



Fashion & Apparel

Facebook Often Flags Lingerie Ads as Nudity. Brands Are Paying the Price

Intimates companies still struggle to create ads that receive platform approval



These Harper Wilde images were flagged by Facebook as a violation of ad policy. Harper Wilde



By [Emmy Liederman](#)

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Facebook and Instagram robots screen for [hate speech](#), pornography and threats of violence. But somewhere along the way, [bras and panties](#) can get caught up too.

Harper Wilde, a digital-first intimates company that is **determined to desexualize its industry**, is accustomed to navigating the often unpredictable censorship caused by artificial intelligence.

"You can upload a photo of just a bra and it can be unapproved for nudity," said co-founder and co-CEO Jenna Kerner. "There doesn't have to be any human skin in the photo. It's somewhat comical but really upsetting at the same time."

Facebook cannot effectively regulate its platforms without the help of artificial intelligence, but **increased reliance on algorithm-powered censorship** slows down social media marketing campaigns.

Many leading brands in the intimates space exist to normalize everyday products that are **as practical for women as toothpaste and deodorant**, but they still face flack for existing in an industry that has historically pushed sales by hyper-sexualizing products.



A GLOBAL LEADER IN SMASHING STIGMAS CREATED A GORGEOUSLY ARTISTIC AD FOR PERIOD UNDERWEAR

Facebook declined to comment on how its ad policies affect lingerie brands. Matt Savare, partner at law firm Lowenstein Sandler, said consumers underestimate how complicated it is for the company to create policies that cater to all interests.

"What's sensitive in San Francisco is very different than what's sensitive in Omaha, Nebraska," he said. "It's such a vexing problem, and it's not going to be solved overnight."

Censored brands speak out

Facebook says its review process is **typically complete within 24 hours of submitting an ad**, but many intimates brands have faced a longer and more exhausting process.

Mary Depoian, social media lead at Harper Wilde, attests to the unpredictability of Facebook censorship. "Comfort Zone," an ad that featured a model in a full-coverage product, was never approved. "Bliss Bath," which featured a model in a nude wireless bra, was eventually manually approved after a few rounds of rejection this spring.

"Why is it OK for men to be in photos in swim trunks but a woman can't be in a photo in a bra?" asked Kerner. "I can't say it's entirely surprising, but it's just another thing that you run up against. It's more fuel to the fire."

Comfort Zone



According to lingerie brand Cosabella, creating Facebook-approved content is a matter of trial and error. The process is both complicated and time consuming for the company's social media team, said co-CEO Silvia Campello.

"We are continuously looking to strike a balance to ensure our products are properly showcased while still being on brand," she said.

Heidi Zak, co-founder and CEO of [ThirdLove](#), also stressed that these policies slow down business operations.

"Having a team go back and relook at an ad is a use of resources on the brand side," she said. "We're all just trying to show images of real women and not anything that I would deem as inappropriate."

"Men's erectile dysfunction ads are approved but not ads for women's lubricants, for example."

Sally Mueller, co-founder, Womaness

According to Andrew Frank, a research analyst at Gartner, while it is now common for marketers to [diversify their outreach beyond Facebook and Instagram](#), reliance on these platforms is not going away.

"There are other ways to reach an audience, but there are none that can match those platforms in scale and efficacy,"

he said.

Do Facebook ad policies reflect consumer sentiment?

In an Adweek-Morning Consult poll, 73% of Americans said when it comes to skin being shown in Facebook and Instagram ads, context matters. Another 29% said there is nothing wrong with skin being shown in intimates ads.

Morning Consult also found nearly 9 in 10 consumers would rather decide what content is permissible for their social media feeds on their own. When it comes to screening ads, Facebook judges content based on both community and ad guidelines, [which ban](#) "nudity or implied nudity," as well as "excessive visible skin or cleavage."





Cosabella shared that photos similar to this one are often unapproved by Facebook. Kat Irlin

Some brands believe Facebook's review process has become more forgiving. Jonathan Shokrian, CEO of underwear company MeUndies, believes that over the years, social media companies have "come a pretty long way in allowing more freedom of expression." MeUndies [went viral in 2014 for creating a playful stick figure ad](#) that mocked the social platform's censorship of its original post.

While Shokrian has noticed progress, unpredictable censorship remains an "ongoing issue" for MeUndies, which has also gotten flagged for

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"We feel the platforms are using outdated standards for reviewing ads," said co-founder Sally Mueller. "Men's erectile dysfunction ads are approved but not ads for women's lubricants, for example."

'A black box by nature'

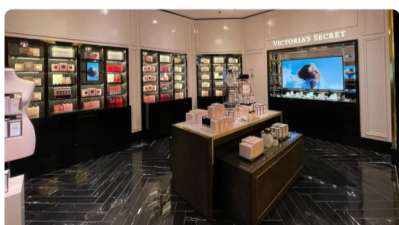
Facebook has been candid about its increased use of automated censorship, which the company believes creates [a safer environment for users](#). Facebook took action against [31.8 million posts](#) in Q1 2021, up from 28.1 million in Q4 2020.

According to Frank, a stronger reliance on automated censorship will only create more discrepancies.

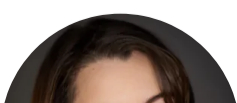
"The system is kind of a black box by nature, and it's getting a bit more random as more AI gets involved," he said. "Things that seem neutral might get flagged for reasons that are even hard for professionals to understand."

Public opinion on the [lingerie industry](#) is riddled with controversy, and conflicts between consumers, brands and the technology that powers platforms will only escalate. According to Frank, brands should prepare for censorship and find creative ways to raise awareness—like MeUndies did in 2014.

"It's sort of become a game between Facebook and its advertisers," he said. "The best thing marketers can do is have a monitoring and response process in place, so that when this happens they can react quickly."



VICTORIA'S SECRET GOES PUBLIC. NOW COMES THE DIFFICULT PART



Emmy Liederman