages of global harmony, these ads would take on dozens of different iterations in the next two decades. They became such a staple in Benetton's marketing repertoire that in the 1990s, the expression "a Benetton ad" was sometimes used to refer to an image with a diverse group of people. Some of these ads tackled politics, like this advertisement diffused during the Cold War in 1986 that featured two athletes, one from the US and one from the USSR, in a friendly pose.

Roughly a decade after the first "All the Colors of the World" world campaign, Benetton released a modified version of these ads. In lieu of a line of smiling faces, however, the ad featured vials of blood labeled with different first names. While still invoking the theme of inclusivity, the ad signaled a change in Benetton's marketing aesthetic. In the 1990s, Benetton ads seemed to be more focused on shock value than clothing. Many of their most controversial images featured no Benetton clothing. Instead, they depicted a wide range of social and political phenomena, from soldiers in the Bosnian war, to a baby with its umbilical cord attached, to a nun and a priest kissing, to a dying AIDS activist. These advertisements were often met with backlash, calls for a boycott of Benetton goods, and, at times, with censorship. Toscani justified these ads in an interview with *The New York Times* in 1991, explaining that he saw advertising as both an artistic and political endeavor: "I have found out that advertising is the richest and most powerful medium existing today, so I feel responsible to do more than to say, 'Our sweater is pretty.'" JWT and Benetton separated in 1992, but Benetton continues to test the limits of public reception with their advertising, despite experiencing a slip in popularity over the past two decades. As recently as 2018, a Benetton ad elicited vociferous criticism from politicians and consumers in Italy and around the world when it repurposed a photograph of migrants being rescued in the Mediterranean Sea.

The Benetton ads in the JWT archive shed light on how a fashion company adopted unconventional methods of advertising as a way to connect with a younger generation and bring awareness to social issues. At the same time, reactions to these ads indicate that consumers were uneasy with the confluence of fashion and social commentary.

Today, clothing companies are increasingly placing social causes at the center of their ads, like British clothing chain Jigsaw and their 2017 "Love Immigration" campaign. Did Benetton's advertisements pioneer this modern phenomenon of "brand activism"? Or were Benetton's ads an example of a company commodifying social causes and taking advantage of the ethically murky waters of fashion advertising?