Victoria’s Secret: Uncovered

Kristia Morabito

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Abstract

From their highly anticipated fashion show to their mainstream retail stores, Victoria’s Secret has flooded all avenues of marketing and is virtually everywhere. The brand’s ability to sell is tied to its unique, yet varied levels of sales channels. Does Victoria’s Secret speak to a variety of women from all different age groups and sizes?

This paper will examine the direct relationship between Victoria’s Secret’s retail branding tactics and how consumers receive it. Is America’s favorite lingerie retailer painting a façade over the naturally beautiful and aiding in the trend towards an unhealthy body image in young women? What are the repercussions of having this image of ultimate sexiness?

The Beginning

Sexy is Victoria’s Secrets middle name. Dominating the world of intimate apparel for the past several years, sexy is an image that Victoria’s Secret has capitalized on unlike any other retailer. Interestingly enough, sex wasn’t the only thing in mind during its creation in the 1970s. Victoria’s Secret was originally intended to create convenience and comfort, not for women, but for men. The original creator of Victoria’s Secret, Roy Raymond, wanted to open a store where men would feel comfortable purchasing ‘something special’ for his significant other. The Stanford Graduate opened the first store in San Francisco, California and soon after created a mail-order catalog. In 1982, only a few years after the first store was opened, Raymond sold his company to The Limited (Hoovers).

Under the Reign of TLD

Far from the stores original intention, The Limited elevated Victoria’s Secret to “North America’s number one specialty retailer of women’s intimate apparel” (Hoovers). Now the brand offers a variety of merchandise, from intimates to their women’s beauty line. Operating an estimated “1, 040 mall-based stores” Victoria’s Secret is The Limited Brands most successful branch (Hoovers). In the 2009 fiscal year, along with Bath and Body works, Victoria’s Secret accounted for 84% of The Limited’s $8.6 billion net sales (Stock).

The woman behind the current brand is President and CEO, Grace Nichols. It is under Nichols’ leadership that “Victoria's Secret has become one of the top 10 recognized brands in the world and the leading specialty retailer of lingerie” (White). The brand is comprised of three major units; the Victoria's Secret Stores, Victoria's Secret Lingerie Catalog, and Victoria's Secret
Beauty Products. Within these three divisions, there are a variety of collections. Some include: Angels by Victoria Secret, Body by Victoria, Glamour by Victoria's Secret, The Miracle Bra by Victoria's Secret, Victoria's Secret Pink, and Very Sexy Second Skin Satin. Each paired with its own marketing campaign; Victoria’s Secret is committed to their success (White).

Victoria’s Secret is built on the sole idea that every woman should look and feel sexy. This image is portrayed through various forms of media. The issue becomes not whether their image is sexy (there is no arguing that) - the argument comes into play when we look at the audience that Victoria’s Secret is marketing to, and whether or not they really do include women of all shapes and ethnicities.

**Media**

Sex sells. There is no denying it: the world of advertisements, sexual innuendoes, references, and just plain exposure often launch a product to advanced popularity. We are all aware of the fact that sex sells which is why it is the most prevalent type of advertising. But is it safe to say that advertising has brought on the trend of an unhealthy body image? Pictured below are just a few examples of many seductive Victoria’s Secrets advertisements.

![Victoria’s Secret Window Advertisement](image)

*Figure 1: Victoria’s Secret Window Advertisement. Photo courtesy of Kristia Morabito. All rights reserved.*
Figure 1 features the recently launched fragrance called Shine. This advertisement is not only about the product. Strategically placed, the new fragrance just covers the models crotch. By doing so, the viewer’s eye is immediately drawn and associates the model’s sexiness with the fragrance.

These images along with many others are seen as ideals that young women and the Victoria’s Secret customer strive for. Due to the size and shape of the model’s featured, young girls feel as though they need to lose weight to become as sought after as the women shown. Although many women recognize the intended goal of these ideals (to lure customers), it is more difficult for younger generations to acknowledge the somewhat fantasy figures represented. Due to these advertisements, the American industry profits enormously from capitalizing on the insecurities of young women, claiming to supposedly nurture them with advertised products and health plans (Hesse-Biber 4).

Influenced greatly by the media, the emergence of the ‘slender body type’ has become a highly coveted ideal. Thin has become the new beauty standard for women today, and can be seen at best through the various forms of media that women are exposed to on a daily bases.

After reviewing 49 students at a New England women’s college, researchers found that fashion magazines were highly influential in the way young women viewed their own bodies. The study focused solely on the effects of fashion magazines versus news oriented magazines. Turner notes that,

The results of this investigation demonstrates the role of the media in shaping, rather than merely reflecting, societal perceptions of the female body… it was found that women’s body image satisfaction is, indeed, influenced by their exposure to the thin ideal presented in fashion magazines.
It is safe to say that due to the media, an unrealistic body image is coveted by the average contemporary women of today. This fact directly affects both the emotional and physical health of a woman (Turner).

The Vs Customer: Pink

Perhaps one of the most successful collections launched by the brand is Victoria’s Secret Pink. In 2004, the company launched Pink as a line targeted towards a much younger audience. With the addition of Pink, Victoria’s Secret experienced a whole new hype. Although proving to be extremely beneficial to sales, the Pink line promotes unrealistic sizing amongst young women and teens. The sizing of the very popular push-up is only offered in sizes 32AA to a 36D. Initially this may seem to make sense; however, a large population of young women is increasingly overweight. The range of sizes offered, in fact, do not fit a majority of their target market. However, Victoria’s Secret’s Pink continues to increase in sales due to their marketing techniques (Zmuda). As demonstrated in Figure 3, Victoria’s Secret favors a slender body type model to promote their product. This type of advertising is the exact reason why girls have become insecure and confused about their own image (Zmuda).

![Figure 3: Victoria’s Secret Window Advertisement. Photo Courtesy of Kristia Morabito. All rights reserved.](image-url)
To further prove the unrealistic sizing of Victoria’s Secret Pink, their size extra small is laid directly above that of a JC Penny’s girl’s size 6/6x in Figure 4. The children’s size is intended to fit a girl around the age of 7 to 8 years of age. As you can see, the size extra small from Victoria’s Secret is significantly similar to that of the JC Penny’s brand. Although providing the customer with minimal coverage is often the aim of Victoria’s Secret products, the width at which to span across the hips of a young women gives girls the impression that this is the ideal size to squeeze into.

![Underwear Comparison](image)

**Figure 4:** Underwear Comparison. Photo Courtesy of Kristia Morabito. All rights reserved.

**The Vs Customer**

The average woman is 5 foot 4 weighting about 155 pounds (Schrobsdorff). This is nearly 20 pounds heavier than the average women of the 70s, yet designers are introducing smaller and smaller sizes. Furthermore, what is really interesting is that at the same time this is going on the industry is partaking in vanity sizing. Vanity sizing is when companies choose to ignore the
standard ASTM sizing and add up to a half of an inch to sizes. This way a woman can buy a size 12 rather than a 16 and feel more confident about themselves (Schrobsdorff).

The industry seems to be torn between these two very different schools of thinking when it comes to determining sizing. Yet while some brands change in favor of a fuller figure and participate in vanity sizing, Victoria’s Secret continues to under size their lines. The push for a slender body type and achieving a thin figure becomes extremely evident throughout every collection Victoria’s Secret offers.

Victoria’s Secret is widely recognized for their Angels, which appear in almost every ad campaign. Credited with launching the careers of the world’s most sought after supermodels, these ‘bombshells’ help target women ages 15 to 60. After interviewing a former employee of Victoria’s Secret, some unanswered questions were revealed. Kish explained that the ideal body type of a Victoria’s Secret model is a size 2, with bra size of about a 34C. Working in one of their many NYC locations, Kish noted that the Victoria’s Secret store on Lexington attracted white women around the age of 35. When asked about their interracial clientele, Kish responded, “Although Victoria’s Secret thinks they are interracial, their designs are only made for white women. Black women tend to need more support . . . most international customers were Russian or Brazilian because they tend to fit the Victoria’s Secret body type, tall with boobs”(Kish).

Kish also explained her position on the marketing of Victoria’s Secret products and how they affect young girls in a negative way. She spoke about the sizing of Victoria’s Secret, explaining that the largest bra size offered was a 40DD and in underwear, an XL, which is really only a size 10 or 12. The former employee also said, “when customers would ask if we had a larger size, or when we knew they weren’t going to fit in our sizes, we would refer them to Bloomingdales”(Kish).

**Review**

Body image is something that has remained extremely important when it comes to considering beauty. The fact is that women are greatly affected by what surrounds them on a day-to-day basis. A study showed that of over 100 women with no eating disorder symptoms, “more than 95 percent of the women overestimated the size of four body parts- on average 25 percent larger than they really were” (Kaiser 103). Kaiser explains,

> Our bodies and our perceptions of them represent an important part of our social culture heritage. As we learn to have a body, we also begin to learn about our ‘social body- our society’. (109)

This is important in understanding the influence of culture on weight and how the ideal body type is dependent on the time period. Unfortunately, today in America - in the midst of our obesity crisis - young girls are encouraged to look like the models featured in the previously pictured ads in order to be considered beautiful. Pictured below (Figure 5) is an in-store display of Ambrielle products. The Ambrielle line can be found in Sears and it focuses on a shapelier woman. Its advertisements as well as mannequins feature full coverage and support for customers. These are examples of the types of products that Victoria’s Secret lacks. As seen, this
merchandise is no less sexy than that of Victoria’s Secret yet it appeals to the target customer Victoria’s Secret ignores entirely.

**Figure 5**: Sears’s advertisement for Ambrielle Lingerie
Photo courtesy of Kristia Morabito. All rights reserved.

### Conclusion

Retail mogul Victoria’s Secret is the ultimate success story in terms of beating out its competitors and saturating the market of intimate apparel. Its range of merchandise, from everyday undergarments to lavish lingerie, has made Victoria’s Secret the largest segment of publicly traded Limited Brands (Hoovers).

“With wealth and fame comes power, and with power comes responsibility” (Gordon). Flooding the market and gaining the cheeks of so many loyal customers Victoria’s Secret owes it to their customer to properly represent the shape of every woman. It is important to note the social responsibility that retailers have when creating their image. While Victoria’s Secret appears to want every woman to look and feel sexy, it is evident that the company is in fact encouraging women to fit their standards. Instead of welcoming sexiness in all shapes and colors, Victoria’s Secret challenges a woman’s individuality. Further proving, while the merchandise is entirely tangible, the image that the brand sells along it is superficial, or fake none the less.
Works Cited


Kish, Jennifer L. Personal interview. 25 July 2010.


