

Decoding Victoria's Secret: The Marketing of Sexual Beauty and Ambivalence

Since the 1977 opening of a single store in San Francisco by Roy Raymond, the underwear business dubbed "Victoria's Secret" has evolved into a chain of about nine hundred stores, achieving a phenomenal financial share of the \$12 billion women's lingerie market and transforming the image of intimate apparel on a wider scale than any other retail operation. Like many other successful businesses, its long-term success was based on a timely idea: to induce women themselves to replace their girdles and plain, practical white cotton bras and to indulge on a regular basis in the glamorous lingerie supposedly reminiscent of the frilly, fancy undergarments of the Victorian Era. True, this was what men had been buying for them all along, but only as the occasional Christmas, Valentine, or birthday gift. Although Raymond opened his original store in 1977 as an environment catering to *male* buyers, this vision was rejected by Leslie Wexner, who bought the chain (which had grown to six stores) for \$4 million in 1982. According to Dan Finkelman, senior vice president at Intimate Brands, Victoria's Secret's parent company, Wexner geared his strategy toward women—the sex that buys more than 90% of intimate apparel in the form of underwear, but that, he believed, secretly aspires to buy lingerie. Finkelman asserted that "If we gave women a chance to make them-

selves feel sexy in a wonderful, romantic environment, they'd prefer that to going to a mass merchant to buy a three-pack" (McGinn 1-2).

A change in image was what was needed—new colors, patterns and styles that promised sexiness packaged in a tasteful, glamorous way and with the snob appeal of European luxury. Catalogs listed VS's headquarters as London, even though it was "really" Ohio. The up-scale tone was carefully fostered, thus avoiding the raunchy sexual image of Victoria's "naughty" rival, Frederick's of Hollywood. Currently the bordello elements in VS's decor are being de-emphasized even more in hopes of appealing to women from teen-agers to mothers and grandmothers. According to Lauri Brunner, retail analyst for the banking firm Dain Rauscher Wessels, "They're getting out of hot-pink wallpaper and using pale pink and beige wallpaper. . . . Fixtures will be of higher quality and signage will be much better" (Christie 1). Robin Burns, president and chief executive officer of Intimate Brands' beauty products division, describes the new look as "residential." The new stores, such as the posh 18,000 square foot store in New York, will have "crystal chandeliers and mahogany furniture set in a colonnaded interior" (Burns 1).

Although VS's parent company, Intimate Brands, also owns Bath & Body Works and White Barn Candle, VS accounted for more than half of IB's \$4.5 billion revenue in 1999. Capitalizing on this success, VS has further expanded its glamorous image into a total body image, including a line of fragrances and makeup, now sold in about five hundred Victoria's Secret Beauty Stores (McGinn 2). VS generated \$2.9 billion in the year 2000 (Burns 1) with purchases from the 380 million catalogues distributed annually accounting for one-third of the company's revenue (Christie 2). Additionally, VS has aggressively promoted its image concept through communication technology: in 2000, the virtual store grossed \$135 million, tripling sales over fiscal year 1999. Seven to nine percent of these were international sales (Christie 1). The May, 2000, Webcast drew two million viewers (Howell 1). Television advertising, on-line marketing, and webcast lingerie runway shows feature supermodels displaying the latest product or image tweak. Much as Ford or GM pushes its latest car mod-

els with enticing new names, so VS models the ultimate female body, improved annually by the invention of buzzwords such as “miracle bras,” water and gel-filled bras, “seamless body,” “a body for your body.” Aggressive, wide-scale promotion of the right image at the right time might seem to account for VS’s success. Like most other women’s apparel ads, VS ads are apparently based on three assumptions: (1) a woman’s physical beauty is an instrument for selling any product, including herself; (2) a woman is always struggling to get or hold onto the right man in order to give meaning to her life; and (3) a woman’s self-image is largely based on a male perception of her physical beauty. But a closer look at the contents of the typical VS image, and the language used to sell it, will reveal hidden messages based on these assumptions that are at least as powerful as the obvious ones mentioned above. It can be argued that VS’s marketing is more effective than that of other companies because these hidden messages play into the ambivalence, insecurity, and contradictions, both inherent and society-based, which characterize male/female sexual relations.

The first assumption, that a beautiful female body can sell any product, is based on the idea that men respond first to a woman as a visual object and only later as a person, that is, “the male gaze,” said to objectify a woman as a commodity for the pleasure of an absent male spectator. When this arguably “natural” male response is overlaid with societal norms which say that sex is bad, wrong, or dangerous except in very restrictive conditions, then the visual attraction takes a strong swing in the direction of the voyeuristic¹: the vision takes on added enticement because it is forbidden and prurient.

Consider, for example, this description of the February 1999 VS fashion show webcast by Edward Rothstein in the *New York Times*:

The medium has met the message: delay, provocation, unpredictability, furtive flickers of something hidden—these elements of the Webcast are also part of the appeal of Victoria’s Secret. Gazing at this Webcast was like watching a striptease through a keyhole, catching glimpses of a fuller world that one

squints at, trying to imagine in fleshy glory. . . . Sex as partial disclosure: sounds like Victoria's secret. (Rothstein 2)

This same mysterious dream world of seductive images is created in VS's catalogs, the facial expressions of the female models being anything but expressions that females would direct at other females (barring lesbian attraction). The models are above all cool and mysterious, closed lips slightly pouting or smiling, or lips parted slightly but rarely smiling openly. The look is inaccessible a la Grace Kelly, sometimes even defiant a la Marlene Dietrich. The looks and poses may be variously described as mysterious, pensive, secretive, knowing, seductive, sultry, dreamy, confident, teasingly indifferent, vaguely dissatisfied, demure, enclosed, and private. The sheer number of these descriptors suggests the ambiguity of the poses, but they all convey sexual allure and careful preparation in anticipation of a male's admiration. The allure and potential accessibility to the unseen male spectator are further heightened by the fact that the model is almost featured alone, in a private world with borders of lines or solid color which isolate her. It is rare to see anything which would suggest that she has any relationships. Unlike many other fashion catalogs, there are no other women, men or children shown with her to suggest that she is a wife, a companion, or a mother. She is completely anonymous—without even the name, statistics, or brief life history accorded a Playboy Bunny. She is all possibility.

The second and third assumptions evident in female intimate apparel ads are that a woman is struggling to get or hold on to a man to give meaning to her life, and that her self-image is largely determined by a male perception of female beauty. These assumptions are substantiated by the fact that ads featuring females are designed to attract *men*, but sell primarily to women who presumably are drawn to them to find out what men want or desire in a woman. An article entitled "Victoria's Not-So-Secret Strategy" by Marisa Kula, cites Renee Redd, director of the Women's Center at Northwestern University, who asserts that

This culture has an . . . incredible focus on women's bodies. . . . [W]omen's self-esteem . . . rests on how attractive they are to men. And while VS may not have created the standards of female

desirability, its mass-marketing both nurtures the existing stereotypes . . . and fertilizes their future growth. Worst of all, it is a very specific . . . stereotype that is presented as “sexy.” Put it this way: Do you look like a Victoria's Secret model? No? Then you don't look sexy (Redd 3).

As deplorable as promoting a stereotyped image may be, it is obviously enormously successful in reaching the female consumers that VS has targeted. Redd's article does concede that “The models are not the anorexic type that women tend to idealize. The image of the curvaceous woman is therefore healthier, but the underlying effect is that women are sensing this is what men want” (2). Unlike the anorexic or boyish-looking models in most magazines, wearing clothes that fit them like sacks, the typical VS model reveals her curves in undergarments or clothes that typically mold to the body, a button or two discretely undone, a thumb perhaps tucked into her bikini bottom or jeans—as if to ask, “Wouldn't you like to take this off?” Curves are much more in evidence than bones, and there is actually more variety of shape—at least bust shape—than the usual assumptions about stereotypes would suggest. The one restriction is that the customer be a size fourteen or under. For the small-breasted woman, VS has small-breasted models who succeed in being erotic and provocative, their cleavage emphasized by gel, airlift, underwire, or removable pushup pads. These supports are mentioned only in small print, while the large, attention-getting letters—often printed on the upper chest—proclaim that the cleavage-producing bra is simply a “Miracle.” The VS models, fifteen of whom were listed on a web-site called “Who2 Loop,” represent types from sultry/exotic to cool/savvy to angelic/divine. Like a well-stocked dessert tray, there is something to suit any taste in the international array of beauties with a variety of nationalities: Australian, Czech, Polish, Belgian, Dutch, British, American, French, Brazilian, German, and so on (A Who2 Loop 1). The conclusion must be that VS wants to garner as many women as possible, worldwide, who are small or medium-sized and who want to look like what men presumably want. Indeed, VS's latest sales pitch is “A body for your body,” which is apparently meant to suggest to women that VS can remodel whatever they've got.

So, Victoria's surprising secret, according to this writer's interpretation, is that she has based her huge success with *women* upon being the best at giving *men* what *they* want visually. In contrast to the varying degrees of graphic sexual display in *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, or *Hustler*, the pubic area, as well as the nipples and areola, are never on view in VS. In spite of this lack of graphic display, men apparently love to look at the women in Victoria's Secret. A sampling of magazines and web sites catering to men corroborates this fact. An anonymous article posted in <formen.ign.com> entitled the "Babes of Victoria's Secret" contains descriptions of six of the models from the male point of view. The following description captures the flavor of all six: "Tyra Banks just simply rules the planet. . . . [H]er body could melt my hypothalamus gland in two seconds flat. . . . [H]er majestic breasts . . . rival any other set I've ever seen. They're as close to perfection in boobs as can be hoped to achieve" (<Formen> 3). Here is another male point of view, also from an article at the <Formen> web site, this one entitled "Flesh Merchant: Victoria's Secret Catalog": "From the confused and horny teenager to the husband whose wife is out of town, the Victoria's Secret Catalog is perhaps the most tasteful way to get your rocks off without feeling like a scumbag" (Douglas 1). The only slightly dissatisfied male comment that I found in a horde of enthusiastic male reviews was in an article deploring the digital removal of nipples in Victoria's Secret. The article was entitled "How to Draw the Nipples Back on Victoria's Secret Catalogue Models Using Adobe Photoshop 4.0" (Ronzoni 1).

This comment aside, part of Victoria's secret attraction for men may actually lie in the possibility that, in addition to loving the sight of beautiful female faces and bodies, men actually find a degree of visual mystery, uncertainty, and secrecy to be more provocative and stimulating than complete sexual exposure. This may be particularly true in a society characterized by sexual repression, ambivalence, and guilt. According to Michel Foucault in his study *The History of Sexuality*, this repression began at the beginning of the Seventeenth Century and reached its height during the Victorian regime. The prevailing view was that only married heterosexual

sex was normal. All other forms of sexuality were treated with "an injunction of silence" except when referred to in a "clandestine, circumscribed, and coded type of discourse" (144).

Sexual repression still exists, in spite of the erosion of belief in Protestant authority as well as the sexual and feminist movements. In fact, modern advertising, according to Jackson Lears, fills the void left by the erosion of belief in divine authority: "[T]he advertiser [is] a modern replacement for the priest . . . permit[ting] the individual to consume and still be absolved of guilt and sin" (Quin~oy 1).

Mirroring this repression, the reaction to Victoria's Secret seems enthusiastic and, at the same time, slightly guilt ridden. Among the typical chatroom comments that I encountered on the Internet, both male and female reactions were ambivalent. One male reviewer enthusiastically described his favorite VS models and then, in an abrupt about-face, ended his article with the following acknowledgment of his un-liberated maleness: "Notice I have been a very good boy and did not refer to these women as chicks although I treat them like objects which I appoligize [sic] for" (O'Collegian 1). In a similar vein, a female fan of VS had this to say about her conflicted attitudes: "I don't think I'm a fan of the Miracle Bra. Sure, it's . . . a cool thing to . . . strap it on and ta-da, have instant cleavage." But she follows this up with the disclaimer: "I'm pretty comfortable with my average cleavage, thank you very much, and I don't feel I must increase my bust to look . . . more 'womanly.' 'Cause after a l l, breasts are not what being a woman is really all about" (Abbagirl 1).

VS catalogues cater to and reassure both men and women who want to be "good" and "bad," safe and daring, at the same time. To accomplish this, a strange, oxymoronic language is used that simultaneously strokes the id and soothes the super-ego. Accompanying the all-important image, the very infrequent but prominent messages have a double appeal to the reality of a woman's actual body and to the miraculous transition that VS will help her achieve: women who want to be "more" are promised a "natural miracle," "bare solutions," "glamorous support," "beyond basics," "new classics," and a "second skin." An interesting ex-

ample of VS's play on the divine/earthly dichotomy is the marketing of its "Dream Angel Series" of perfumes, lotions, and body powder. The model's facial expressions and body postures, which are sultry or provocative, sharply contrast with the innocent pink and white of the background color and giant angel wings. The message which accompanies this medium is "Dream angels divine—the third scent from heaven." The arms deftly cover the "forbidden" portions of the breast while simultaneously holding one of the large, luxurious wings over the pubic area. The result is ethereal beauty, a platonic ideal of sensuality without any suggestion of the scatological aspects of sex. Not since the 'Fifties TV shows *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*" have the vixen and the angel been so tantalizingly fused. Nostalgia for a "purer," more discrete time when SEX did not proclaim itself so blatantly is a large part of VS's appeal also.

The conclusions then, that I have reached, are essentially three. (1) Most women, in spite of the consciousness-raising effects of the Women's Liberation movement, have thoroughly internalized the belief that a narrow, male-constructed image of female sexuality and beauty defines their self-worth. (2) This male-constructed image is accompanied by feelings in both sexes of ambivalence, confusion, and guilt, resulting in a need for sending and receiving conflicting sexual messages. (3) A large part of Victoria's Secret's enormous marketing success has been achieved through a consistently glamorous, flawless portrayal of this ambivalent, hyper-real version of the female body.

Marie D. Smith

**Florida Community College at Jacksonville
Jacksonville, FL 32246**

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