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Charlotte Rawlings | Added 1 hour ago | The Information | How long? | 3-4 minutes

Does the ASA need to revisit its gender stereotyping rules?

Campaign asks adland if the Advertising Standards Authority needs to rethink its gender stereotyping rules following the Calvin Klein and FKA twigs ad ban.



FKA twigs: Calvin Klein ad banned by the ASA

The Advertising Standards Authority has come under scrutiny for banning a poster ad for Calvin Klein. The ad features an image of singer-songwriter FKA twigs with a denim shirt draped over her naked body. The placement of the shirt reveals the side of a buttock and breast.

The ASA banned the ad for objectifying women and appearing on an untargeted medium. However, the watchdog did not ban two ads featuring model Kendall Jenner, which also featured some nudity.

FKA twigs called out the ASA for banning the ad in an Instagram post last week. "I do not see the 'stereotypical sexual object' that they have labelled me," she said. "I see a beautiful strong woman of colour whose incredible body has overcome more pain than you can imagine."

The singer also said the decision exhibited "double standards" when compared with other campaigns, such as Jenner's topless poster or The Bear star Jeremy Allen White's recent shoot for the brand.



The ASA also banned a Girl vs Cancer ad by Bartle Bogle Hegarty for using the word "f*ck". The poster was part of a campaign that addressed sex for people living with or beyond cancer. The ASA said the ad was likely to cause serious and widespread offence and was inappropriate for display in an untargeted medium where children could see it.

In light of this, does the ASA need to revisit its gender stereotyping rules?



Advertising Standards Authority

For the reasons set out in our ruling, we judged that the ad featuring FKA twigs broke our rules on objectification and inappropriate targeting. We keep our rules under review but there is no current plan to revisit the one that prohibits harmful gender stereotypes. It is based on comprehensive public research, which showed the potential harm that can arise from these stereotypes, both to women and men.



Rani Patel
Co-founder and managing director, Calling

The ASA needs to update its guidelines to reflect a modern society. The current guidelines exclusively just look at the objectification of women's bodies, which implicitly suggests that men's bodies are not capable of being degraded in the same way. In a world where the idea of gender is more nuanced, the guidelines are simply outdated because of their binary view.

In my opinion, a better articulation and criteria for judgment of what is considered objectification is required. Things to factor would be: the goal of the creator and/or brand when making the image; the subjects' submission - in this case, the celebrities featured - have agency and are in empowering positions to express themselves versus young subjects who may be under the abuse of someone else's power. The audience's perception is reality and, in this case, the images appear to be viewed by those predominantly who see the world through a patriarchal lens.



Brinsley Dresden
Partner and head of advertising and marketing, Lewis Silkin

What is probably more useful than re-opening the debate on gender specifically is harmonising the rules in relation to stereotypical portrayals of other protected characteristics. Despite some progress in recent years, unhelpful discrepancies exist between the approaches taken to gender, which since 2019 have been robust, and to, say, race and ethnicity. At the same time, more work will likely have to be done in relation to AI-generated ads, which risk perpetuating harmful stereotypes because of the limited data they are trained on.

The recent Calvin Klein/FKA twigs case raised the issue of female objectification, but perhaps more pressing is the difference in reaction to the FKA twigs images for CK and those of Jeremy Allen White. FKA twigs' statement in response suggested she had been labelled, ostensibly by the ASA, as a stereotypical sexual object, in contrast to her male counterpart. This perhaps raises a thorny issue about the ASA's own objectivity.

Put simply, ads that perpetuate harmful stereotypes are detrimental to societal progress but, generally speaking, a pragmatic, light-touch approach from the regulator, which provides clarity but doesn't stifle creativity, is what is needed.



Bukola Garry
Head of cultural impact, M&C Saatchi Sport & Entertainment London

I find the banning of the recent FKA twigs extreme (and since when is two considered a valid sample size?). The decision lacks an understanding of the need for layered explorations of women, especially women of colour on premium platforms, in this case, an iconic Calvin Klein ad. The decision conflicts with FKW twigs' own sense of agency and the lens through which she chose to present herself. It diminishes her choice to reflect her own story of "a beautiful strong woman of colour whose incredible body has overcome more pain than you can imagine".

The overwhelming response from fans, especially on social, corroborates this, with most people attuned to the double standards and in support of Calvin Klein and FKA's collaborative creative choice. This example of everyday resistance by fans speaks to the power of community and their active resistance against monolithic narratives. They refuse to accept the limited imaginations of others and, instead, continue to shape the spaces they are passionate about as the true outliers they are - this is an example of what M&C Saatchi Sports & Entertainment calls "Fancom". Fancom - coalescing communities of fans with intersectional passions who are discerning, borderless and co-authors of the spaces they occupy.

I wonder to what depth of interrogation took place. Most processes lack the introspection required for ideas that play with creative boundaries - hence rushed decisions that take us 10 steps back. ASA, time for an upgrade.



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