

The Trouble with Angels: A Case Study of the Lingerie Company Victoria's Secret's Strategic
Transformation After Its Fall From Cultural Relevance

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In the world of fashion, trends are constantly going in and out of style. One item is hot for a season then totally out of touch the next. A brand's ability to stay current with the latest trends and address the wants and needs of the consumer are vital for the survival of a company (Kibbe, 2021). A cause that many consumers have begun to champion is beauty representation. In the past ten years there has been a growing call, from female consumers specifically, to change the way women are represented by brands. According to Mintel research, about 68% of consumers in the United States currently want to see diversity in beauty advertising as it is reflective of "real life" (2021). Brands have had the opportunity to respond to this preference from consumers or to stay in their old ways with the hope that brand loyalty might trump these changes. A brand that defined femininity for the past 20 years was Victoria's Secret, but as consumer habits have shifted, the company has not adjusted at the same pace (Silver-Greenberg et. al, 2020). Since 2016 Victoria's Secrets sales have been on a steady decline as "what men want" has been less inline with consumer interest when shopping for undergarments (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021). One of the strategies the company has recently implemented this past summer was splitting from its parent company, L. Brands Inc. to operate as its own separate entity (L. Brands Inc, 2021). This separation was one of the several tactics the company has employed in an attempt to win back customer favor.

Victoria's Secret was the premier women's lingerie brand from the 1990s to the early 2000s. Their models, also referred to as "Angels," were a homogenous array of slender, predominantly white women who were intended to represent the quintessential "sexy woman." Victoria's Secret went as far as to run a campaign with the tagline "Perfect Body" in reference to the "Angels" which cultivated nearly impossible beauty standards for women (Kibbe, 2021). The

sexy, exclusive, and nearly fantastical identity Victoria's Secret represented was a global giant in the fashion industry earning nearly \$7 billion in sales annually (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021). Despite this long-held dominance, in the mid 2010s the brand's favor among consumers began to wobble. The company had several internal problems related to the mistreatment of women both internally and externally that were coming to light on a global scale, including controversial rhetoric from the CMO Ed Razek and major sexual harassment allegations in connection to company leadership, an inability to adapt products to more current fashion trends or consumer interests, and out-of-touch campaigns.

Beyond these internal missteps, cultural perceptions surrounding women and beauty had begun to shift with the inception of the "Body Positivity Movement." The Body Positivity Movement began in the 1960s as a group of women charged the public with acceptance of plus sized bodies in the United States (Hayden, 2021). The "#MeToo" movement, social justice movements, the rise of social media platforms and shift towards interest in more body positive messaging. The internet aided in giving a platform to consumers to voice interest in brands that contain messaging directed at women rather than the sexualization of women which men would find appealing. This shift countered the original concept behind Victoria's Secret which was inspired by making men feel comfortable shopping for their partners in lingerie stores (Friedman, 2021). After a consistent decline in sales and sentiment towards the brand, Victoria's Secret put on their final Angels Fashion Show in 2018 which up until that point had been the most notable and longstanding campaign implemented by the brand, annually pulling over 4 million viewers (Munzenrieder, 2019). In addition to the termination of the show and the split from L. Brands Inc, Victoria's Secret launched a new campaign in 2021 titled the "VS Collective " in which they have partnered with seven outspoken public figures of diverse backgrounds who are known for

promoting inclusive gender identity and equality, primarily for women. The company also appointed new C-suite executives and board members, the majority of which are female. As next steps, they plan to rebrand the interior of their physical stores, launch more inclusive products, and advertise a wider range of models for customers to identify with (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021).

Several key questions arise from this seemingly last-ditch effort to regain favor with Victoria's Secret customers: With such a consistent decline in public favor of the brand and overall sales, why has it taken so long for the brand to react to sizable cultural shifts? How has the public relations team been involved with the determined course of resurrection for the brand? And is it even possible to win-back favor after such a public, torrid recent history? This thesis will utilize a case study analysis to examine how Victoria's Secret, a brand that has historically targeted women while perpetuating dominant gender and beauty norms, has employed public relations strategies to address huge cultural changes regarding body image, beauty, and gender norms, in order to reposition its brand as one better aligned with the cultural values expressed in the body positivity and #MeToo movements.

Literature Review

Gender Norms & Cultural Shifts

Gender inequality has taken many forms in American society throughout the country's history. In "Feminist Criticism in Public Relations: How Gender Can Impact Public Relations Texts and Contexts" Linda Aldoory argues that gender is "one of the most restricting forces in American life" as it pertains to all aspects of gender roles from the workforce to the home (2016, p. 1). Gender norms are defined as the generalized beliefs of what characteristics an

individual should maintain based on what gender they identify with (Aldoory, 2016). These perpetuated norms influence corporate structure, professional practice and identity in the workforce (Aldoory, 2016). Because public relations practice is informed by cultural norms it is imperative to examine how public relations communication perpetuates gender stereotypes. Aldoory argues that feminist scholarship can be alienating due to the impression that feminism is “man-hating and radical” (2016). This often leads feminist focused public relations research to be siloed due to the presumptions associated with the topic. According to an investigation into the articles published in the *Journal of Public Relations Research*, “out of 103 articles published... 8 were found to address gender/feminism/women. For Public Relations Review, only 16 of 574 (3%) articles addressed gender/feminism/women” (Aldoory, 2016). Despite Aldoory’s findings in the 2016 study regarding a lack of attention to issues of gender within the scholarly field of public relations, a major shift in cultural perceptions of feminism and gender advocacy was taking place publicly in response to popularized social movements.

The body positivity movement has held a major presence on social media since 2012 empowering women of all shapes and sizes to embrace their present physical shape (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). The movement was sparked initially by a group of feminists in 1973 who started the “Fat Underground” with the mission advocate for fat individuals. With the dawn of the internet came a growing forum for conversations surrounding acceptance of all types of bodies. Social media platforms catalyzed the spread of a new terminology for the fat acceptance movement: the body positivity movement (Osborn, 2022). The body positivity movement “challenges the unrealistic standards of beauty present in the media by the promotion and acceptance of diverse body sizes and appearances” (Lazuka, Wick, Keel, et al. 2020). The phrase body positivity has grown so much in popularity that its use represents a variety of purposes.

Due to the vast use of the body positivity movement it has strayed from its original purpose as a phrase for fat activism. Weight loss companies and weight loss trends have repurposed the term creating dissonance in the intention behind the hashtag on the internet (Osborn, 2022).

In the past fourteen years there have been major shifts in consumer habits due to rising cultural relevance of the body positivity movement to a larger audience, which have brought attention to female consumer voices, highlighting how they want to be represented and communicated to, rather than how brands think they should communicate to women. Increased access to social media outlets have cultivated new online forums for communities to engage in dialogue about social causes, forcing brands to listen more directly to consumer interests (Hayden, 2021). In “The Shifting Terrain of Sex and Power: From the Sexualization of Culture to #MeToo,” Rosaling Gill and Shani Orgad suggest that the popularization of social media is a driving force for feminist activism (2018). The “Me Too.” movement originated from Tarana Burke who started “Just Be Inc.” in 2007. Just Be Inc. was a group on a mission to empower black girls. Through her experience there she created the “me too” phrase as a response to the community members sharing their personal stories of sexual assault. The movement went viral in mainstream media ten years later in 2017 when actress Alyssa Milano used “#MeToo” in a tweet commenting on her own survivor experience during the Harvey Weinstein sexual assault case. This diverted the movement from its original purpose as a phrase coined to empower black women (Mosley).

The enthusiasm with which the #MeToo movement was embraced along with the popularization of the body positivity movement soon snowballed into a general reckoning with female representation and communication in society. The #MeToo movement has acted as a label for much larger cultural shifts which are challenging gender inequality and sexism (Gill & Orgad

2018). Gill and Orgad (2018) argued that social media is certainly the driving force behind the saturation of social action towards changing cultural norms surrounding female beauty, identity, and treatment. History is full of important moments and campaigns for female activism, but the #MeToo movement has been able to firmly hold a place in society and ignite action inspiring conversation in online forums and changing female consumer habits. The hashtag has circulated in 85 countries.

The momentum of this cultural shift towards public female advocacy and empowerment has led to a shift in how organizations communicate with target audiences (Aziz, 2020). While there are many spaces where the socially constructed “ideal female” is still present, there are numerous places where female imagery is being overhauled. Many companies and countries are taking stands against unrealistic representations of women. In 2017, France created a policy that ensured models had a doctor’s certification that they were within a healthy body mass index. Getty Images implemented a requirement that images could not contain photoshopped images of models where their size was edited to be skinnier. Companies such as CVS also committed to no longer altering models in the beauty products sold in their stores. Other brands have taken on campaigns to move towards more body-positive messaging regarding women. Brands such as Aerie which launched #ariereal in 2014 have seen massive sales growth through the promotion of body positive products and imagery. In “Are Portrayals of Female Beauty in Advertising Finally Changing?” Kathryn Ponders suggests that “consumers increasingly appear to call for greater inclusion and diversity in terms of body shape and size” (2018). Ponders, like Gill and Orgad (2018), argues that social-media platforms have provided the space for consumer opinions to be heard.

Brands like those discussed above have found success by developing more inclusive female representation. However, the theory of social comparison, defined as the ability for “individuals to engage in social comparisons with others to evaluate the self on a given dimension,” is also believed to be a driving force for generating sales (Pounders 2018). Pounders is suggesting using this theory that comparing oneself to a perceived goal appearance or possession of materials can drive consumers to brands (2018). This feeling of lack can be a motivator for consumer habits. Comparison can happen in two different ways: upward comparison and downward comparison. Upward comparison is when a consumer compares themselves with an image they perceive to be “better” than they are. Whereas downward comparison is comparison with an image they perceive as being “worse” than they are. Comparison is a natural habit of judging worth based on external forces and oftentimes has been relied upon in consumer driven communication. Despite this, Pounders argues that: “we are witnessing a cultural shift of significance, where women expect diversity, realism, inclusion in marketing campaigns--with regard not just to body size and shape but also to ethnicity, ability, and gender” (2018, p. 136). There is no doubt this shift has come in tandem with the rise of social media, empowering female consumers to express their demands and be readily heard by organizations.

Brand Identity and Values

Recent research into the impact brand values have on consumer decisions have concluded that an organization’s values or lack thereof dictate the modern consumers decisions to support a company. A study conducted at Washington University in St. Louis found through a national survey that companies should publicly share their values to gain a larger consumer base (Wolfersberger et. al, 2021). Many researchers have concluded that younger generations such as

gen. X, Y and Z put more importance in their purchases on brand values. 5W Public Relations suggested in their 2020 Consumer Culture Report that “71% of consumers prefer buying from brands that align with their values” (Pickard-Whitehead, 2020). The theories behind this increased conviction to purchase from righteous brands are known as ‘social identity’ and ‘consumer-brand identity’ (Elbedweihy et. al. 2016). These theories propose the thought that customers seek symmetry between their own values and identity and that of the brand identity. It extends beyond the general desire to contribute to brands with positive values to the notion that consumerism in a certain brand is a direct reflection of an individual’s identity. Social beings tend to naturally classify themselves and it is theorized that this classification goes as far as what brands an individual chooses to support. These theories result in a third theory behind values motivated consumerism called “self verification theory” (Elbedweihy et. al. 2016). The self verification theory argues that individuals have a need to confirm their perceived self image. Consumerism is one mode in which said individual can verify to both their general community and more importantly themselves what their identity is (Elbedweihy et. al. 2016). This creates the opportunity and necessity for brands and organizations to clearly define their values. There is risk of negative reactions to a brand's stance on an issue or societal norm: “Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of consumers around the world will buy or boycott a brand solely because of its position on a social or political issue” (Edelman 2018). However, many consumers would rather a brand express any form of value, even if it is not in line with their own interests (Washington University In St. Louis, 2021). The definition of a brand’s values translates into their brand identity which is crucial for the cultivation of a following of a brand.

Brand identity has become increasingly important in consumer perceptions of brands and sales. Brand identity is thought to result from a company presenting a product or persona that

differentiates itself from other competitors. Shiva Nandan in “An exploration of the Brand Identity--brand image linkage: A communications Perspective” presents the theory that brand identity is cultivated from components such as: “brand vision, culture, positioning, personality, relationships, and presentations” (2005). These aspects of brand identity are the ways in which a brand defines its purpose, promotes characteristics specific to its identity, creates relationships with stakeholders, and creates emotional relevance among those stakeholders. Nandan maintains that brand identity goes hand in hand with brand image. Brand Image is defined as “consumer perceptions” which houses impressions a consumer has about the brand. Theorists have argued that the overall personality of a brand may be more relevant to consumers than the actual service the brand provides (Nandan 2005). Thus, a strong brand identity and brand image is an essential combination for a popular brand (Nandan 2005).

When the identity of a brand and its image are in line, a much stronger base for loyalty cultivation among consumers can be created. There are several strategies a brand can take to solidify loyalty among its consumer base. Diffusing hyper competition by differentiating their product or service in an oversaturated market will cause a brand to stand out as a premiere choice for consumers. Another challenge brands must overcome is time-compression which Nandans presents as an expedited timeline brands have experienced in recent years due to advancements in technology. Attention spans and increased access to variety in media has led to the overall decrease in a brand’s life span. This means brands must find strategic, timely approaches for maintaining the engagement of consumers. Brands must also address the growth in ability consumers have to share information. Prior to mainstream internet use and social media organizations had a monopoly over the information shared about their brand. Nandan describes this new ability consumers have to share information as “consumer-generated media”.

Consumer-generated media is defined as “online information that is created, initiated, circulated, and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities, and issues” (Nandan 2005). Because of this new ability for consumers to share perspectives on brand image it is imperative for brands to gauge their relationship with consumers by monitoring these online conversations consumers are having about the brand. Nandan argues “the strength and quality of relationships that a brand has with its customers are measures of the value of the brand” (2005). This value created by the brand through its communication translates into brand image, the perception of the brand by consumers. This theory of cultivating a strong brand image and identity through communication relationships is known as interpretive communications. Interpretive communication is implemented to create meaning behind a brand which will resonate with its target audience (Nandan 2005).

The confluence of a strong brand identity and image is likely to lead to a strong authentic brand reputation. Reputation management is debated in the Public Relations profession due to the thin line between authentic reputation maintenance and superficial efforts to solidify standing among consumers (Butterick 2011). Brand reputations are malleable and will likely grow and change over time as with brand image and identity. Reputation, identity, and image are all developed through all different parts of an organization’s actions and characteristics. As information has become more easily accessible about brands through the rise of the internet consumers have become more concerned with the brand’s identity as a whole, placing greater importance on reputation and brand values. Having a strong reputation as a brand is vital for the company’s success, but it can lead to alienation of customers if done inauthentically. Butterick presents the argument that if a communication effort conducted by a brand is focused on reputation management it will lead to superficial results. This is why maintaining a strong brand

identity and image can ensure that a brand's reputation is organically maintained (Butterick 2011).

Socio-Cultural Impact of Public Relations

Public Relations as a practice uses cultural trends to inform strategy which leads to the cultivation and/or solidification of social norms. In "Understanding Public Relations: Theory, Culture and Society," (2018) Lee Edwards presents the theory that practitioners should critically investigate the "socio-cultural" impact organizations have on society at large. Socio-Cultural Public Relations is the theory that organizational messaging creates a ripple effect beyond the intended point of influence. Edwards argues that oftentimes PR is examined "in isolation from their social, cultural and political contexts, and organizational objectives" (2018). The reasoning for this theory is that because public relations is driven by the culture of the community which houses it, it is unpredictable what kinds of impacts its messaging will have on perceptions and trends within that community. It is imperative for PR professionals to have a pulse on "social trends, technologies, communication channels, and cultural phenomena " to create relevant messaging (Edwards 2018). Professionals source and reintroduce the latest trends to create impact and influence on its consumers. Edwards argues that by doing this public relations "intervenes in and instrumentalizes different aspects of society and culture" causing the practice to have agency to create change (2018). Public relations is often examined as a one way form of communication as it is employed to motivate action, but society also influences and motivates public relations practice making it "mutually transformative" (Edwards 2018). Public Relations is oftentimes categorized as an "instrument of commerce" being utilized as a tool for economic growth for an organization. Under this label, considerations for PR as a socio-cultural instrument can be disregarded when developing theories about the practice. This separation of the profession

from the cultural impact of its work can lead to practitioners disregarding their role in the cultivation of social norms (Curtain & Gaither 2005). Socio Cultural public relations examines how the products of the practice are present in everyday life.

Society is made up of social groups oftentimes naturally organized by identifiable characteristics such as socioeconomic status, gender, religion, or values held by individuals. These social groups harbor stereotypes that lead to structures within communities that perpetuate the group's perceived identity. This concept of social structures is relevant to the practice of Public Relations because it brings forth the dilemma practitioners must consider of perpetuating the identities which the stereotypes of said groups create (Edwards, 2018).

Edwards argues that social norms are often regarded as “common sense” due to the repetitive nature of these perceived norms (2018). The norms that are accepted in communities are embedded into all functions of the social group. Public Relations campaigns are another facet of the socio-cultural impact of PR practice as they directly engage with target audiences. In some cases, campaigns promote the consideration or challenge of commonly accepted norms, but in other cases social norms are used to inform and dictate all aspects of a campaign. Public relations efforts begin by considering social groups as target audiences. When crafting a campaign the receiver of the messaging is typically typecasted, thus enforcing identities generally accepted by the larger public.

Public relations creates a sense of identity as its target audiences determine how they relate to presented representations of current cultural characteristics. The act of a recipient of media identifying with or rejecting a claim in public relations messaging creates exclusive assumptions. If a consumer perceives messaging as true it reinforces a stereotype they harbor. In contrast if the audience member does not relate to the communicated identity they may either

reject the validity of the communication or exclude themselves from the targeted social group. Typecasting can even be found in products. Depending on the positioning of promotion for a product people are more likely to associate that product with a certain social group or identity. PR practice takes a goal outcome and uses strategic planning and communication to cultivate meaning with its messaging to accomplish a goal. This leads to the perpetuation of an identity within a social group whether or not that was the intention of the Public Relations professional (Edwards 2018).

Caroline Hodges, in “PRP Culture: A Framework for Exploring Public Relations Practitioners as Cultural Intermediaries” argues that the industry of public relations lacks the examination of Public Relations as a shaper of culture (2006). PR gleans insights from cultural norms and then contributes directly to their manifestation. Hodges cites it as a tool which has been used on a public scale to shape policies and cultural debates thereby having an active hand in the institutions that shape society. Because public relations is used in some cases to cultivate understanding of a certain topic it actively reinforces norms already present in society by reiterating them on a larger scale. Hodges presents the theory that public relations Practitioners are “cultural intermediaries” which defines PR professionals as “central to economic and culture life” (2006). Successful PR efforts create discourse and action, thereby holding a presence in day to day life.

Examining the socio-cultural implications of Public Relations practice acknowledge a wider lens to the relevance of the profession. Public Relations is a “meaning making” tool which stretches beyond the dissemination of information or discourse. The study of Public Relations efforts and the inevitable side effects that come from working so closely with widely accepted cultural norms and trends is invaluable for the evaluation of PR beyond simply being a promoter

of commerce. The inspection of how Public Relations impacts culture creates a form of responsibility for practitioners to acknowledge the impacts their messaging has on society at large (Curtain & Gaither 2005).

This literature review has presented themes of gender norms and cultural shifts, brand identity and values, and the socio-cultural impact of public relations to present the relevance each of these themes have in communication practices. Less than 10% of articles in the *Journal of Public Relations Research* addressed “gender/feminism/women” and only 3% in the *Public Relations Review* (Aldoory, 2016). People who identify as female make up nearly half of consumer populations and so considering their habits as consumers is a relevant topic of study. Movements such as the “Body Positivity Movement” and the “#MeToo” movement are ideal places to examine interests of female consumers as their large-scale reach has presented a platform for many types of female consumers to express opinions. The body positivity movement went viral on social media dating back to 2012, bringing on a new trend of body empowerment rather than body size aspiration (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). This, coupled with the #MeToo movement which went viral in 2017, was influential in empowering women to take a stand against demeaning female representation and inequity in society at large (Gill & Orgad 2018).

Understanding the rise in these movements as viral trends informs us of the increased activism for female specific causes which has been catalyzed by social media (Gill & Orgad 2018). The access to online forums for communities to engage in dialogue about social causes have reinforced interest female consumers maintain about what they want brands to represent and value (Hayden, 2021). Social media has also revealed a brand’s values and actions more publicly than ever before. With this increased visibility into every part of a brand, consumers have begun to make purchase decisions with more consideration for the company’s values

(Pickard-Whitehead, 2020). It's theorized that the value of the persona of a brand has surpassed the actual service provided by the brand (Nandan 2005).

Social media platforms have played a role in the increased outspoken advocacy for feminist social causes and brand reputation exposure, changing female consumer habits in the past 10 years. When understanding how these topics intersect it becomes clear that there has been a new demand from consumers to be heard by brands. Social media has provided a platform for two way communication between brands and consumers which has changed the way actions of companies are dictated. Public relations professionals are more consistently being pressured to listen to consumer voices to determine brand messaging (Edwards, 2018). The theory that PR practitioners should investigate the "socio-cultural" impact of their brand on society to inform effective PR practice directly relates to the concepts presented in this literature review (Edwards, 2018). When considering how strategic communications messaging affects said audience from a lens of feminine beauty it's theorized that some beauty norms have maintained relevance and crossed different cultures, "due to propagation of these ideals through advertising and social media, which can influence standards of ideal beauty and also impact a woman's body esteem, generating body-focused anxiety" (Maymore, 2020). This theory of communications perpetuating potentially harmful cultural norms lays the groundwork for understanding the role of PR within a brand and in society at large. This case study will reveal how PR practitioners must consider their role in the maintenance or creation of cultural norms as well as their relationship with the consumer. Lee Edwards in "Understanding Public Relations: Theory, Culture and Society," argues that public relations practice must be informed by "social trends, technologies, communication channels, and cultural phenomena " to create relevant messaging (Edwards 2018).

So what happens when a brand, which has been credited with defining cultural norms, discontinues consumer listening in a time when consumer expression is at an all time high? And how might that brand utilize public relations strategies to transform with the ever evolving consumer? To satisfy these questions, Victoria's Secret will be used as an example case for how a brand might address this monumental task of realigning itself with the consumer and current cultural norms. In the following sections I will provide background on the history Victoria's Secret as a brand to present day, a methods section which will describe the primary research utilized, an analysis of the data gathered which includes interviews with a communications executive at the company, press releases published, retail and corporate websites, and the brand's instagram account, and finally a conclusion on how this case informs us of best PR practice when addressing the changing environment around the organization.

Chapter 2

Methods

This research project is designed to examine how public relations strategy is used to address cultural shifts, showcase revamped brand values, and revitalize consumer loyalty. The case study method will be used to analyze how public relations practitioners respond to shifts in consumer interest. In 2002, the case study method had been utilized in about one third of public relations publications. A case study is described as the study of "a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (Cutler, 2002). This case study draws on information from a variety of sources, including two one-hour long interviews with a Victoria's Secret communications executive; internal organizational documents; public organizational documents; social media content created by the organization; and media coverage of the organization. The two interviews

were conducted on January 26th and February 12th with a Victoria's Secret communications executive and a series of questions were asked in order to discuss the process of the company's transformation. The interviews were held via zoom and recorded and transcribed. Themes from the interview informed the types of textual references for this study to demonstrate how the statements made by the communications executive appear in public actions taken by the brand. A portion of a slide deck from an internal document which was provided by the interviewee was shared as a textual reference to organizational operations. The deck has terminology used by the company in this transition, sections of dialogue from the May quarter 1 earnings meeting with the CEO of Victoria's Secret & Co Martin Waters, and brand insights from the past quarter. Press releases, social media content, earned media, and audio/visual content shared by the company were also analyzed to develop this case study. Yin describes the case study research method as a "comprehensive research strategy" (Yin, 1994) which means a variety of materials are referenced to develop conclusions from research (Norander & Brandhorst, 2021). The use of various types of materials for this case study were beneficial in creating a more well rounded perspective on the actions taken in the case being examined.

To develop this case study a critical discourse analysis method was employed. A critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used in social science research, specifically with interest pertaining to "semiotic dimensions of power, injustice, abuse, and political-economic or cultural change in society" (Fairclough, Mulderrig, & Wodak, 2011). In a critical discourse analysis, discourse is viewed as a form of social practice which encompasses both the event being examined and the elements which surround said event such as the environment, institution, situations, and social structure (Fairclough, Mulderrig, & Wodak, 2011). It's theorized that the use of language as discourse "makes its own small contribution to reproducing and/or transforming society, and

culture” (Fairclough, Mulderrig, & Wodak, 2011). Through this lens it is evident that not only is the discourse event an important characteristic of examining a case, but that the social reaction from the discursive message is also important to our understanding of the case. The examination of discourse in this form of analysis is paired with a social critique which is employed to explain or intervene in a social phenomena (Fairclough, Mulderrig, & Wodak, 2011). Critical discourse analysis does not imply a passive examination of cases, but rather engages with social practice and relationships, taking a side in the situation being examined. This style of analysis differs from other analytical approaches as it is not impartial. The position a CDA takes is not defined at the beginning of a research case, but rather defined through research gathered during the study. The value of a CDA for this case study is that the method is an academic study of contemporary phenomena that deals with issues of culture, marginalization and power (Fairclough, Mulderrig, & Wodak, 2011). Given the focus on defining, and redefining, concepts of beauty and femininity relevant to this case, CDA helps make clear the “dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and all the diverse elements of the situation(s), institutions(s), and social structure(s) which frame it” (Fairclough, Mulderrig, & Wodak, 2011). Meaning that a CDA helps inform us of how concepts of beauty and femininity in this case have a “two-way” relationship where the event, the definition of femininity through communications messaging, reinforces social norms, but also contributes to its creation and transformation. It’s theorized that discourse is “socially influential” which draws attention to the power of the social impact of the discursive event (Fairclough, Mulderrig, & Wodak, 2011).

This case study will utilize documentation starting in 2018 to that of the present day. This time period will encapsulate the gradual decline of sales and positive impressions about the brand. It’s been theorized that a case study as a research method provides a greater understanding

of the dynamics present within single settings (Culter, 2002). This reinforces the appropriateness of examining Victoria's Secret as they are currently in the midst of creating major changes internally and externally. The purpose of having both the internal lens of an interview and the external lens of textual analysis of messaging produced by the brand will hopefully clarify the present challenges and triumphs that come with rebranding an international company. Victoria's Secret has not only changed how they message women, but how they communicate with the media at large. Due to serious changes in transparency policies the inclusivity and openness that the brand has tried to push in external messaging is also being reflected internally. This validated the methods of combining interviewing and textual analysis because it gives a clearer depiction of the scale of the brand transformation and what it may or may not take for a successful rebrand to occur.

It is important to note that this case will not produce a generalizable theory. Yin argues that a single case study method cannot produce statistical generalization since it is only examining a single instance of the phenomenon being studied (Norander & Brandhorst, 2021). With this in mind, statistics will be presented in this case, but they will be derived directly from Victoria's Secret to describe actions taken by the brand rather than to draw conclusions about PR practices as a whole. A research study regarding the physical size of Victoria's Secret models over the past 20 years will be referenced to create a baseline understanding of what the stereotypical body size of VS models is. This will be used when analyzing product sizing on the retail website and model usage in media created by the company.

Changes in the brand's social media messaging was also analyzed as part of this case study. Instagram will serve as the social media outlet examined because, according to a dossier on social media usage in 2021, Instagram is one of the most popular forms of social media in the

United States having a market share of 6% preceded by Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest (Statista, 2021). Instagram also has a range of post styles which create an informative visual reference. Numbers on types of posts, models included, impressions, and frequency of subjects will be gathered as part of the research process.

Internal information regarding messaging, brand concept, communication tactics, and statistics about brand impressions was also gathered and analyzed. The Instagram analysis begins with the brand's first post in 2018 and was directed by notable changes made in posting patterns over the course of four sections. The first section examined starts from the first post to the first time a more size-inclusive model is shown. A size-inclusive model will be discerned as a woman who appears to fit a size larger than 32B which was the standard Victoria's Secret model size identified in a study referenced during the analysis (Maymore, 2020). The second section will be the time period between that initial size-inclusive post and the next time a more diverse model appears. The third section will be a month sampling taken from December 1st to January 2nd in preparation for the first interview with the communications executive. The fourth and final section analyzed will be February 7th to March 7th as that captures the launch of the "Cloud Love Collection" campaign. The purpose of this method of gathering internal and external data is to develop conclusions about how internal strategy is reflected externally to revive a brand's image. Information will be collected from annual company profile reports to gain a general understanding of consumer reactions as a possible correlation to changing brand identity.

Another important part of this case study will be to examine produced media such as the "VS Podcast" which is a series of interviews with members of the "VS Collective," press releases, promotional videos, and stories shared by the company. Five press releases by

Victoria's Secret & Co and Limited Brands inc. will be used to reference terminology used by the company when describing changes in leadership, new campaigns, and the split of VS from its parent company. The podcast produced by Victoria's Secret will be used to understand how the new brand ambassadors are utilized by the company, what content the brand broadcasts from the conversations, and what purpose the podcast is serving. A new campaign by the company called "Cloud Love" will be analyzed as the most up-to-date action taken by the brand. A press release and promotional Instagram content will be examined to understand the strategy for this activation. The Victoria's Secret retail website will be analyzed to comprehend what changes have been made to products, models, sizing, and terminology. The corporate Victoria's Secret & Co website will also be used to ascertain what the company's public mission, values, and diversity equity and inclusion policies are. These materials will provide perspective to the brand voice Victoria's Secret is trying to convey. In contrast to this collection of produced media, an examination of earned media through major news outlets such as the *New York Times*, *Business of Fashion*, *The Cut*, and *Vogue* was also conducted. The impressions shared by reporters at news outlets will provide perspective to how the rebranding efforts by Victoria's Secret are being received, interpreted, and communicated. These articles will also provide direct quotes from company leaders, both past and current, to illuminate different leadership styles and attitudes of executives dictating the direction of the brand.

Chapter 3

Victoria's Secret Background

In the 1970s undergarments were considered utilitarian. Women's lingerie was reserved for special occasions such as honeymoons and anniversaries. The primary place to buy lingerie

was at department stores which deterred men from buying for their partners. In 1977, Roy Raymond found a need for a new form of lingerie store after being “too embarrassed” to shop for his wife. He wanted to create a store which allowed men to feel at ease shopping for their loved ones. His vision led to a Victorian-themed lingerie store in Palo Alto, California marking the beginning of Victoria’s Secret. The company sent a nationwide catalog which attracted customers to this new vision for women's undergarments. This coincided with the rise of the women's movement inspiring new preferences for products such as bras. Despite the revolutionary vision for the product, in 1982 Victoria’s Secret was on the brink of bankruptcy. During this time Leslie Wexner had started The Limited in Columbus, Ohio. Another revolutionary brand of the time, The Limited sold athletic sets to women which was a relatively untapped market at the time. The Limited had had tremendous growth going from 11 stores in 1970 to 188 by 1977. Looking to acquire more brands to create a conglomerate, Wexner began scouting new companies. On a business trip in San Francisco, Wexner stumbled upon Victoria’s Secret. He had never seen anything like it in the US and saw the potential for another groundbreaking market. He acquired Victoria’s Secret in 1982, marking the upward trajectory for the brand (Barr 2013).

Wexner went to Europe to observe how lingerie was marketed to women and came back with a mission to create attainable fantasy, glamor and luxury in womens lingerie while also maintaining its original strategy of being a comfortable shopping experience for men. By 1995 Victoria’s Secret had 670 stores across the country and was worth \$1.9 billion dollars (Barr, 2013). Victoria’s Secret as a brand revolutionized the womens’ underwear industry and made ‘sexy’ commonplace (Schlossberg, 2015). The brand brought affordability and accessibility to the lingerie industry while also maintaining an image of exclusivity and luxury (Adler, 2010).

After Wexner's purchase, Victoria's Secret quickly "helped shape society's view of female sexuality and beauty ideals" (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021).

By the mid 1990s, Victoria's Secret had solidified itself as the top undergarment brand in the nation. It was during this time that VS launched its most successful and iconic campaign, the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show. The fashion show ran annually, recruiting the top supermodels in the world to participate such as Tyra Banks and Heidi Klum. In 1999 the show was aired online, being described as an "internet-breaking moment" as 1.5 million viewers caused the crash of the site (Hanbury, 2021). The communications team at Victoria's Secret "understood the allure of the personal brand, hitting just at the moment before Instagram would transform the notion of fame" (Friedman, 2021). They strategically trained their models to represent the brand and cultivate their own profiles and individual brands giving power to Angels inductees (Friedman, 2021). Becoming an "Angel" in the Victoria's Secret fashion show was a catalyst for launching many models' careers into stardom (Hanbury, 2021).

In the early 2000s, Sharen Turney became the CEO of Victoria's Secret after directing a brand identity shift in their catalogs from "Playboy" to "Vogue." Under the watchful eye of the female CEO over the course of nine years, VS sales increased by 70%. Victoria's Secret utilized the rise of social media to their advantage. Their sexy imagery and click-bait worthy campaigns advanced the fame of their brand and their brand spokespeople, the Victoria's Secret Angels. The rise in on-demand universal access to curated Victoria's Secret messaging and imagery on social media concealed the lengths "Angels" underwent to achieve their physique such as extreme dieting and intensive exercise nearly unachievable by the modern woman (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021).

One of the standout communication crises the company suffered over the course of their relevance was the 2014 “Perfect Body” campaign which attempted to attract customers by showcasing different product styles, but used predominantly white, “rail thin” models creating a racially and physically exclusive narrative about what they ascertained as the “perfect body” (Kibbe, 2021). This campaign reinforced their stance on “Victoria’s Secret’s monolithic beauty standard” (Kibbe, 2021). The outrage from the internet community over the launch of this campaign highlights the growing voice from consumer communities intended to hold brands accountable. The reaction “highlighted a breadth of beauty ideals and subcultures and a growing acceptance of a variety of gender expressions, while also offering a platform for complaints against brands seen as exclusionary” (Kibbe, 2021). The following year, “the company’s share of the U.S. women’s underwear market dropped to 21 percent last year from 32 percent in 2015,” ((Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021). The ‘Perfect Body’ campaign is a standout instance of the divergence of consumer voice and the leadership of Victoria’s Secret to present ideas of femininity.

Despite the negative attention from this campaign, Sharen Turney was a successful leader during her tenure as CEO, stepping down in 2016 (Hanbury, 2021). Leslie Wexner took back leadership of the company. Following Wexner’s reinstatement came serious missteps by the company. The hugely successful catalog was terminated along with swimwear, another extremely popular part of the brand. From 2016 to 2018 Victoria’s Secret suffered major declines in sales and customer popularity. They failed to adjust with changing consumer trends that steered away from products like the trademark VS Bombshell pushup bra. Market shares and quality of products declined (Hanbury, 2021). The Victoria’s Secret fashion show drove nearly \$7 million in sales, but by 2018 customers were not mystified by the annual fashion show as they

once were (Friedman, 2021). Ed Razek, CMO of Victoria's Secret and integral executive member since the 90s, was quoted on controversial opinions about plus size and transgender models in the fashion show and was accused of various sexual harassment offenses during previous shows. These dark undertones combined with an evident disregard for consumer desires led to the cancellation of the show after 2018. When Razek stepped down that year it opened the floodgates to the flawed, misogynistic leadership and culture within the company (Hanbury, 2021). Razek's leadership further illustrated the struggle between consumer interests and Victoria's Secret's brand identity and leadership. The current CEO, Martin Waters, commented for a *New York Times* article about the company's consumer insights saying, "when the world was changing, we were too slow to respond" (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021). The decision makers at the company were excluding certain social groups in a time when there was a spread in the conviction that "bra wearers are not just cis-women but also trans-women and non-binaries" (Kibbe, 2021).

Wexner's second reign at the company included a male dominant board of directors determining decisions within the company which did not reflect the changing interests of consumers towards more body positive and natural imagery to market to women. Only a year after Razek's resignation, Wexner and Victoria's Secret were exposed for connections to the sex-offender Jeffrey Epstein. In 2020, Wexner stepped down as chairman and CEO of L. Brands which was the parent company of Victoria's Secret. In the summer of 2021 L. Brands spun off Victoria's Secret which created a stand alone brand as opposed to being associated with the company (Sorkin, 2021). Martin Waters was appointed CEO of Victoria's Secret. The company hired three new C suite executives, all of whom were female. Currently, the board of directors at Victoria's Secret is all female, apart from one male board member. Martin Waters, CEO of

Victoria's Secret, commented on some of the internal changes occurring in the company and their influence on its "transformation." He said, "I've known that we needed to change this brand for a long time, we just haven't had the control of the company to be able to do it," (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021). Along with said leadership changes was the departure from the parent company Limited Brands Inc. Further, the Victoria's Secret Angels fashion show and spokes-women have been replaced by a collection of activist and influential women in popular culture. The eight women, known as the VS Collective, have a range of racial and gender identities, body sizes, and contributions to female causes (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021). The physical stores are undergoing changes as well such as the brightening of interiors, mannequins depicting a wider range of shapes and sizes, a pregnancy line, a mastectomy bra, and the imagery of Angels completely removed (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021). The CEO commented on these changes in the brand's identity referencing its initial inspiration, "we needed to stop being about what men want and to be about what women want" (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021).

The other tactic Victoria's Secret is currently implementing in their "transformation" is in their strategic communication approach. Waters commented on the messaging strategy changes stating: "we are less focused on a specific demographic target and more focused on being broadly inclusive of all women of all shapes and sizes and colors and ethnicities and genders and areas of interest" (Sorkin et. al. 2021). Victoria's Secret in its history has undergone a transition from trying to define female composition and sexuality to attempting to reflect consumer interests in the modern fashion market. Victoria's Secret once changed culture, but more recently, in a changing culture failed to maintain its leadership in the industry and are now grappling with transforming its brand identity to respond to the modern, communicative consumer.

Chapter 4

Analysis

Cultural Shifts: In and Around Victoria's Secret

For many years Victoria's Secret was credited with defining femininity for women around the world (Silver-Greenberg et. al, 2020). The Victoria's Secret Angels dispersed the message among millions that to be feminine meant being skinny and white. This feminine identity had been challenged for decades prior through movements such as the body positivity movement, but the growing access to the internet and social media catalyzed more outspoken consumers challenging the cultural norm of femininity which Victoria's Secret helped construct and reinforce (Hayden, 2021).

In 2017, the #metoo movement went viral during the Harvey Weinstein trials where the acclaimed Hollywood director was charged with sexual assault. A few years later body positivity was gaining traction on social media as people around the world began to speak out about celebrating their natural body types (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Ironically, during this rise in acceptance of more diverse definitions of femininity, Victoria's Secret models increasingly got smaller (Digravio, 2020). In a study done by a group of Boston University Medical Cosmetic researchers found that from 1995 to 2018 Victoria's Secret model sizes had a sharp decline. Her findings were obtained through the online Fashion Model Directory which provided measurements of models walking in the Victoria's Secret Fashion show such as "hair color, eye color, height, bust, waist, hips, dress size, race, and age at time of first runway show" (Maymone et al., 2020). The study did not measure weight, but rather compared overall model dimensions of all participating models during the time period in question. The team found that, "collectively, models shrank roughly two inches across their bustlines, one inch around their waistlines, and nearly half an inch off their hiplines" (Digravio, 2020). The average bust, waist, and hip size of

VS models started at “32.9, 24.7, and 34.9 inches in 1995” and decreased to “32.0, 23.6, and 34.4 inches” by 2018 (Maymore, 2020). The dress sizes of VS models went from “5.2 in 1995 to 3.7 in 2018” whereas American women by 2018 had an average dress size of 16 to 18 (Maymore, 2020). Despite the shrinking body diversity, the number of non-white models in the fashion show increased by about 16% from 1995 to 2018 (Maymore, 2020). The decline in model sizes contradicts the increasing average sizes of American women during that time period. Along with these statistics came another finding that cosmetic surgery to create the desired “waist to hip” ratio for women was increased by over 4,000 percent (Digravio, 2020).

In 2014, during the time period covered in this study, Victoria’s Secret ran the public relations campaign titled “Perfect body” which showcased 10 models in new VS products (Kibbe, 2021). Only one of the models in the campaign was not white and all 10 models represented the average sizing from the BU sizing study. This campaign was met with great criticism by consumers as it reinforced gender stereotypes that were becoming far less recognizable in the target population. In an interview with a communications executive at Victoria’s Secret & Co she surmised what consumers during that time likely began to conclude about the brand. She stated, “They saw the marketing and said ‘okay, well that’s the kind of product they sell. They don’t make products for me’” (Interview, 2022).

As body acceptance gained popularity, Victoria’s Secret failed to respond. In 2016, Sharen Turney stepped down as CEO of Victoria’s Secret and Les Wexner, the originator of the Victoria’s Secret brand which was popularized in the early 1990s, was reinstated as CEO and chairman of the board (Hanbury, 2021). In Wexner’s role as CEO he was quoted sharing his perspective on feminine beauty when an employee brought up the trend retailers were adopting to embrace different body types stating, “nobody goes to a plastic surgeon and says, ‘Make me

fat” (Silver-Greenberg et. al, 2020). Wexner was not the only executive with major influence making sexist, ageist, and exclusionary comments about femininity. Over the course of Wexner’s second regime, Victoria’s Secret’s internal crises were being exposed on a global level. Ed Razek, CMO of Victoria’s Secret, made inflammatory comments in a 2018 Vogue interview about feminine beauty and his perceived definitions of it. During this time he was also under fire for serious sexual harrasment claims by models and female employees at the company (Hanbury, 2021). In tandem with the accusations being made against Razek came the final Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show in 2018 which had been the most successful public relations campaign by the company since its conception. From 2015 to 2020 Victoria’s Secret went from having 32 percent of the U.S. Women’s Intimates apparel market to 16 percent (Ell, 2021).

In 2020, the *New York Times* published an investigative journalism piece about the rampant culture of misogyny, sexual harrasment, and toxic leadership within Victoria’s Secret. Wexner was quoted several times in the article and after major allegations about Wexner’s involvement with the sex offender Jeffery Epstein, he stepped down from his role as CEO during that same month in February, 2020 (Hanbury, 2021). The company openly admits that “we were too late to change when culture changed” (Interview, 2022). The internal crises that Victoria’s Secret suffered and diversion from consumer interests caused the brand, which once defined femininity, to struggle to introduce solutions which would lead modern cultural and consumer relevancy.

Organizational Response - Internal

In the spring of 2021, it was announced in a press release by L Brands Inc. that L Brands Inc. and Victoria’s Secret would split (L Brands Inc., 2021). A brand new group of board members were appointed to Victoria’s Secret & Co as it became a stand alone company.

Victoria's Secret & Co is now the parent company of Victoria's Secret, Victoria's Secret Beauty, and Pink. Six of the seven board members appointed were women (L Brands Inc., 2021). The only male on the board is Martin Waters who became CEO of Victoria's Secret & Co in 2021 (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021).

From Waters' induction into the role of CEO, radical changes were made in the company. The communications executive interviewed for this research summarized the first tactic for transforming the brand as recognizing the missteps in the company stating, "we needed to right those wrongs and we didn't have the leadership in place to do that. We just needed people to get out of the way so we could fix them" (Interview, 2022). After leadership changes were underway, the new CEO Martin Waters stated that the organization had to redefine their mission, "we have a clear reason why we exist at Victoria's now, and that is to inspire women around the world with products and experiences that uplift them and champion them and support their journey" (Victoria's Secret, 2021). Martin outlined the new purpose of the brand to advocate for women. He described the shifts that would be made as "moving from what men want to what women want. We're moving from sexy for a few to sexy for all. We're moving from a look to a feeling. It's about including most women rather than excluding most women and being grounded in real life rather than mostly unattainable" (Victoria's Secret, 2021). The mission to include "most women" and stray away from the "unattainable" directly contradicts previous tactics for cultivating Victoria's Secret's brand image. This was a dramatic shift in the goals and mindset of the company leadership where the emphasis is now on empowering consumers as they are rather than before when leadership made statements on how consumers should be (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021). Changing the mission from telling to listening and building community with customers helped define the steps the company intended to take to win back consumers.

From an internal document, shared by the interviewee, regarding the transformation the company intends to make came a slide titled “Brand Projection Goals” which aimed to highlight the then and now mentality for the mission and work of the company. The company phrased the old identity as “permission” which described themes of “what men want,” “sexy for few,” “a ‘look,’” “excluding most women,” “forever young,” and “out of touch” (Victoria’s Secret, 2021). The new identity was packaged as “celebration” in which the brand intends to be focused on “what women want,” “sexy for all,” “a ‘feeling,’” “including all women,” “age doesn’t preclude sexy,” and “grounded in real life” (Victoria’s Secret, 2021). These new pillars of the company goals helped formulate the mission statement that can be found on the Victoria’s Secret & Co. Corporate website. The new mission states:

“Victoria’s Secret is the leading specialty retailer of women’s lingerie, prestige fragrance, body care, accessories, athletic and lounge wear. We are on a mission to champion, celebrate and advocate for women and the causes that matter most to them and through the transformative power of our products and experiences bring inspiration, confidence, comfort and joy to women around the world” (Victoria’s Secret & Co, 2022).

After changing leadership, brand purpose, goals, and the mission for the brand, the company needed to change several internal operations to come into alignment with the goals for its rebrand. Victoria’s Secret had to get their “own house in order” before moving on to external strategy (Interview, 2022). Several areas the company addressed in its internal overhaul were consumer insights, Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI), and communications being utilized more heavily throughout the company (Interview, 2022).

In the interview for this research, the communications executive highlighted one of the major missteps the company made: losing track of consumer voice. They confirmed that the

consumer insight team which once existed to inform the brand of the desires of consumers had “gone away for a period of time,” they stated, “we had this really robust consumer insights team and then there was a period of time where, I think there might have been somebody who still did some of it, but it kind of went away” (Interview, 2022). The executive believes that a major strategic failure in the company was not listening to the consumer which is an integral part of being a retailer. The interviewee compared the communication channel between Victoria’s Secret and its consumers before and after the transitions in the company as, “before it was here’s what you should look like, how you should feel. Versus now we’re really listening back and uplifting voices” (Interview, 2022). In several interviews Martin Waters referred to the customer, “her,” as being the key informant for the rebranding efforts. He described the process as listening to the customer and making changes based on what was being asked to uplift “her” story, “her” appearance preferences, and support “her” journey through womanhood (Victoria’s Secret, 2021). Now the company has reintroduced an entire team dedicated to consumer insights. They utilize a panel regularly to get feedback on ideas, which is essentially their ongoing focus group and rely on customer surveys to inform choices made by the brand (Interview, 2022). The company is now trying to leverage that information in ways they had neglected in the past, informing current tactics in the company (Interview, 2022). Waters argues the most recent results of consumer listening and relationship building with the customer can be seen through communications efforts such as “our recent Mother’s Day, Bombshell Because, and PINK Mental Health Month campaigns” which he sees as examples of how the brand is “reflecting, celebrating and championing our customers and the different moments and dimensions of their lives” (Victoria’s Secret, 2021).

Another step Victoria's Secret took to internally shift its structure was to integrate Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) into all facets of the business. Previously, DEI employees were housed in the HR department of the company. Now the company is integrating "DEI touch points" into various parts of the business. Brand associates believe it's an important part of changing communications internally and externally to better reflect a larger customer base (Interview, 2022). On the corporate website there is a page on inclusion where Victoria's Secret has outlined their intention for DEI in their business, "we believe that Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Make Us Stronger and it's a part of everything we do" (Victoria's Secret, 2022). Some ways they have committed to further improving their DEI efforts are through monitoring cultural changes, employee satisfaction, engagement with minority-owned third-party companies, and focusing on charitable work related to racial equity (Victoria's Secret, 2022). These newly defined DEI initiatives translate into changes in product terminology and racial and physical representation in stores and online are examined later in this analysis.

The role of communications at Victoria's Secret has also been elevated in the company. The president of external communications meets with the CEO every other week, tying communications directly to the top (Interview, 2022). The company has reprioritized communications as a tool rather than a defense when cultivating the brand from the inside out. The communications executive described the new mindset within the company as "to have a successful communications team, having access to the information directly from the top is super important, but also being integrated across the business so that you can hear things that are going on and connect the dots" (Interview, 2022). In order to integrate communications across all aspects of the company, a "Narrative Taskforce" has been implemented to make sure everything the company is doing is "polishing the brand, not tarnishing it" (Interview, 2022). The narrative

task force meets internally and is dedicated to thoughtful communication which supports the mission of transparent and community minded messaging (Interview, 2022). The focus of the narrative task force is also to catch potential moments of self-inflicted crisis which was a trend in the old regime (Interview, 2022).

The organization's internal changes have been made over time with the intention of informing changes that the company has begun to make externally. The CEO of Victoria's Secret Beauty commented on the shifts in the mission of the company in a Women's Wear Daily article stating "advocating for women is not about signage. It's about how you interact with the customer...It will unfold over time. And it's our North Star. It will literally touch every facet of what we do" (Ell, 2021). This exemplifies the company's strategy of completely changing its goals and mission as an organization to guide consumer centered changes externally for the brand. Waters was quoted in an internal document reviewed for this research about the timeline for changes underway for the brand, "rather than expecting a big reveal or a big relaunch of the brand, this will– the change in the positioning that I've just described, will show up in everything that we do on a day-to-day basis" (Victoria's Secret, 2021). Waters, Unis, and many of the other executives tasked with resurrecting the brand have demonstrated through public statements that they believe successfully changing Victoria's Secret requires starting within and progressively introducing external changes to ensure sustainable and lasting change. When discussing the rebranding efforts by Victoria's Secret, the communications executive stated, "we don't call it a rebrand because rebrand to me is like a facelift, right? It's like, okay put some lipstick on and no here's something that started internally first, so it just took so long" (Interview, 2022). Rebuilding the brand from the inside out has been no small task, especially when the external efforts have had to contradict decades worth of practices by Victoria's Secret.

Organizational Response - External

One of the first places the transformation by Victoria's Secret has occurred is the retailer website. When looking at the product description pages, the descriptions are littered with phrases such as "Victoria's Secret is all about giving your curves some love" from the "Push-up Bra" description and "there is a push-up to go with every look to make sure you always show off your curves" (Victoria's Secret, 2022). The "Full Coverage Bra" descriptions contain characterizations such as "for everyone who wants a comfortable and flattering fit" and "you can stay confident all day long" (Victoria's Secret, 2022). VS "Lightly Lined Bras" promise to "let your natural curves shine" and that "Victoria's Secret has the perfect shape for you" (Victoria's Secret, 2022). These descriptions show the company's effort to gear its messaging towards its consumers in a way that encourages them to try VS products because they will be an accessory to the shopper's unique beauty rather than create beauty within the customer. The website also has removed "bombshell," the trademark VS bra from anywhere on the site, but the terminology "Angels" still exists in the form of a collection of undergarments known as the "Dream Angels Collection" (Victoria's Secret, 2022). The website also showcases models of a range of sizes and racial identities demonstrating wear and fit of products (Victoria's Secret, 2022).

Another branded part of the company to change was a national scale "store refresh." The store refresh was a multi-million-dollar investment as there are over 850 stores across the United States (Interview, 2022). The aesthetic for Victoria's Secret stores in the past was dark walls and ceilings, mannequins which were no larger than size 32B, and dimly lit staging of products (Shunnarah, 2021). The renovations included replacing old imagery with a wider range of models such as "transgender and plus-size models" (Ell, 2019). The color scheme in stores has lightened as well as the lighting. Plus-sized mannequins, floor-to-ceiling mirrors, and a greater

emphasis on swimwear and activewear have been incorporated into store layouts (Shunnarah, 2021). The goal of the renovations was to create a welcoming environment that reflects the changes the company is trying to make to inspire customers and provide another concrete proof point of the brand’s commitment and ability to change (Shunnarah, 2021).

Another tangible change the company has made is with product offerings and size diversity. The company plans to carry a “more expanded size range... we are introducing larger cup and band sizes for the customers” (Shunnarah, 2021). Figure 1 captures the most up to date sizing options Victoria’s Secret offers on the retail website.

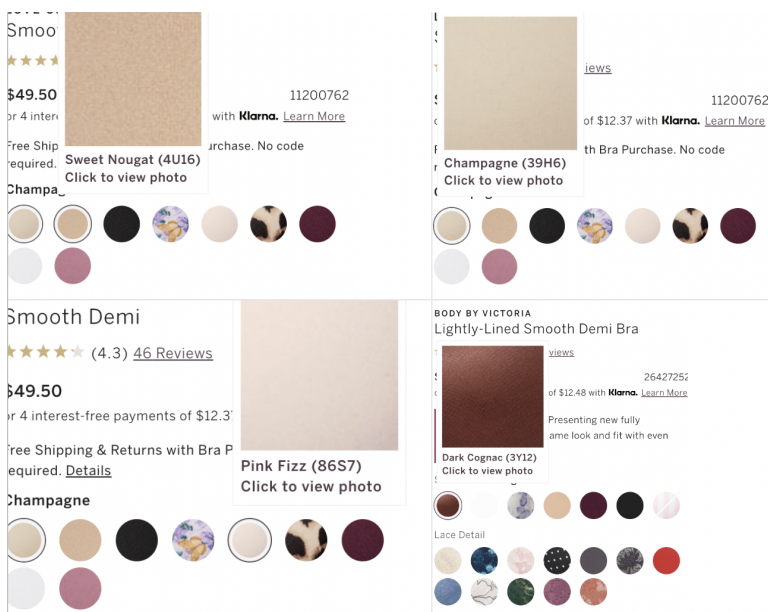
Figure 1.

Size ▾	Collection ▾	Style ▾	Color ▾	<input type="checkbox"/> AVAILABLE AT Select Store	SORT BY Recommended ▾	
<input type="checkbox"/> XXS	<input type="checkbox"/> XS-M	<input type="checkbox"/> 32DD (E)	<input type="checkbox"/> 36C	<input type="checkbox"/> 40B	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	
<input type="checkbox"/> XS	<input type="checkbox"/> L-XXL	<input type="checkbox"/> 32DDD (F)	<input type="checkbox"/> 36D	<input type="checkbox"/> 40C	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	
<input type="checkbox"/> S	<input type="checkbox"/> 30A	<input type="checkbox"/> 34A	<input type="checkbox"/> 36DD (E)	<input type="checkbox"/> 40D	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	
<input type="checkbox"/> Small-DD	<input type="checkbox"/> 30B	<input type="checkbox"/> 34B	<input type="checkbox"/> 36DDD (F)	<input type="checkbox"/> 40DD (E)	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	
<input type="checkbox"/> M	<input type="checkbox"/> 30C	<input type="checkbox"/> 34C	<input type="checkbox"/> 38B	<input type="checkbox"/> 40DDD (F)		
<input type="checkbox"/> Medium-DD	<input type="checkbox"/> 30D	<input type="checkbox"/> 34D	<input type="checkbox"/> 38C	<input type="checkbox"/> 42D		
<input type="checkbox"/> L	<input type="checkbox"/> 32A	<input type="checkbox"/> 34DD (E)	<input type="checkbox"/> 38D	<input type="checkbox"/> 42DD (E)		
<input type="checkbox"/> Large-DD	<input type="checkbox"/> 32B	<input type="checkbox"/> 34DDD (F)	<input type="checkbox"/> 38DD (E)	<input type="checkbox"/> 44C		
<input type="checkbox"/> XL	<input type="checkbox"/> 32C	<input type="checkbox"/> 36A	<input type="checkbox"/> 38DDD (F)	<input type="checkbox"/> 44D		
<input type="checkbox"/> XXL	<input type="checkbox"/> 32D	<input type="checkbox"/> 36B	<input type="checkbox"/> 38G	<input type="checkbox"/> 1		

Beyond sizing changes, which is a clear tactic under their body inclusivity initiatives, product colors have been renamed. When discussing DEI efforts and product colors in the communications interview, the representative shared how before beige bras were called “nude” and without their DEI focus, the company didn’t catch the exclusionary effects naming a beige bra “nude” would have since there are many shades of “nude” in real life. Renaming color swatches for products went all the way back to working with designers and instructing them on

more inclusive terminology (Interview, 2022). Products now have names such as: “beige,” “Champagne,” “Black,” “toasted sugar,” and “praline” to name a few (Victoria’s Secret, 2022). Victoria’s Secret has also begun to satisfy new audiences' needs through the introduction of the nursing bra and the mastectomy bra. When examining the nursing bra sales page on Victoria’s Secret’s website a slender, white model is demoing the bras despite not being pregnant, but in promotional imagery the bra is being worn by a more accurate demographic (Victoria’s Secret, 2022). Figure 2 demonstrates a sampling of color swatches for Victoria’s Secret products found on their website.

Figure 2.



The mastectomy bra was launched in a two-fold approach as it was launched in October of 2021 in collaboration with the Stella Cares Foundation for breast cancer awareness and self care (Victoria’s Secret, 2021). The partnership with the Stella Cares Foundation is part of another external effort Victoria’s Secret & Co. is conducting to introduce more intentional and impactful Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts. The initiative with the Stella Cares foundation sets out to educate women about risks of breast cancer with the hashtag #CheckYourself,

donations to the foundation to further breast cancer prevention and support, and sales from mastectomy bra going directly to the foundation during breast cancer awareness month (Victoria's Secret, 2021). Another CSR effort the company has created is the "VS Global Fund" which was created to "accelerate the innovation in cancer research for women, by women" (Victoria's Secret, 2021). The company sees this as another way they are committing to their mission of being "the world's leading advocate for women" by not only supporting the cure for breast cancer, but also supporting female researchers to make those discoveries (Victoria's Secret, 2021). When discussing the organization's overall response to the cultural shifts which drastically changed the desires and purchasing habits of Victoria's Secrets consumers as well as the internal crisis that clouded the brand for several years, the communications executive described transforming the brand with the metaphor, "it's kind of like turning around the Titanic because we are so big" (Interview, 2022). The monumental challenge of completely "transforming" an international brand could not occur without the strategic and tactical messaging produced by the organization to match its changing identity.

Role of Strategic Communications

The old communication strategy at Victoria's Secret was to focus on reputation management, not engage in proactive outreach to media outlets, and not speak to business press whatsoever (Interview, 2022). When Martin Waters was appointed CEO he challenged the previous communications tactics with a new leading theme for all communications in and outside the company known as "radical transparency" (Interview, 2022). In one of the research interviews, the communications executive compared the old communication strategy to the new communication strategy stating, "Our old regime was very much like, don't really talk to the business press... we've kind of flipped that on its head since Martin has come to the role of

CEO” (Interview, 2022). The new strategy of “radical transparency” involves frequent and transparent communication with stakeholders, prioritization of communications at the company, prioritizing involvement in external narratives, and actively reaching out for press coverage (Interview, 2022). Before the transformation of the brand became public, Waters held meetings daily and then weekly on Fridays with the communications team until campaigns such as the VS Collective were launched. At the end of quarterly earnings periods, which Victoria’s Secret now “invites” the public to view in press releases (Victoria’s Secret, 2021), Waters has completely unscripted Q&As with shareholders which is radically different from the previous strategy of limited external communication (Interview, 2022). The structure of the communications teams at Victoria’s Secret are internal communications, a Public Relations team, External Communications, and hired agencies supporting the transformation (Interview, 2022).

Victoria’s Secret changed its communications strategies in both working with earned media and owned media during its ongoing transformation. One of the biggest changes in the communications strategy has been to work with media sources to own the external narrative the company wants to present (Interview, 2022). An instance of this was shared during the research interview with the communications executive. In February of 2020, the *New York Times* was conducting an investigation into the toxic culture rumored to exist inside Victoria’s Secret. The article “‘Angels’ in Hell: The Culture of Misogyny Inside Victoria’s Secret” by Jessica Silver-Greenberg, Katherine Rosman, Sapna Maheshwari and James B. Stewart was published exposing many of the internal issues that existed within the organization. In 2021, the communications team was considering where to present the story of Victoria’s Secret’s ongoing commitment to a brand transformation. There were many outlets that they saw as contenders, but chose to pitch the story to the *New York Times* despite the article which had besmirched the brand

in the previous year. The executive recalls the decision as being one that would have never happened with the old strategy of the communications team, but was a step towards the radical transparency and ownership of the external narrative which Waters was trying to instill (Interview, 2022). The article titled, 'Victoria's Secret Swaps Angels for 'What Women Want.' Will They Buy It?' by Spana Maheshwari and Vanessa Friedman ran in June of 2021. The choice to speak directly to the *New York Times* was considered a relationship builder between the company and the news outlet which led to over 400 related media articles running after that. Other areas where the communications team has worked more proactively and collaboratively with media outlets has been through willingness to engage with the creation of the upcoming hulu docuseries "The Rise and Fall of Victoria's Secret" and an upcoming book about the company (Interview, 2022).

While the communications team grappled with a new form of dialogue with the news media, it had to also transform its owned media outlets such as social media and public relations campaign messaging. An essential element of this was redefining its target audience to match the mission of the brand. The goal of being the "leading advocate for all women" creates a real challenge in defining who the brand messaging is intended for. Especially when the mission is to be by a woman's side throughout her journey in life (Victoria's Secret, 2021). One insight Waters highlights from the team's research in building a new strategy was that women tended to feel they "aged out or sized out" of Victoria's Secret so a focus of the brand representatives has been to incorporate models of diverse ages and sizes to help individuals reimagine themselves as VS customers (Victoria's Secret, 2021). The customers the Victoria's Secret's transformation is trying to reach are those of "any age," loyal customers, customers who are new to the brand, and

customers who were alienated from the brand (Interview, 2022). To do so the communications team has utilized a diverse array of influencers to target specific communities (Interview, 2022).

With the death of the “Angels,” who had been a long-time spokeswoman for the brand, came the opportunity for a new kind of Victoria’s Secret spokesperson. One of the first public relations campaigns launched by the company during the transformation was the “VS Collective” (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021). The VS Collective launched in June of 2021 with the intention of “creating a platform that will build new, deeper relationships with all women. Through a series of collaborations, business partnerships and cause-related initiatives, we’re bringing new dimensions to our brand experience” with the final goal of transforming how we connect with and show up for women,” commented Martha Pease who is the Chief Marketing Officer of Victoria’s Secret (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021). The members of the collective are diverse in their roles in society. Those members include:

- Adut Akech – Refugee, Mental Wellness Supporter, Model
- Amanda de Cadenet – Journalist, Photographer, GirlGaze Founder & Equality Advocate
- Eileen Gu – World Champion Free Skier, Youth & Women's Sports Advocate, Model
- Bella Hadid - Advocate, Entrepreneur, Model
- Hailey Bieber - Model & Advocate
- Megan Rapinoe – LGBTQIA+ Activist, Pay Equity Crusader, Professional Soccer Player
- Naomi Oskara - Athlete, Equality Advocate, Designer, Entrepreneur
- Paloma Elsesser – Body Advocate, Community Creator, Model
- Priyanka Chopra Jonas – Actor, Producer, Entrepreneur
- Valentina Sampaio – LGBTQIA+ Activist, Actor, Model (Victoria’s Secret, 2022)

In the article “Victoria’s Secret Swaps Angels for ‘What Women Want.’ Will They Buy It?” Megan Rapinoe commented on her decision to participate in the VS Collective, stating that she was won over by the acknowledgement of the brand’s executives about the missteps that occurred in the past. She also was impressed by the offer to have a role that extended beyond ambassadorship and has larger responsibilities such as consulting on company language, products, and company narrative (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021). When asked about still having similar influencers to VS Angels of the past, the communications executive responded with the theory that, “before it was about exclusion and now it’s about inclusion. Yes it’s possible we can have Hailey Bieber and we can have Paloma. That’s what it’s about whereas before, it was like this exclusive way” (Interview, 2022). The new goal of the spokeswoman for the company is about reach rather than idolization (Interview, 2022). Intriguingly mention of the collective is scarcely found on the actual retail site, but has a quiet presence on social media outlets such as instagram (Victoria’s Secret, 2022). Despite this, the collection has had an offshoot creation known as “VS Voices” which is a podcast hosted by one of the collective members, Amanda de Cadenet, interviewing other collective members. The goal of the podcast is to “connect with trailblazing women around the world to celebrate the multifaceted nature of the female experience” (Victoria’s Secret, 2021). Each of the collective members shares a variety of stories on a range of topics which are authentic to their personal experiences. For example, Priyanka Chopra Jonas’ episode discussed her upbringing, grief, loss, and race, Paloma Elsesser’s discussed addiction and body advocacy, Stella McCartney’s discussed breast cancer and motherhood. In the research interview the intention behind VS Voices was discussed:

“We have been focusing more on finding ways to share the women who we work with share their stories, and not their stories about working with us just their stories. Who are they?”

What are their lives like? What do they love? What keeps them motivated? What obstacles are they overcoming to get to where they are?” (Interview, 2022).

The Megan Rapinoe episode podcast provided a true test for the communications team’s commitment to authentic storytelling. In the podcast Rapinoe discussed things such as “socialism, defunding the police, all the things we think Megan Rapinoe would talk about” (Interview, 2022). From a Brand reputation standpoint this was troubling to consider publishing as a Victoria’s Secret produced piece of media as it could be potentially alienating, but after conferences with the task force team and CEO, the podcast ran without exclusions. It was an important moment for the brand to stick to the commitment of “her story and her voice” which was precisely what the Victoria’s Secret had set out to do when reconfiguring the communications strategy and company mission (Interview, 2022). The VS Voices podcast is one of the first steps the brand has taken to build more of a community out of the retail brand. The communications executive sees Victoria’s Secret evolving beyond being just a retail brand (Interview, 2022). Other places this can be seen is on social media where community offerings such as a virtual workout class week was promoted on instagram during the week of August 2nd, 2021 as a promotional piece for VS sport as well (victoriasecret, 2021).

Since the VS Collective there have been several campaigns over the course of the year, but none quite as groundbreaking as the “Love Cloud Collection” Campaign which launched in February of 2022 (Victoria’s Secret, 2022). In a press release by the company the campaign was described as a “first of its kind” for the brand which is modeled by eighteen “dynamic women, reinforcing Victoria’s Secret’s commitment to welcoming and celebrating all women” (Victoria’s Secret, 2022). The company considers this campaign to be a milestone in its steps to support the

vision for the future of the company. The Love Cloud Collection is designed for everyday comfort to “support women's daily needs” (Victoria’s Secret, 2022). Some of the models which have attracted the most media attention are three models ranging in ages from 47 to 53 and a Puerto Rican model named Sofía Jirau who has down syndrome, all firsts for the company (Shivaram, 2022). The whole purpose of the campaign is to demonstrate support for women in their everyday lives in a variety of ways. This campaign has attracted curiosity across the nation about these tactics the communications team is now implementing which are radically different from the reputation the brand maintained for so long.

Another piece of the company which was important to examine was its social media output. For this study Instagram was used as the primary source of information for social media trends and habits by Victoria’s Secret. Before examining the page, the “Community Guidelines” page on Victoria’s Secret & Co.’s corporate website was referenced to understand the mission behind social outlets. The page stated: “the activity and community we foster across all our social media properties must put that advocacy into action, by maintaining a safe, inviting, supportive, and inclusive space for all” (Victoria’s Secret, 2022). The intention behind social media as stated by the website is to build community with consumers. The Victoria’s Secret Instagram has 71.8 million followers. The page has 2,537 posts dating back to July 9th, 2019 (it seems all other posts have been archived). The page has 10 story highlights which include: “Swim,” “Love Cloud,” “Women's History Month,” “For love and Lemons x Victoria's Secret,” “Press,” “As Seen On,” “VS Voices,” “The VS Collective,” “Breast Cancer,” and “VS Guidelines.” The first plus sized model appeared on instagram on October 8th, 2019. The white model was used consecutively for posts on October 17th, 19th, 25th, 26th, and 28th as the only size inclusive representation. On January 23rd, 2020 (a few days before Wexner stepped down

from company leadership) a photograph with a group of models representing a mix of races and sizes was posted with the caption “All-new-and all about you. Join us as we redefine our lingerie landscape” foreshadowing the brand transformation. Other notable posts that shifted tone from the previous Victoria’s Secret instagram persona were a Black Lives Matter post following the murder of George Floyd on June 1st, 2020, Women’s History Month Interview series in March of 2021, a Mother’s day campaign in April of 2021, followed by the first appearance of a pregnant woman on April 20th, 2021, the first LBGQTQ post went live June 16th 2021, and finally on June 16th, 2021 the VS Collective was announced signifying the final shift of the page into a new direction of shared content (Instagram, 2022). To create a greater understanding of what the representation looked like of certain demographics beyond the more monumental post during the 4 year time frame, several tables were created to track representation in race and model size diversity.

The first time period analyzed in figure 3 was the first post still accessible on the instagram to the first appearance of a plus size model:

Figure 3.

VS Instagram from October 8th to October 17th 2019				
	Size			
Race	VS Convention	Moderate	Plus	Mix
White	13			
Mix with White	5			
Mix non White	0			
Non White	6			
Total posts	24			
<p>This table represents Victoria's Secret's first post still existing on their instagram to the first post where a woman who represents a body size which diverts from the conventional VS model size. It also tracks racial diversity representation of the models during that time. In this time period the same plus sized model is showcase in each post tracked.</p>				

The table highlights that in 24 posts, all the models were of the VS conventional size which was described earlier in the cultural shifts section. The next time period observed was in between posts of the seemingly token plus size model used on the social media page:

Figure 4.

VS Instagram from October 19th to October 28th 2019				
	Size			
Race	VS Convention	Moderate	Plus	Mix
White	15	2		
Mix with White				
Mix non White				
Non White	6			
Total posts	23			
This table represents Victoria's Secret's second plus size post on their instagram to the third time that model is showcased. In this time period the same plus sized model is showcase in each post tracked. It also tracks racial diversity representation of the models during that time.				

The purpose of sharing these two tables is to demonstrate that in 2019, while there were sparse posts containing models of sizes deviant from the VS conventional model size, it was rare. It also demonstrates the ratio of white to non white models in which non white model representation is dismal by comparison. The third table is a sampling of the instgram over the course of a month during the time that the interview for this research was conducted:

Figure 5.

VS Instagram from December 1st 2021 to January 2nd, 2022				
	Size			
Race	VS Convention	Moderate	Plus	Mix
White	24	3	2	2
Mix with White	3		1	16
Mix non White	1		1	4
Non White	8	1	3	
Total posts	69			
This table was a sampling of a month of VS instagram posts. The table tracks the race of the models represented in posts as well as their sizing.				

It is important to note that the volume of posts over the course of this month was much higher. Even so the range of diversity in race and body size has improved since 2019. The final table is from February 7th to March 7th during the time this analysis was conducted. This occurred in conjunction with two months that the brand chose to recognize, Black History Month and Women's History Month, and also the launch of the most inclusive campaign yet by the company “Love Cloud Collection”:

Figure 6.

VS Instagram from February 7th 2022 to March 7th, 2022							
	Size						
Race	VS Convention	Moderate	Plus	Mix	Maternity	Product post	Black History/Women's Month Posts
						14	9
White	11	5	1	0	0		
Non White	7	2	3	0	1		
Mix with White	0	0	0	16	0		
Mix non White	0	0	0	2	0		
Total posts	71						
This table represents a sampling of VS instagram posts from February 7th to March 7th 2022. The table tracks the race of the models represented in posts as well as their sizing. During this time frame there were feature posts for Black History Month, showcasing black female spotlights and Women's History month which shed light on female causes. This time span also encapsulates the launch of the "Love Cloud Collection" campaign which has the most age, size, race, and ability inclusive campaign the company has ever launched. Three of the feature posts included models ages 47 to 53, a model with down syndrome, and a pregnant model.							

Over the course of Victoria's Secret's Transformation they have taken many steps to improve their internal structure, diversify female narratives, listen to consumers, offer new products and change the aesthetic of their store. During each step of this process communications has been a vital part of owning the narrative of Victoria's Secret's fall from grace and attempts to right wrongs. Public relations messaging has aided in telling a new story for Victoria's Secret and taking the narrative a step further than physical changes, but the new story of Victoria's Secret's brand identity as well.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In 1982 Les Wexner, founder and CEO of The Limited clothing store, purchased Victoria's Secret from Roy Raymond who set out to revolutionize the lingerie purchasing experience for men (Barr 2013). By 1995 Victoria's Secret had 670 stores across the country and its worth was over one billion dollars (Barr 2013). Along with the rapid growth of the company came cultural shifts in how female undergarments were designed, used, and purchased by consumers. Many credit Victoria's Secret with transforming the definition of femininity by creating accessible luxury (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021). To promote this revolutionary concept, Victoria's Secret relied on spokeswomen, known as "Victoria's Secret Angels" which were slender, predominantly white, models who participated in all promotional activations by the brand (Maheshwari & Friedman, 2021). Victoria's Secret Angels helped define female beauty and sexuality through the brand's messaging and external communications for over a decade.

In one of the research interviews for this study, the communications representative stated, "we were a reflection of the times and yes we 1,000% reinforced that" (Interview, 2022). Despite

once being a definer and reinforcer of cultural norms, the brand's influence on consumers began to waver due to internal issues being exposed on a global scale, a disappearance of consumer listening strategies internally, and the lack of DEI considerations in product and promotion considerations, leading to Victoria's Secret's consistent decline in consumer relevance. Now, the brand has had to take major steps in the past two years as an attempt to reinvent themselves as a brand that "champions, celebrates and advocates" female consumers (Victoria's Secret & Co, 2022). Some of the steps taken in this process include leaving Limited Brands inc., changing leadership within the company and on the board, integrating DEI efforts across the business, and integrating strategic communications throughout the business to create a more proactive internal strategy which is now being translated into major brand transformation and communications efforts.

When considering the analysis of this case it is important to refer back to the public relations theories presented in the literature review. PR as a practice relies on the use of cultural trends to inform the strategy of communications messaging (Edwards, 2018). Investigating the "socio-cultural" impact organizations have on society and how society should properly inform organizations helps create understanding of how to use public relations from a strategic communications perspective (Edwards, 2018). Public relations is oftentimes examined as a form of communications with a single direction, but this case clearly demonstrates that PR practice is "mutually transformative" (Edwards, 2018). This case brings clarity to the balance in exchange of information strategic communications practice must have with its consumer base to deliver messaging that is effective and relatable to the consumer. Victoria's Secret was once the creator of female beauty standards, then became a reinforcement of the standards it helped create, then

as the value of consumer insights and strategic communications lost the precedent in the company Victoria's Secret also lost relevancy and informed messaging.

Public relations is often seen as a “tool of commerce” which allows for the exclusion of cultural impact considerations despite its essence being informed by modern culture (Curtain & Gaither 2005). Instead, public relations practice should be regarded as a “meaning making” tool as it takes information gathered from societal norms and trends and applies their meaning to tell relevant stories (Curtain & Gaither 2005). Using these theories of public relations as an active participant in the exchange of cultural information it becomes relevant to examine the impact and influence cultural norms have had on Victoria's Secret's present challenges as an organization.

The analysis of this case revealed missteps taken by the company which deterred customers and outdated their brand identity in modern times. One of these failures was internal structure, specifically leadership in the company. The leadership at Victoria's Secret refused to recognize changes in female consumer habits. Les Wexner, CEO and Chairman of the board was quoted several times with polarizing statements that directly opposed the shifts in female body empowerment such as determining “fatness” as unfeminine when in a meeting with trend retailers (Silver-Greenberg et. al, 2020). The CMO of Victoria's Secret, Ed Razek, was also quoted in popular press interviews making sweeping generalizations about what constituted feminine beauty and displays of female sexuality (Hanbury, 2021). The commentary made by both men revealed the mentality held by leadership, contradicting growing consumer voices calling for more realistic beauty standards (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Outside of their public comments, as a representative of the brand Razek alienated the public further as major sexual assault accusations came out in 2018 (Hanbury, 2021). Wexner also attracted more controversy to the brand when his strong connections to the sex offender, Jefferey Epstein were revealed (Hanbury, 2021). As

major figures associated with the brand these were both defaming instances for Victoria's Secret's reputation.

Another misstep the company took was failing to prioritize consumer insights. As revealed in the interview with the communications executive, "we had this really robust consumer insights team and then there was a period of time where... it kind of went away" (Interview, 2022). When considering the theory that society influences and motivates public relations practice (Edwards 2018) it is clear that losing sight of the consumer would certainly lead to a failure to stay current with modern cultural influences. When Victoria's Secret stopped listening as closely to consumers its communications messaging began to reinforce dated narratives about female beauty which were not in line with consumer expectations.

Finally another misstep made by the organization was not integrating strategic communications as a tool both internally and externally. Before the change in leadership at Victoria's Secret, communications was used as a reputation management tool (Interview 2022). The precedent at the organization was to limit external communication as much as possible (Interview 2022). This form of reactive communication led to the brand identity being informed by the owned media being shared by the company and the actions of leadership executives which created self-inflicted crises for the company (Interview 2022).

These missteps helped inform the transformation strategy that is currently being implemented to bring Victoria's Secret back to its leadership role in the female retail industry. In the research interview for this case, the communications executive described the mentality for the brand transformation. She stated, "we kept saying 'we only have one shot at getting this right like if we go out and we fall flat on our faces like there we do not get another second chance'" (Interview 2022). After necessary leadership turnover occurred in the company including a new

board for Victoria's Secret & Co (L Brands Inc. 2021) and Martin Waters instatement as CEO (Victoria's Secret & Co 2021) the organization was free to begin integrating with the times.

In the prior structure of Victoria's Secret, public relations was not thought of as a strategic function. As part of the brand's transformation they recognized the need for communications to be more integrated across the company in a transparent manner rather than smothered (Interview 2022). The new regime recognizes the value of strategic communications as a two way channel. It is utilized internally as Martin Waters emphasizes radical transparency among stakeholders in the brand, through the proactive narrative task force whose strategy is to speak directly to relevant press in an effort to own the company's brand identity, and an active consumer insights team.

These internal communications strategy changes paired with a mission statement which is more in line with modern consumer values helped guide the communications practice within the company. Because Victoria's Secret has begun to align their actions and communications with a mission representative of consumer interests they have been able to implement the transformation as an informed risk which was designed through communications and consumer insights. As stated in the analysis, the communications executive described the early stages of Victoria's Secret's transformation as "getting our house in order" (Interview 2022). The attention the company paid to restructuring its primary values, leadership, and communications tools led to alignment with its new external messaging. Had the company not intentionally first adjusted its operations to be more mission driven towards "championing women" and integrating radically transparent communications across the company the external changes could have been considered performative (Interview 2022). The authenticity of the brand transformation was contingent on having a genuine story to tell. That began with changes in the company to create a

sincere external effort to reach consumers where they are at. If consumers were only able to see changes in owned media messaging, but company leadership was still making discriminating comments about feminine beauty it would have been impossible to create a sustainable reputation for the brand. The attention the organization paid to create internal operations that match their mission and values and also integrated presence of strategic communications as a tool within the company demonstrates how public relations strategy stretches beyond external communications and rather is present in all aspects of the company.

As discussed in the analysis, following these internal strategy shifts came major adjustments to the brand. Those changes included store remodeling, size expansions, diversification of model sizes, terminology changes on website and in product colors, product description changes, CSR efforts directly impacting womens causes, and collaborations with empowering spokeswomen in public relations campaigns.

As discussed in the research interview and seen in many public statements by employees at Victoria's Secret, this brand transformation will certainly take time. The general public is only seeing small pieces of change slowly being rolled out by the company. Looking ahead, the outcomes for the newly "transformed" Victoria's Secret is still unknown. The communications executive once described it as "turning around the Titanic" as the brand is so large not only in global store presence as a brand, but also in global reputation and recognition (Interview 2022). As of now it is possible that the efforts made by the company could be considered as exploitative and tokenizing of certain demographics of women. For instance, because social media is such a popular resource for reputation reinforcement, the general public may only recognize the changes being made by the company as image based and superficial. Another place where proof of identity change could be questioned is on the retail website where they fail to mention or

direct traffic towards the “VS Collective” campaign initiatives such as “VS Voices” or relevant stories related to the campaign. However, based on the internal changes within the company that now inform the external messaging it is possible that with time the Victoria’s Secret transformation will not only be positive, it could be a monumentally successful strategic response to self-inflicted crisis and cultural changes.

Victoria’s Secret changed the perception of womanhood, sexuality, and body image starting in 1995 (Barr 2013). At one point the company was synonymous with women’s undergarments and the Victoria’s Secret Angels were regarded as the epitome of femininity. This cultural construct the brand propagated would not have been as influential without the involvement of public relations communications. The company began to falter when the brand actions and communications efforts no longer aligned with or influenced the perceptions of consumers. One of the biggest takeaways from the success, decline and transformation of Victoria’s Secret is that if communications strategy is rooted in a mission of informing all company operations it has the potential to create sustainable and eventually successful brand identity shifts in the eyes of the consumer.

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