

ASA ruling on Calvin Klein FKA Twigs advertisement

08 March 2024

For the first time, the ASA has reversed a ban it made on the grounds of objectification, citing “the strength of public feeling”. The ad, featuring FKA Twigs, is no longer banned but cannot be shown on public posters.

Background and context

On 10 January 2024, the UK Advertising Standards Authority ruled that an ad campaign ran by Calvin Klein in April 2023 breached its rules.

The campaign featured three celebrities; FKA Twigs, Kendall Jenner and Jeremy Allen White. Images of them were used on public billboards.

- The first image featured the singer FKA Twigs. The ASA said she “wore a denim shirt that was drawn halfway around her body, leaving the side of her breast and bottom exposed.”
- The second image, which appeared alongside the image of FKA Twigs, featured the model and media personality Kendall Jenner wearing a pair of jeans. She was topless, with her arms folded across her chest.
- A third image featured Kendall Jenner lying on her back, wearing underwear and holding a pair of jeans part way up her thighs. Superimposed text stated “Calvins or nothing”.
- The campaign also featured Jeremy Allen White posing wearing only boxers. One of the images shows him pulling his underwear waistband down to reveal his abdominal muscles.

The ASA’s original ruling 10 January 2024

The ASA received two complaints about the ad featuring FKA Twigs. The complaints were made on the grounds that the ads were:

1. Offensive and irresponsible – because they objectified women.
2. Inappropriate for display in an untargeted medium.

Calvin Klein said that the ads were similar to previous ads that have been shown in the UK for many years, and that a degree of nudity should be expected in adverts for underwear.

The ASA agreed with the complaints on both grounds and banned the advert. In its original ruling, the ASA said that “the composition of the image placed viewers' focus on the model's body rather than on the clothing advertised”, and that the piece uses nudity and focuses on FKA Twigs' physique, not the clothes, thereby presenting the model as a stereotypical object. For this reason, it was considered likely to offend and was banned.

The ads featuring Kendall Jenner were also complained about and investigated by the ASA. In the ASA's view, these ads did not overly sexualise Kendall Jenner, and ‘were characteristic of typical lingerie advertising’.

The campaign featuring Jeremy Allen White received 3 complaints – but hasn't been investigated by the ASA.

FKA Twigs took to social media to air her views on the ruling. She said:

“I do not see the ‘stereotypical sexual object’ that they have labelled me. I see a beautiful strong woman of colour whose incredible body has overcome more pain than you can imagine. In light of reviewing other campaigns past and current of this nature, I can’t help but feel that there are some double standards here so to be clear...

I am proud of my physicality and hold the art I create with my vessel to the standards of women like Josephine Baker, Eartha Kitt and Grace Jones who broke down barriers of what it looks like to be empowered and harness a unique embodied sensuality. Thank you to CK and Mert and Marcus who gave me space to express myself exactly how I wanted to – I will not have my narrative changed.”

The post gained a lot of traction online.

What the overturned ruling is

The ASA have since backed down from one aspect of their original ruling, stating they ‘they are not afraid to say they got it wrong’. They have reversed the ruling that the ad objectifies, and the republished ruling describes the image to ‘present FKA Twigs as confident and in control’, therefore she has not been objectified.

The ASA has not changed the ruling on the second ground, and ultimately the ad is still banned for being ‘overtly sexual’ and thereby unsuitable for display in an untargeted medium, where they were likely to be seen by both children and adults.

Key takeaways for advertisers

1. Overturning a decision based on a broad discretionary ground such as “social responsibility” is tough – this is the first time the ASA has done it.
2. Actively involving models in the creative and approval process is helpful.
3. Social media backlash can play a part. The ASA says that they aim to make judgments that reflect societal standards, and clearly here it realised that the court of public opinion was against it.
4. Backing your models and staying part of the conversation can help. Although many brands steer clear of sensitive topics such as those that FKA Twigs touched on in her Instagram post, taking a stance can change ASA policy.

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