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## **Victoria's Secret's Illusion of Perfection**

### **An Analysis of Marketing Done by Victoria's Secret**

#### **Introduction**

Fashion and clothing have the power to change how we feel about ourselves. It has the ability to make us feel confident and uplift people, or it can make us feel bad about ourselves and exclude people from certain groups. The brand Victoria's Secret has a long history of frequently making their customers and women, in general, feel bad about themselves in a variety of ways while claiming that they are uplifting women. While this is seemingly a simple issue, their marketing has had a large impact that bled into many areas of our society. A few of these issues included using Photoshop in a way that created unrealistic body expectations, encouraging the sexualization of women and girls, encouraging over buying of clothes, and creating an overall toxic culture that affected many areas of our society.

Victoria's Secret is a women's underwear brand created in 1977, and bought by the former CEO, Leslie Wexner, in 1982. The brand has a long history, and it has looked wildly different during different time periods. Leslie Wexner is known for dominating brands mostly found in malls. He has owned brands such as The Limited, Express, PINK, Lane Bryant, Bath and Body Works, La Senza, Henri Bendel, and he briefly owned Abercrombie and Fitch. Thus,

Wexner's positions have given him an enormous amount of power and control over what media and products we as a society consume.

This paper will be focusing on different forms of advertising created by the brand and its former CEO, Leslie Wexner, and how they have created feminist issues in our society. I'm going to delve into more information about the brand, and I will be focusing on three artifacts from the brand's advertisements from the 2010s until today. I'm going to be looking at the artifacts through the lens of feminist criticism in order to fully understand how the advertising done by Victoria's Secret has affected women and how it has impacted our society. Feminist Criticism looks at media artifacts through the lens of feminist beliefs which include (but are not limited to) the belief that men and women should have equal rights and that there should be liberation for everyone. This is an extremely broad way to describe feminist beliefs, but this lens has a long list of values. Additionally, feminism tends to look different to each person, and it can't be described shortly. I want to define two common terms that are frequently used when discussing feminism. These phrases are "female gaze" and "male gaze". These terms describe how men and women view different parts of our society and world. In this paper, I will be using the term female gaze to describe how women see themselves, and what they want to see in marketing for lingerie and underwear. I will be using the term male gaze to describe how men view women and what they want to see in marketing for lingerie and underwear. These terms are both frequently used in feminist criticism and will be important later on in my paper.

### **Context**

First to give context to Victoria's Secret and its own Leslie Wexner, I'm going to discuss the whys, the messages they are conveying, and their audience. First, There are a lot of pieces

that play a role in the exigence and why Victoria's Secret advertises the way that they have for so long. According to the documentary *Victoria's Secret: Angels and Demons*, for many years the brand portrayed itself as conservative and European. Victoria was a character who was meant to be an accomplished, British woman, but when the late 1990s hit, this very quickly changed. The media quickly changed with *Sex and the City*, Britney Spears, etc. This cultural shift had a big impact, and Victoria's Secret had to change in order to keep up with the times. Thus, the idea of this classy woman went away, and it was replaced with ideas of hyper-sexuality and hyper-femininity.

During the time period I'm focusing on in this paper, Victoria's Secret has a couple of messages that they focus on sending to their customers. According to the documentary *Victoria's Secret: Angels and Demons*, they focused their marketing on the idea of "fantasy." This idea was applied in a long list of ways. They applied this idea to what their stores looked like, their commercials, fashion shows, etc. I believe it's arguable whether it was meant to be a fantasy for men or for women. In my opinion, it often shifted. It also shifted between being a fantasy of luxury clothing and a sexual fantasy. The brand's overall message shifted between trying to appeal to men while also claiming that they were empowering women with their products and media. I also want to briefly discuss the message Victoria's Secret was trying to send through its sister brand, PINK. PINK was marketed towards the early twenties, teenage, and pre-teen girls. According to the documentary, their main marketing ploy was "f.o.m.o." otherwise known as fear of missing out. They did this by holding events specifically created to post on social media and to make girls feel left out, and they did this in many other ways as

well. As one can imagine, this creates a very toxic and exclusive brand identity that doesn't have a positive effect on customers.

Next, I want to focus on the audience that Victoria's Secret is targeting. Victoria's Secret is mostly targeting women of all ages. However, they were also very exclusionary toward certain groups of women. They had a limited size range, and their advertising promoted heterosexual and cisgender ideals. Victoria's Secret also targeted a lot of their advertising towards heterosexual men. Whether or not men were buying products for women in their lives, it gave women the idea that what Victoria's Secret was selling was what men wanted. Thus, women would buy the products in order to impress men. As I mentioned before, PINK was marketed toward underage girls. According to *Victoria's Secret: Angels and Demons*, the idea of this brand was to get new customers while they were young and keep them buying their products for the rest of their lives.

### **Canons of Rhetoric**

As I previously mentioned, Victoria's Secret has been around since 1977, and it was bought by Leslie Wexner in 1982. Looking at the brand's ethos, Victoria's Secret has been around for nearly fifty years, thus it knows the business of underwear and lingerie well along with the former CEO, Wexner. According to an article from Business Insider, Wexner is the founder of L Brands which owns Victoria's Secret along with many other brands. His estimated net worth is \$5.6 billion, and he spent nearly the longest amount of time being CEO in American History. Wexner grew up working in his parent's clothing store in Dayton, Ohio called Leslie's, thus he had experience in retail from a very young age. The Limited was his first clothing company, and it was opened in 1963. According to Zippia, Victoria's Secret's annual revenue

since 2002 has been \$7.6 billion. Overall, the company had a huge amount of growth, but there have been significant drops in revenue at different times.

Next, I want to discuss the pathos used by Victoria's Secret. The brand frequently uses emotions in its marketing which has significant effects. As I mentioned before, the marketing idea behind Victoria's Secret is "fantasy" and all of the ideas that this word can hold. The marketing idea for PINK is "fear of missing out" which clearly can have some strong implications for young girls. They cater to these emotions in a variety of ways to encourage people to buy their products. Pathos is their strongest marketing tactic and they were especially aware of how society reacts to their marketing tactics.

Victoria's Secret uses logos much less in its marketing compared to pathos. Logos is mainly used when creating marketing campaigns based on previous experience and what they already know will sell to customers. They can base this on their extended history of selling lingerie. They also base their marketing on what was happening in culture during different time periods. As I previously mentioned, they were a more conservative lingerie brand, but they changed in the late 1990s when the culture shifted to hyper-femininity and hyper-sexuality. Overall, they've looked at how people have responded to their advertisements, and they've taken those responses and used them to make their marketing better.

Victoria's Secret has a wide range of terminology that they use in their marketing. The words that are seen the most often are "fantasy" and "sexy." First, the term fantasy can be applied to a huge variety of situations, and Victoria's Secret takes advantage of this. They apply this term to their advertisements, how they design their stores, and their products including lingerie, perfume, loungewear, etc. They want their product to feel like a fantasy and to feel

luxurious. They also want it to be a fantasy for men as well. I will discuss this more in-depth later in this piece. The term “sexy” is mostly self-explanatory. Since it’s a lingerie company they obviously want their products and advertisements to be “sexy.” However, their definition of what qualifies as “sexy” is extremely narrow and not inclusive which is reflected in their advertisements during this time period that I’m focusing on.

### **Analysis**

In this section, I’m going to use Feminist Criticism to look at a few pieces of media created by Victoria’s Secret. First, I want to look at a couple of pieces from during their height of popularity between 2010 and 2013, and then I want to look at a piece that’s more recent and shows how they have dramatically changed in order to keep up with the times. These pieces specifically stand out and reflect the brand’s values during different times. They also each have had a significant impact on our society in different ways.

First, I’m going to look at a commercial from 2010 which was directed by Micheal Bay. Micheal Bay is a director known for creating action movies like Transformers. Watching this video from today’s point of view is somewhat shocking and almost comical due to how dramatic it is. This video is centered around the idea of “fantasy” and all of the different fantasies one can have. It’s clearly catered toward the male gaze and not the female gaze because it has a strong theme of action. The music in the video sounds similar to what one would hear in a driving video game or action movie. There are also explosions, cars, a helicopter, a motorcycle, and many other things that are stereotypical things men like with the addition of women in lingerie. The “fantasies” this commercial is creating is created with the intention of targeting men more than women. However, as I’ve mentioned, targeting men in advertisements causes women to

feel that this is how they need to be and what products they need to buy in order to attract men. Thus, while the marketing isn't targeting women, it still works, and the video will still convince customers to buy products.



Next, I want to look at a collection created by PINK in 2013 called, “Bright Young Things” which can be seen above. This line of underwear created extremely problematic and serious issues. First, the name of this collection is problematic. Using the word “young” along with “things” is in no way hiding that the brand is objectifying girls and women. Additionally, it can be seen from the products of this campaign that PINK is encouraging pedophilia. As I’ve mentioned previously, PINK is largely marketed toward underage girls. In this line, PINK created underwear with different phrases which included, “I dare you,” “Let’s make out,” “Wild,” and “Call me” written on the crotch or backside of the underwear. These phrases are sexually suggestive due to the implied meaning of the phrases and their location on girls’ underwear. Printing these sexual phrases on underage girls’ underwear is in no way appropriate, and it

suggests that PINK approves of pedophilia. A brand of this size creating a product like this normalizes the sexualization and objectification of underage girls.

Lastly, I want to discuss a more recent commercial called, "Think You Know Us?" that was released in 2022. According to *Victoria's Secret: Angels and Demons*, Victoria's Secret experienced a lot of decline in 2016 due to new inclusive brands such as Aerie, Cuup, and Savage X Fenty created by Rhianna. These brands had models with a variety of body types, ethnicities, and disabilities. This was the exact opposite of what Victoria's Secret was doing in their marketing, at the time. This commercial marks their rebranding in 2022, and it looks very different from how they have done their marketing in the past. Leslie Wexner stepped down as CEO in 2021, and Martin Waters replaced him. He quickly started to work on rebranding Victoria's Secret. In this video, we can see much more diversity and inclusion. However, to me, this commercial doesn't feel genuine, and it even feels patronizing in some ways. Firstly, this has to do with how long it took Victoria's Secret to do this rebranding. Again, brands like Aerie came out in 2016 and had been around for six years before Victoria's Secret realized that they might need to make some changes. In the commercial, it says, "We've changed," and, "We now know that beauty was always yours to define." After looking at the previous artifacts, I find this very difficult to believe. They've also changed their colors from bright neon colors and black to more neutral colors which creates a more natural feeling. They use a lot of positive wording and say that they promise to advocate for women in the future. Overall, it's difficult for me to believe this new message that they're trying to send. This commercial feels like they're just checking off boxes of what an inclusive brand looks like. I can't place if this is simply due to the content of this commercial or if it's due to their past.



**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Victoria's Secret has had a troubling past that has been extremely harmful to women, and they are still trying to repair it. I feel that they still have a long way to go until they are truly an inclusive and positive brand, and I feel that there is more they should apologize for. There are a multitude of other issues this brand has created that I wasn't able to include in this paper, and I highly recommend doing additional research. Their past has been so destructive that I almost wonder if they have much of a future left. I want this paper to serve as a reminder that we accepted and normalized these ideas just a few years ago, and I hope that this will inform you about how brands can affect our thinking.

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