

From Victoria's Secret to ThirdLove ---Changes in Bra from the Perspective of Feminism

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ABSTRACT

Taking the old bra brand "Victoria's Secret" and the emerging online bra brand "Thirdlove" as examples, this paper analyses the evolution of the modern bra from the perspectives of communication and semiotics, taking feminist theory into account. As women have become more self-aware, they have also become more eager to gain aesthetic control over their own bodies. Through the method of textual analysis, this paper aims to compare and contrast the existing literature and the differences in visual symbolism between the advertisements of the two brands. The study finds that the original aesthetic of objectifying women and designs that constrain them are slowly becoming less acceptable to consumers. Women are becoming more aware of their own bodies and are no longer limited by the 'male gaze', and lingerie brands are more willing to show women's bodies as they originally were in their advertising and are no longer constrained by the choice of models. This study has implications for the evolution of lingerie brands, contemporary bra advertising and the awakening of feminism.

Keywords: *Feminism, Bra, Victoria's Secret, Thirdlove.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Bra is a kind of clothes, which can protect a woman's body and also (re)creates it in its own image. As an important research topic of feminism, bra is a wonderful example of how the 'nature' of the body is constituted by and within discursive practices such as fashion, medicine, the law, science and media [1].

The corset was originally intended to shape the female body into a style that was beautiful or decent in a patriarchal culture and was defined as a symbol of female oppression. After the 18th century, the corset became a symbol of women's social status and the first modern bra appeared at the Paris World's Fair in 1889. Interestingly, the first bra was named 'comfort', much more comfortable than a corset. Of all clothing, lingerie is probably the most representative of a woman's active evolution. Over the centuries, the status of lingerie has evolved from practical to almost perverse body shaping, from a waist shackle to a symbol of contemporary fashion and sensuality through changes in the world and changing attitudes. The evolution of the modern bra also reflects the changing connotations of the brassiere, with styles, fabrics, comfort, and advertising reflecting women's social status and thinking about themselves.

As a woman's intimate apparel, the bra has always been a sexual fantasy. Due to economic development and changes in people's thinking, bras have started to be advertised on billboards and big screens in recent decades, different brassiere advertisements convey different values. Nowadays advertisements not only promote products but also convey important messages to society, such as political stance, environmental awareness and social issues. Ideology plays a crucial role in advertising because it carries the message, which influences the way people thinking and shapes their attitudes from advertising.

This paper will use two brands, Victoria's Secret and Thirdlove, as case studies to analyse the differences between different ideologies of bra advertising, the reasons for them and the impact they have on consumers, from a feminist perspective represented by verbal and visual signs.

This study is an analysis of the evolution of feminist thinking today from the perspective of women's lingerie, and is important for the exploration of contemporary feminism and the analysis of visual symbols of lingerie in advertising, contributing to future research on feminism and related fields in advertising.

1.1 Feminism Perspective

Feminism, the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes. Based on what is being stated by Burkett, E& Brunell, L, women and men should have the same right in almost all aspects in life [2]. It means both women and men have the same chance in proposing their opinions or ideas, getting opportunities and salary. Patriarchy is the opposite of feminism, the social system in which the father or a male elder has absolute authority over the family group [3]. Feminist theory aims to understand the nature of inequality and focuses on sexual politics, power relations and sexual consciousness. Feminist political action challenges issues such as reproductive rights, abortion rights, education rights, domestic violence, pay equity, voting rights, sexual harassment, gender discrimination and more. Themes of feminist inquiry include discrimination, stereotyping, objectification (especially of sexuality), the body, oppression and patriarchy.

1.2 Semiotic Perspective

In advertising, feminist values are represented in words and pictures, which are the emotional symbols of advertising. Semiotics is a branch of linguistics and this basic definition triggers more people to think of symbols as signs that are directly visible in everyday life, such as traffic signs. In reality, however, semiotics is also about something other than visual signs. Eco, U.(1979) has said that the broadest definition of semiotics is that it is concerned with everything that can be used as a sign [4]. Strictly speaking, semiotics encompasses not only signs but also anything else, for example words, images, sounds, gestures and objects.

A negative case in point is Coca-Cola's milk ad for Fairlife, the The milk ad created by London-based photographer Jaroslav Wiczorkiewicz in 2014 depicts an apparently naked woman in a sexy pose, topped with a dress made of milk. The ad was boycotted by many consumers because of the provocative message it conveys to female consumers. The advert conveys visual symbols and values, while milk is seen as a sex symbol in the media in Western society, as Deborah Valenze (2011) states in her book, *Milk: A Global History*, "situated in a culture [where] milk [acts] as a mirror of its host society, reflecting attitudes towards nature, the human body, and technology" [5]. The content behind the Fairlife milk advert reflects the discriminatory and stereotypical portrayal of women in media coverage.

This article will use the advertisements of the bra giant 'Victoria's Secret' and the new e-commerce lingerie brand 'Thirdlove' as case studies, and will analyse them in the context of contemporary feminism, exploring how the bra has changed over the last few

decades and the underlying meaning behind it.

2. VICTORIA'S SECRET VS THIRDLLOVE

2.1 Awakening From Patriarchy, Declining From Feminism

Victoria's Secret was originally founded to make it easier for men to buy underwear for women. Victoria's Secret established in 1977, the original purpose is to avoid the embarrassment of men choosing underwear for their partners, and to create a comfortable shopping environment for men. The first Victoria's Secret show, founded in 1995, also seemed to win the attention of men [6]. This show constantly refreshed the content of people's conversations and soon became a popular culture phenomenon. Since 1999, it attracted millions of viewers every year. Beginning in the 1990s, Victoria's Secret quickly became the largest female underwear company in the United States. The big show every year is like Alice's wonderland which is filled with female hormones. It looks like it is selling underwear, but in fact it sells a "dream for man".

The Victoria's Secret Fashion Show is an annual promotional event sponsored by and featuring bra brand Victoria's Secret. From 1995 to 2018, Victoria's Secret used the show to promote its products in a high-profile environment. Models signed with the company, known as Victoria's Secret Angels, are the main participants in this event. Most of these models are world-renowned models [7]. The fashion show reached its peak ratings in 2001, watched by over 12 million of people [8], and is known for its exquisite lingerie and wings, music by famous artists, and set designs with ever-changing themes [9]. The Victoria's Secret show became a trendsetter in the lingerie aesthetic at one point in time, making many women its followers.



Figure 1: The Victoria's Secret Show. From variety, website: <https://variety.com/2019/tv/news>

In November 2019, due to the influence of the "Me Too" movement and the rise of female self-awareness, the ratings and sales of the Victoria's Secret fashion show declined. Critics of the Victoria's Secret fashion show believed that it was too single in aesthetics and lacked the diversity of body sizes. Victoria's Secret executives have also encountered more and more criticisms because of their improper remarks, and the

Victoria's Secret fashion show has been officially cancelled [10].

The store used a variety of underwear with different styles to embellish the walls. Men only need to choose the style they like and take out the product of the corresponding size in the counter. At that time, men held the voice and economic dominance of the entire society, and the influence of patriarchy on women was still profound, and this way of selling was extremely new. This brand want to create a comfortable shopping environment for men, not women [11].

2.2. ThirdLove's Rapid Expansion in The North American Market

ThirdLove wrote an open letter to Victoria's Secret to criticize Victoria's Secret's marketing strategy of "creating dreams". Two former Google executives, Heidi Zakhe and her husband Dave Spector founded ThirdLove in 2013. This brand stands on the opposite side of Victoria's Secret, but it is deeply loved by consumers. ThirdLove is already generating over \$100 million in revenues annually, and some 12 million women to date have used Fit Finder, an online tool that determines the right size bra for the shopper [12]. Heidi Zak found that she couldn't choose a bra that suits her while shopping, and found that many women's bras are actually not fitting, so she founded the ThirdLove brand [13].

Heidi Zak once criticized that most designs in the traditional bra industry are based on standard models. But in real life, the vast majority of women don't have the body like Victoria's Secret Angels, this is why many women can't buy underwear that suits their body shape. Victoria's Secret has strict requirements for the body of his model: the height is between 5 feet 8 inches and 6 feet. The hourglass figure is the first choice, and the model with a chest of 34 inches, a waist of 24 inches, and a hip of 34 inches is the most popular [14]. Edward Razek, the chief marketing officer for Victoria's Secret. "There are probably fewer than 100 women in the world who could walk our runway, and only 33 were chosen this year [15]. Victoria's Secret has always been controversial because of its stringent selection criteria for models' bodies.



Figure 2: The Perfect "Body". From Victoria's Secret, website: <https://www.victoriasecret.com>

The design of the bra in most brands does not take into account the real needs of most women, but blindly sells the "sexy" label. This is a problem in Heidi Zak's view. Meanwhile, the available underwear sizes also exposed the problem

According to the statistics of ThirdLove, most underwear shops have more than 30 underwear sizes to choose from. Victoria's Secret has an average of 36, Aerie has 31, and CK has only 26, these sizes can obviously only meet the needs of a small number of women. So ThirdLove launched a creative half-size cup bra. Currently, the brand offers 78 different sizes of bras, with cup sizes covering AA~II. ThirdLove attaches great importance to diversity and inclusiveness, and its brand positioning can meet the needs of all sizes.

ThirdLove became the focus of the publicly challenged Victoria's Secret last year. In November 2018, Victoria's Secret CEO Ed Razek said in an interview from Vogue that the Victoria's Secret show will not use large-size models and transgender models [16]. This opinion quickly triggered a wave of controversy and criticism. ThirdLove wrote an open letter at the time to challenge Victoria's Secret openly, criticizing Victoria's Secret's marketing strategy of "creating dreams". Victoria's Secret's way of showing off a beautiful figure is actually an externalization of the aesthetics of the male perspective. In the open letter she wrote: It's time to stop telling women what makes them sexy — let us decide. In the letter, ThirdLove reiterated the proposition on diversity and inclusiveness, and to build a brand that serves all women, regardless of her size, age, race, and gender orientation. "Designed for all figures" has therefore become its most distinctive brand value proposition.

2.3. Comparison of Victoria's Secret's and Thirdlove's Ads

Advertising is a mirror of social change, and also a mirror of the rise of women and the development of feminism. In the early days of advertising, the audience was predominantly male, and the famous American advertiser David Ogilvy proposed the "3B" strategy in the creative expression of advertising, which means that there are three visual symbols in advertising works that can attract the most attention of the audience: Beauty, Baby and Beast. Beauty is the most visible and interactive of the three. The women in the advertisements were undoubtedly there to catch the eye of the male consumer, and the image of women became a vehicle for sensuality and the objectification of women by society at the time.

From 1848 onwards, women began to fight for the right to vote, launching a series of women's suffrage movements, the goal of the first wave of feminism. In 1920 in the United States, women finally won the right

to vote as recognized by the Constitution. The women's suffrage advert - 'Vote for Women' - is the most feminist advertisement of this period. The times gave women more of a voice and brands made many efforts to develop feminist advertising precisely because they were aware of the power of women. Bra advertising is also undergoing many changes, with the style of the advertisements changing from sexy and virtuous to competent and independent, in an attempt to break down stereotypes about women. Modern women are becoming more and more confident, especially the 'Z generation'. Confidence comes from "self-love", loving and acknowledging oneself. Therefore, sweet words and unwarranted compliments and praise are no longer enough to impress feminists, who need real respect and affirmation for themselves. Their aim is to promote aesthetic progress from singularity to plurality and to eliminate anxiety about the female body from "male gaze", no matter what kind of woman is worthy of being loved.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. Model image analysis

The selection of brand spokespersons for underwear brands is very important. Victoria's Secret models are called "Victoria's Secret Angels". Their graceful figures and sweet smiles have become synonymous with them, the normal figure of this model is unrealistic. These supermodels have also contributed to the brand recognition of the Victoria's Secret brand. Had an important impact. We can find many differences between Victoria's Secret and Thirdlove's advertisements:



Figure 3:The Perfect "Body" . From Victoria's Secret,website: <https://www.thegentlemansjournal.com>



Figure 4:Looks from the 2018 Victoria's Secret Fashion Show.From fashionista,website:

<https://fashionista.com>

3.1.1. Clour

In terms of the color scheme of the advertisement, the colors of Victoria's Secret are richer and the color saturation is higher. However, the color of Thirdlove's bra and the tone of the advertisement picture are mainly gray tones, mostly Morandi colors, giving people a casual and comfortable feeling.

3.1.2. The number of models

In the selection of the number of models, Victoria's Secret models mostly appear in the form of group portraits, but the number of people appearing in the Thirdlove advertising posters is relatively fewer

3.1.3. Picture scenes

In the selection of picture scenes, Victoria's Secret's advertisements basically focus on the full-body effect of the model, emphasizing the model's "perfect body", and showing slender legs in the picture, but the thirdlove posters are basically half-length pictures,the main performance is the underwear product itself.

3.1.4. Models

In the selection of models, Victoria's Secret chooses more world supermodels to show for the brand, and Thirdlove's advertisements select "Real Women" of different races, ages, and shapes. Presenting, let consumers realize that the figures of these models are actually the same as theirs.The model's facial expressions,body postures and giant angel wings. The message which accompanies this medium is that the arms deftly cover the "forbidden" portions of the breast [17]. In feminist theory, the 'male gaze' represents or reproduces women as sexual objects, satisfying the pleasure of the heterosexual male viewer. And while in traditional thought the breast, a forbidden and sexually symbolic part of a woman's body, is wrapped in a fine steel-ringed corset to look erect, because women may

feel that sagging, sagging breasts will not help them gain the affection of the opposite sex, such bra is preferred by men rather than being comfortable for women to wear.



Figure 5:Every Color Body.

From Thirdlove,website:<https://www.thirdlove.com>

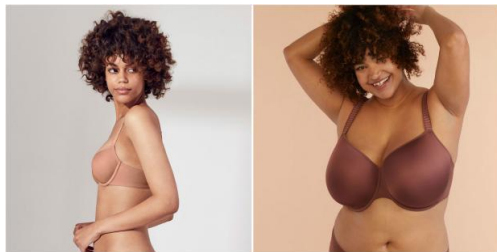


Figure 6:Real Women Body.

From Thirdlove,website:<https://www.thirdlove.com>



Figure 7:Models of all ages.

From Thirdlove,website:<https://www.thirdlove.com>

3.2 Women's bodies are free,they have the right to choose comfortable bra.

The important reason why Thirdlove can rise is because it allows women to choose the right clothes for themselves from being the object of male scrutiny. The online fitting room has also brought a huge source of customers to Thirdlove, allowing women to buy underwear that suits their body without having to try on underwear in a physical store. The purpose of refined products is to emphasize women's comfort. Degree, let women buy underwear for themselves.

When other emerging competitors are trying to meet the needs of all women, Victoria's Secret, by contrast, it departs from the market demand. A typical example is that Victoria's Secret insists on emphasizing "sexy" by hiring thin models, which is an outdated business

strategy.The society's concept of beauty is gradually changing. In the past, people only focused on people's appearance. However, after the famous #MeToo movement in 2017 (A movement designed to encourage women to disclose their experiences of sexual harassment and assault), therefore, the previous strategy of Victoria's Secret adopted the sexy of using slim models to no longer let customers striking.

On November 19, 2018, Victoria's Secret's latest performance report showed that the sales of this underwear brand continued to decline. After that, the share price of its parent company, L Brands, fell 5% in after-hours trading. In the past 12 months, the company's stock price has fallen by more than 40%. Although Victoria's Secret is still the largest brand in the American underwear market, its growth rate has slowed down. According to the forecast of the market research company IBIS World, the revenue of Victoria's Secret stores is expected to only account for 1% in the next five years.

New types of Internet companies have brought more competition to Victoria's Secret. Companies such as ThirdLove and Rihanna's Savage X Fenty are offering more sizes and specializing in specific product categories, such as steelless Circle bra. Victoria's Secret still adheres to the aesthetics of the last century, its product design still takes the sexy route, and the aesthetic standard is still to please men. The direction of society has begun to change. Although Victoria's Secret Show was still the most important business activity of the brand before it was closed, its ability to transform brand value and sales has been greatly reduced.

With the continuous development of politics and economy in the 21st century, the gap between men and women in terms of income and social status is narrowing. Women also desire to be equal in social status as men. Therefore, the "Image Self-Love" movement began to encourage every woman to accept herself positively, honestly, and confidently. Innate body shape. This represents the awakening of women's self-awareness, no longer taking sexiness as the only standard to examine and demand themselves. But it is precisely because Victoria's Secret did not innovate in brand content and form, the Victoria's Secret Show was closed in 2019.

Women were underrepresented in an era when Victoria's Secret was prevalent,while more and more new brands have entered the booming underwear market, and many underwear retailers now employ minority people as models, such as transgender people, plus-size people, and people with vitiligo. They emphasize being more "realistic" rather than a "unique" supermodel.

From the perspective of feminism, advertisements that overemphasize the beautiful figure of women make women objectified, and women have no value as human

beings. In the advertising world, women must be fully represented, basically from the perspective of women. The original intention of exploring feminism was for women to reconnect with themselves. One of the goals of feminism is to dismantle this fixed aesthetic, to transform the original female observation of herself through the "male gaze" into a female appreciation of herself from the heart. The main aim is to help women gain control of their own bodies and to dress according to their own aesthetic sense.

Thirdlove encourages women of all ages to establish a positive self-image and self-confidence. Their groundbreaking half-size underwear has expanded the size of bras to 78 kinds. Because of the care for different women, especially those women who have been forgotten by Victoria's Secret, Thirdlove has been well received on social platforms and poses a growing threat to Victoria's Secret as a market leader.

The corset was worn by women throughout the western world from the late Renaissance into the twentieth century [18]. By now, many scholars of visual culture and gender should be familiar with Mulvey's (1989) critique of 'the male gaze', which is to present and express women as the happy sexual objects of male audiences from the perspective of masculinity and heterosexuality in visual art and literature [19].

Today, corsets are almost condemned as a tool for oppressing women. Fortunately, advances in women's liberation led to the gradual disappearance of corsets in the early 20th century. In the past time of corset and the bra like Victoria's Secret, lingerie was a representation of traditional aesthetics, just to show off a woman's physical beauty. But now women have more identities, they are not just wives and mothers, they need to show off their role and status in society, they want their bodies to be their own from the inside out, they don't want to please anyone and they seek more freedom and comfort in their choice of intimate clothing.

4. CONCLUSION

The bra is a direct testimony to the development of women's status and feminist ideology, reflecting the aesthetics of different eras. Feminism advocates that women look at their bodies with confidence, not from the perspective of "male gaze", and that aesthetic equality between men and women be achieved. The emergence of advertising is an important milestone in the development of modern media, and an important way for brands to promote their products, which often hides many details that people are not aware of, and which makes advertising unique. This article analyses the brand concept of the old bra brand 'Victoria's Secret' and the new Internet lingerie brand 'Thirdlove' from a feminist perspective. It also analyses the differences between the two brands' advertisements and the

representation of their models from a semiotic point of view, where the visual symbols in the advertisements are closely related to the ideas conveyed by the brands.

Victoria's Secret represents a traditionally masculine aesthetic, and the models of Victoria's Secret are still mainly sexy and beautiful, while Thirdlove is a brand promoted by the awakening of the female consumer. When comparing the two brands, it can be seen that there is a difference in the brand's original intent and the group of people who speak out for it, as well as a significant difference in the symbolic visual presentation of the advertisements, such as the skin color of the models, the number of models appearing in a single advertisement, the location of the scenes, and the color palette of the advertisements. After analysis, it turned out that Victoria's Secret was somewhat under-represented in terms of feminism, and that Thirdlove's brand symbols implicitly convey the feminist values that women's bodies are beautiful, that women should not be objectified male playthings, that women should live for themselves, and that women should have the opportunity to achieve their goals and be given the same opportunities as their male counterparts.

There may be some possible limitations in this study. The first point is that when it comes to bra as an entry point for the study of feminism there are relatively few relevant articles in the field of research, not many reference. The second point is that this paper only takes Victoria's Secret and Thirdlove as a case study for analysis, although it is a representative brand, but other aspects of the lingerie industry are not covered. Future research directions could be expanded to study other brands and the fabric or style aspects of lingerie, and to delve into the links between feminism and bras.

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