

Bra Purchase Choice Influenced by Feminism

--An Empirical Study Based on Survey

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ABSTRACT

Bra gained popularity during World War I as the lack of metal supply caused the popularity of corset to subside. Indeed, before 20th century, the women undergarment was dominated by corset which helped women squeeze themselves to shape their slender waist and to demonstrate their curvaceous bosom. Some claim that the process of bra taking place of corset is an achievement of feminism movement, as corset is an oppressive apparel that bonds women too tight and is essentially deforming women's natural body. However, even after bra becomes the mainstream option, it has been subjected to controversy due to the very existence of feminists. Indeed, just as high heels and make up, bras are interpreted by some women as symbols of feminine oppression. Accordingly, lingerie designers have to be cautious in planning their products, which not only need to contain aesthetic elements, but also should refrain from the accusation of feminism. Therefore, by conducting focus group review, this study reveals that women's attitudes regarding bra vary in different locales and lingerie designers have to be aware of this variation in manufacturing their products.

Keywords: Bra, Feminism, Feminist

1. INTRODUCTION

In placement of corsets, the bra's primary physical function was to uplift women's chest against the pull of gravity [1]. There was no denial at the very beginning it rendered women's bosom look firm and thus appeal to males. As a result, for feminism movements after World War II, bra became product that has been scrutinized in a recurring manner [2]. One of the most iconic events occurred in the 1960s when some women protested against the Miss America Beauty Pageant [3] and some bras were incinerated in public. However, judging by current bras' market status and popularity among most women globally, it is and will be an important section of women's lingerie. Therefore, a whole range of bras, made from different materials, catering to different breast sizes, and providing different levels of support, are prevalent in women's clothes section. No matter how many controversies bras are subjected to, they are able to build up women's confidence and bring them physical comfort [4]. But there remain many questions such as how the on earth bras play different roles at home and work, how women respond to the prevalence

of supermodels in bra marketing campaigns, and what functionality women expect in wearing various types of bras. Accordingly, this paper will use method of focus group interview to dive into modern women's perspectives into bra's physical and psychological functionality, and thus provides an empirical guidance for bra designers to provide products that cater to their needs and factor in influences of feminism movements.

2. METHOD

This study employs focus group interview where the subject of interest will be interviewee's responses to several key questions regarding bra. Our research group will rent a small, temporary booth at a shopping mall, and such a booth should be, ideally, in the vicinity of lingerie storefront. By offering small gifts such as shopping bags and supermarket coupons, we invite young women into our booth and conduct an interview that takes less than 5 minutes. The rationality for randomly selecting interviewees within a shopping mall and next to a lingerie storefront is we can have access to

young women with purchasing power and will, and then collect information that is relevant to our study.

Following are the questions we are going to present to our randomly selected interviewees.

2.1 What’s your attitude towards wearing sports bra outside?

The purpose of this question comes is that traditionally, women were not allowed to participate in any sports events as athletes. For example, women were not permitted to compete in Marathon until 1970s. However, with the improvement of women’s status, they gained the autonomy to be part of many sports and the gradual popularity of sports bra was a symbol of women’s increasing sense of participation in domains that were conventionally reserved for men. The main function of sports bra is to alleviate discomfort, yet to demonstrate the sensual attraction of women’s bosom.

2.2 What ’ s your aesthetic preference towards bra?

Purpose of this question: It is to reveal contemporary women’s perception of what constitutes of beauty and what aesthetic elements they value most in bra.

2.3 Have you ever bought lingerie from Victoria ’ s Secret? Do you know about the brand ’ s history? What ’ s your impression about this brand?

Purpose of this question: Contemporary women tend to pursue ideal appearance as it can help them realize their worth as women. For many years, researches and critics of fashion pointed out that as a top women lingerie brand, Victoria’s Secret actually help establish an esthetic standard that caters to men as it throws a lot of large-scale fashion shows and distribute commercials via various social media platforms [5, 6]. Therefore, some critic pointed out this brand should be renamed as Victoria’s Dirty Secret while many feminists oppose this brand as it is full of physical representations of sexuality to draw male’s gaze [7].

2.4 Will you wear bra at home? What ’ s the purpose of wearing a bra on your perspective? Is it necessary for women to wear bra? Can women abandon their bras?

Purpose of the question: If the previous three questions implicitly ask women their attitudes regarding bra and feminism, this one explicitly explores their perspective regarding the functionality of bra. It will help us understand how women perceive bra, whether as

a social norm they have to adhere to, or as a necessity they find they cannot detach themselves from.

Which one is more important, beauty or comfort?

Purpose of the questions: This question tells designers which facet they should focus on when they design their future brands. More importantly, as beauty is for others to appreciate while comfort is for selves to feel, this question will reveal women’s attitudes towards how they are being viewed by others and how much value they tend to add to self-awareness.

3. RESULT

3.1 Participated Interviewee

Table 1. Interview Profile

Nam e	Gender	Age	Background/Career
B	Female	21	Waitress at a bar
G	Female	21	Clerk at an internet firm
R	Female	23	Manager at an accounting firm
F	Female	17	Freshman at a public state university
N	Female	16	High school student

3.2 Interviewees information analysis

All interviews are young women between 16 and 24 and willing to share their thoughts. They are either working or receiving education under multi-cultural context and international influence.

3.3 Interviewees ’ attitudes towards wearing sports bra outside

They view wearing sports bra as a fashion and an appreciable action because they believe this represents the awakening of female self-awareness and hints women’s aesthetic tastes are beginning to evolve. From feminism’ perspective, women start to accept versatile body shapes, therefore, this style gives them more options in outfit and boosts their confidence; from the social point of view, it helps them reduce the social physique anxiety. The garment sports bar itself also represents the consideration of comfort and functionality as priority. Although one interviewee believes that sports bra should be confined within gym,

it is still obvious that the acceptance towards wearing sports bra outside is increasing.

3.4 Interviewees' aesthetic preferences towards bra

Bralette was mentioned a few times by interviewees, as it satisfies aesthetic purposes and brings comfort simultaneously. Other interviewees show their own demand which varies a lot from each other and demonstrates that individuals have their own preferences just as interviewee B claimed, "as I'm growing older", further explained that the aesthetic preferences are changing over time, effected by their grown up and the social factors as well."

3.5 Interviewees' shopping experiences, knowledge and impressions of Victoria's Secret

While only half of the interviews have bought bras of Victoria's Secret, they all heard about the internationally renowned lingerie brand and their impression of this brand is "exquisite" and "is a product of male gaze and the original purpose of Victoria's Secret is to meet the need of patriarchal aesthetic." The word "original purpose" shows that Interviewee R constantly pays attention to this brand and she is aware of the changes that Victoria's Secret have made. One of the other half of interviewees has "bought other products from Victoria's Secret but not lingerie" and is "not very clear about the brand history".

3.6 Interviewees' attitude on not wearing bra at home

All interviewees have an answer of "no" toward the question "Will you wear bra at home?" and they use different frequency words such as "never" "never wear one" "sometimes I don't wear bra at home" "not necessary" and etc. expressing their own choices of wearing bra at home. Most of them think the original purpose of wearing bra is "to protect the privacy and to prevent nip slide" and "being polite in social life". "It's important to wear bra outside because I think that's a part of appropriate wearing and showing respect to others." "Bra is not a necessary item to women nowadays" especially when they are at home. It is definitely a personal choice and should not be used as a constrain to hold women from expressing their own attitudes toward bra.

3.7 Interviewee's opinions on which factor (beauty or comfort) to consider in priority

All interviewees put comfort first. As interviewee F said, "No one can see your bra inside", women

nowadays don't consider bra as a garment to please men and lingerie should be no more a product under male gaze aesthetic. Even if some females put beauty in priority, it is to please women themselves instead of men. Women have all the rights to make their own decisions that please themselves and make themselves feel the best. From the answers of interviewees, we can conclude that lingerie is analogous to feminism developed in modern society and is the "sign of awakening of female self-awareness."

4. DISCUSSION

By integrating the responses of 5 interviews aging from 16 to 23 with different occupations, we can derive how contemporary women look at the role of bra in private life and professional scenarios.

To start with, bra has never been a sensitive topic and women are prone to share with each other their preference over and attitudes on different types of bras. To talk about bra in a natural way already signifies enhancement of women's status as they are free to choose whether or not to wear bra. All the 5 interviewees are willing to answer the 5 questions regarding bra in a straightforward manner. For young women around 20 years old, they look at the bra as just a fashionable products which should contain aesthetic elements, help build up their confidence by giving them a better figure, and more importantly, bring them comfort.

Moreover, their consensus on the acceptance of sports bra once again demonstrates that they recognize the functionality of bra. In other words, they wear bra not for pleasing males, but for making their daily work more convenient and efficient [8]. Also, their unanimous placement of comfort as priority when choosing bra is a signal that contemporary women gain greater degree of independence since in the middle-aged Europe wearing corset is not for comfort but for pleasing men in upper class.

Furthermore, some interviewees recognize the existence of top-tier lingerie brands such Victoria Secret, which demonstrates that they also pay attention to the aesthetic elements of bra. However, there are some interviewees who hold a different attitude toward this brand. According to their observation, although Victoria Secret lingerie is famous for its exquisite design, its focus of promotional campaign seems to define a perfect body by hiring nicely figured supermodels. What Victoria Secret does is to define what is perfect while excluding the diversity inherent in women's bodies [9]. Therefore, for women who are in favor of feminism, they oppose the definition of perfect shape set by Victoria Secret, thus rejecting the brand's products.

In addition, just as the size of bra is relevant with physical health such as shoulder and neck [10], the status of bra is disparate in working settings and home settings. According to our interviewees, they choose a more relaxed attitudes towards wearing bras when they are at home as they do not need to worry the social norms that expect women to dress properly aligned with the universally agreed social dressing codes and they pay more attention to health when they are away from workplace.

5. CONCLUSION

Wearing bras for contemporary women, just as wearing corsets for women in past Europe, is still a tacit social norm at least in public places. Influenced by feminism movement, women's perspective regarding bra has also altered. Physiological comfort brought about by wearing bra is what they care about most while they still value the aesthetic enhancement brought about by exquisitely designed bra. Their attitudes regarding bra vary at private spheres and public ones: they might choose not wear bras at home as they are in a totally free state while they find it a necessity to wear bras at public as the mainstream social values make compulsory wearing bras at professional settings. While international brands of lingerie have initiated large-scale media campaign to commercialize bras as a symbol of sexuality and sensuality, feminism activities have always subjected bras under scrutiny. They firmly oppose the efforts to view bras as something for men's pleasure while allude to the notion that the design of bras should prioritize its functionality and comfort. Influenced by both international brand's successful publicity campaign and substantial enhancement of women's self-awareness and independence, contemporary women are expecting bras that can deliver multiple functions including aesthetic enhancement, physiological suitability, and personal easiness. Therefore, when designers of women lingerie are contemplating their future products, they have to be increasingly aware of the movement of feminism, the independence of their female customers, and the alternation of social norms regarding women's choice of bra. Only in this way can these designers both lead the fashion and achieve commercial success.

APPENDIX

In-depth interview with Interviewee 1, B, Female, 21, waitress at a bar

- (1) I think this kind of fashion trend is representing the awakening of female self-awareness. Lingerie Look is becoming more and more popular, it means that bra is no longer a garment that women will feel nervous when talking about it. Sports bra is a special kind of bra that can show women's healthy body shape and really

abandon the original meaning like sexual attraction.

- (2) As I'm growing older, I prefer bralette which is comfortable and pretty.
- (3) Haven't bought one before, exquisite.
- (4) I never wear bra at home, I believe the purpose of wearing bra is to protect the privacy and to prevent nip slide. Also, wearing bra can help women to make their breast looks better.
- (5) Comfort is more important.

In-depth interview with Interviewee 2: G, Female, 21, clerk at an internet firm

(1) I really appreciate this kind of fashion trend, it's a totally new style of fashion for women, and it really show the single aesthetic of women's figure is beginning to change, healthy body shape is becoming a new fashion trend. While this style of fashion is apparently going to become more and more popular, as while as the sports bra itself.

- (2) Minimalism with simple color.

(3) Never got one, in my opinion, this brand is a product of male gaze, and the original purpose of Victoria's Secret is to meet the need of patriarchal aesthetic.

(4) Never wear one at home, the purpose is being polite in social life, but I don't think it's necessary to wear a bra for women, it's just personal choice.

- (5) Comfort.

In-depth interview with Interviewee 3: R, Female, 23, manager at a accounting firm

(1) In my opinion this style can not only satisfy our comfort needs but also giving us the chance to showing our beauty about body shape. The style gives women more choice about bra and daily outfit. I strongly agree with it and it help us to reduce the social physique anxiety in some perspective and I consider the trend as a sign of awakening of female self-awareness.

(2) I think comfort is the most important thing while choosing bra, and I personally prefer to choose those bralette but not the underwire.

(3) I think the purpose to wearing bra is to optimize the body shape and protect privacy, also it is showing the attitude that I am formal, appropriate, and respectful. I believe not have everyone have to wear a bra, people have different attitude towards beauty and everyone have their own life style.

(4) Sometimes I don't wear bra at home, especially when I am alone. The purpose of bra wearing is to stop the sagging breast. I think at work, it is necessary for

women to wear bras. No, women cannot abandon their bras.

(5) Comfort

In-depth interview with Interviewee 4: N, Female, 16, high school student

(1) I think sports bra makes it more convenient for people that do sport, especially for women. And, I believe the acceptance towards wearing sports bra outside is getting higher and higher.

(2) I think it can have more graphics, patterns and design on it.

(3) I bought other products from Victoria's Secret but not lingerie. My impression to it is mainly the Angle Show.

(4) I believe bra is not a necessary item to women nowadays. More people think it is more comfortable without bra but it still depends on each individual.

(5) I think comfort is more important.

In-depth interview with Interviewee 5: F, Female, 17, freshman at a public state university

(1) I think sports bra could be worn to gym but not on streets.

(2) I think many sports bra look pretty good and I do wear them a lot during workout.

(3) Yes, I do buy lingerie from Victoria's Secret but I'm not very clear about the brand history. However, I do always like them.

(4) I don't wear bra at home. I think the main purpose of wearing bra is to protect privacy, just like underwear. It's important to wear bra outside because I think that's a part of appropriate wearing and showing respect to others. However, I do understand many people don't wear it because they think that's more comfortable.

(5) Comfort is definitely more important. No one can see your bra inside.

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