

## **Background:**

Victoria's Secret, first founded in 1977, rose to prominence in the nineties and was the top-selling American women's lingerie brand for roughly 25 years. Victoria's Secret was also a center of pop culture with its over-the-top annual fashion show and roster of famous supermodels. However, the once top-selling brand's reputation and sales have declined over the past decade amid allegations of fatphobia, transphobia and toxic workplace culture (*Victoria's Secret Faces Backlash*). In our research, we want to understand why young people shop less at Victoria's Secret and what the brand can do to improve sales and public perception.

Since the beginning of our research, we have sought to understand ways Gen-Z consumers perceive Victoria's Secret. Our earliest background research examined how consumers reacted to rebranded advertising materials that are more inclusive of different races and body types. Following the results of the focus group, we identified several factors that are especially important to the group participants. We then used the results of interviews and ethnographies to narrow our research to the two most important factors to Gen-Z shoppers: diversity and online shopping. In our approach to the survey, we wanted to understand how Gen-Z consumers feel about the online shopping experience and the diversity of Victoria's Secret. The iterative steps of our research led us to two main research questions: "how well does Victoria's Secret online shopping experience meet the needs of Gen-Z consumers?" and "how does diversity and inclusivity in advertising affect Victoria's Secret's reputation among Gen-Z consumers?"

## **Methods:**

Our research process began on Sept. 20 with background research. This included looking at Victoria's Secret's website and social media, news coverage of the brand and peer-reviewed articles. Next, we conducted a focus group held on Sept. 27 with five female participants aged 20 and 21. The atmosphere fostered during the focus group was deliberately designed to be easygoing and conversational, ensuring each participant had a chance to express their thoughts. The main goal of the focus group was to gauge the sentiments of these individuals, particularly concerning the brand's advertising materials, with a specific emphasis on newer campaigns. We then used some findings from the focus groups to help form interview questions; these interviews were also conversational and open-ended (example: Appendix A). Each group member conducted two interviews (ten total). Following all of these research activities, we realized certain themes and topics were brought back up repeatedly: online shopping and diversity. As we planned to conduct ethnographies, we each tried to zoom in on these issues. Our ethnographies included watching young women shop online and in person at Victoria's Secret and popular competitors like Aerie.

Our next step was to conduct an online survey through Qualtrics; we distributed it to young women through various channels such as social media, private messages, and campus sororities to ensure a reasonable sample size. Male respondents were automatically excluded to focus on Victoria's Secret's consumers. With a total sample of 72 respondents, aged 18 to 46 (average age: 20.88, STD = 3.46), our survey progressed from demographic screening to questions directly addressing women's shopping preferences. Survey questions range from factors important in womenswear brand selection, preferred shopping venues, online versus in-store preferences, to the frequency of visits to Victoria's Secret online (Appendix B). The survey ended with an experiment directly aimed at measuring the impact that diversity in

advertising photos has on purchase intent and brand favorability. The respondents were randomly shown either an image of all white, thin women or an image of women of several races and body types.

### **Insight 1:**

Gen-Z shoppers have unique values. Young people want to feel connected to the brands that they shop at. We first encountered this in our focus group and interviews; participants expressed strong feelings about womenswear brands. Participants mentioned diversity, inclusion, sustainability, social responsibility and price as factors important to their shopping habits. One interviewee noted, “Body positivity is important to me and it has to feel genuine. I’m not interested in brands who are just hopping on trends. Brands like Aerie feel authentic.”

In our survey, we asked participants to identify and then rank the following factors: extended size range, racially diverse models, size-inclusive models, easy-to-use website, product comfort, range of styles and frequency of sales. In both questions, product comfort was by far the most important, ranked most important by 38 of 57 participants. Our data shows that other factors, including sales, diversity, sizing and website use, were of similar importance to consumers.

### **Insight 2:**

The shopping experience is significant, both online and in-person. In our focus group, participants mentioned using the Aerie website to shop for underwear most often. One participant mentioned, “I honestly don’t really shop in stores. Doing everything online is just easier. And my lingerie shopping is mostly done online too, specifically on Aerie’s site. I feel like they offer a lot more options compared to Victoria’s Secret and have better deals.”

In our survey, we asked whether they preferred online or in-person shopping. Our mean of 3.26 (STD=1.37) indicates that more people shop in stores than online. However, closer examination of the data reveals that the data was concentrated at either end of the spectrum (always shopping online or always shopping in stores). Thus, neither element is more or less important; both sides of the shopping experience can be changed and improved.

### **Insight 3:**

Throughout each of our research methods, participants mentioned the importance of diversity. In our focus group, many stated that Victoria’s Secret lingerie had “limited sizing” and felt “not inclusive.” Another participant mentioned that “...their models aren't really a fair representation to real people and I didn't really feel connected with Victoria’s Secret’s style. Unlike Aerie, they feel more realistic...”

Some interview participants explained that they had “hard to find” bra sizes and unusual band and cup size combinations. This qualitative data shows that target consumers feel strongly about both race and size inclusivity especially as it relates to the shopping experience. We also have strong quantitative data to support the importance of diversity and inclusion with customers. We designed our experiment to determine if diversity affected the brand's overall reputation. To do so, we examined how advertising and branding material impacted purchase intent and brand favorability. This experiment, which was performed at the end of our survey as described previously, measured the effect that a more and less diverse image had on purchase intent and favorability. Our experiment data was essential because it shows a causal relationship between diversity in advertising visuals and increased purchase intent and brand favorability.

### **Conclusions & Implications:**

Our research goal was to analyze, perceive, and understand Gen-Z's emotions towards Victoria's Secret. We achieved this throughout all of our studies and research. Our general approach to answering our objective has stayed the same, but some of the things we zoned into and focused deeply on were altered as the study continued, such as the survey/research questions. We geared closely to purchase intent and favorability to measure Gen-Z's perception of Victoria's Secret. Overall, we believe that our progress was sufficient and though our findings were not groundbreaking, it helped cement the belief that Gen-Z does not favor Victoria's Secret. We made good progress towards our goal as our objective was answered and we got to see multiple views of Gen-Z's perception of the brand. Some findings like our lack of clear preference between online or in-person shopping were kind of unexpected, but it did not affect the general objective of what we were studying.

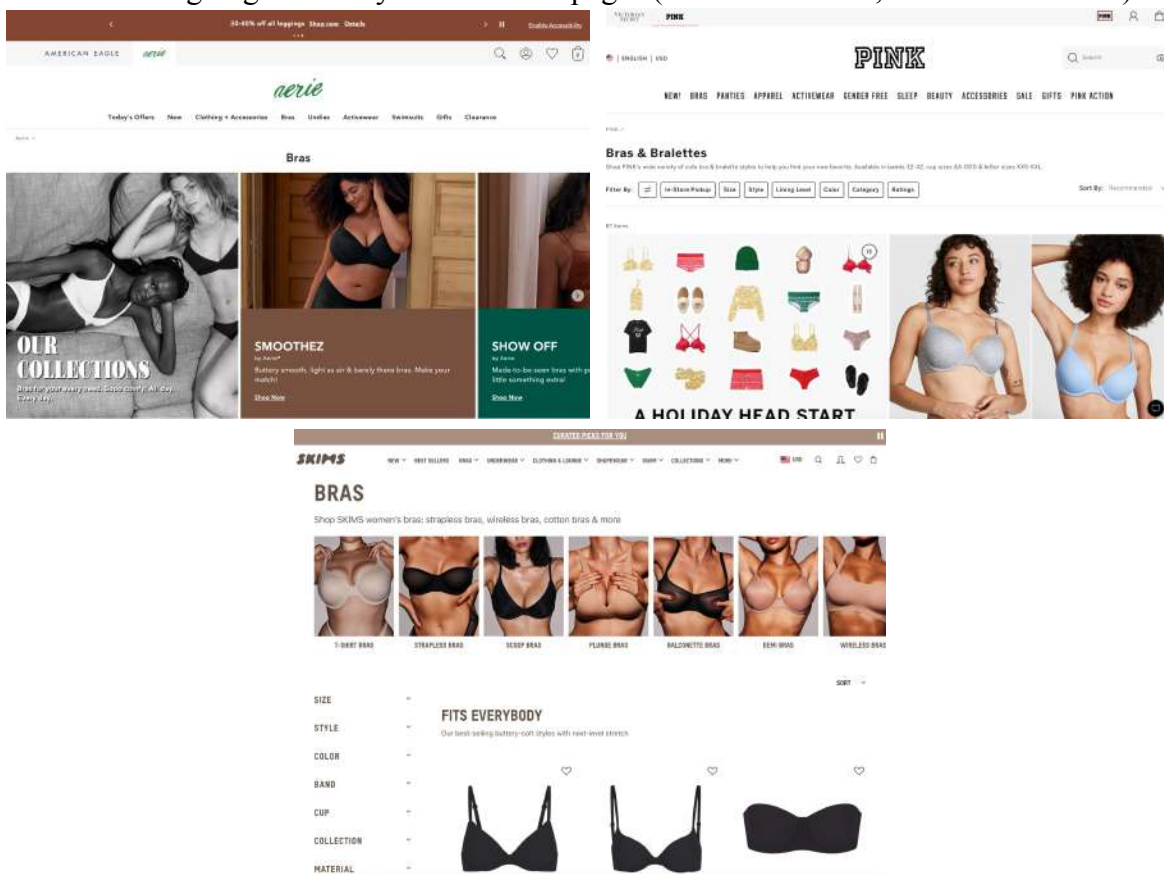
Common themes that we saw throughout the study were: Gen-Z shoppers distinctively value brand connection, prioritizing authenticity, diversity, inclusion, sustainability, and fair pricing. Our survey underscored the importance of product comfort, with sales, diversity, sizing, and website usability also registering as significant factors. The shopping experience, whether online or in person, surfaced as a central theme, revealing a preference for in-person shopping but a collective desire for enhancements in both realms. Diverging from the conventional brand image, diversity emerged as a prominent theme, with participants expressing discontent over Victoria's Secret's limited sizing and lack of inclusivity in their models. To guide the company's trajectory, we recommend implementing transparent communication strategies addressing these themes, initiating initiatives to expand sizing options and sustaining research efforts to stay attuned to the dynamic preferences of Gen-Z consumers. By acknowledging and acting upon these themes, Victoria's Secret can redefine its approach, placing authenticity, inclusivity and an elevated shopping experience at the forefront to regain favorability among the youth demographic.

## Appendix A:

### Interview Guide

This interview is being conducted for my Advertising and PR Research Methods class. My hypothetical client is a women's intimates retailer, and the goal of my research is to examine Gen-Z's sentiment towards this brand and the women's underwear industry. This interview is entirely voluntary, completely confidential and should take about 20 minutes.

1. Is it okay if I record audio from this?
2. What is your name?
3. How old are you?
4. As I mentioned, today we are talking about womenswear. What comes to mind when you think about bra and underwear shopping? Where do you typically shop?
5. Do you prefer to buy underwear and bras online or in person? Why?
6. You mentioned you shop at Aerie; what do you like about that brand's website?
7. Have you ever bought anything from Victoria's Secret or PINK online? Can you elaborate on that experience?
8. Now I'm going to show you a few web pages (Victoria's Secret, Aerie and SKIMS).



- a. Can you tell me which site appeals to you most?
  - b. Why is that? What elements stand out positively or negatively?
  - c. What did you dislike about that store?
9. Is there anything else about this kind of online shopping you'd like to share?
  10. Do you have any other thoughts about Victoria's Secret?

## **Appendix B:**

### Survey and Experiment Stimuli:

This survey is part of a UNC student research project. It is designed to measure consumer sentiments towards Victoria's Secret and the womenswear industry. Participation is voluntary, and all results are anonymous. If you consent to participate in this survey, press the arrow to continue.

1. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How do you identify?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Non-binary/third gender
  - d. Prefer not to say
3. Which factors are important to you when purchasing women's bras and underwear?  
Select all that apply:
  - a. Extended size range
  - b. Racially diverse models
  - c. Size inclusive models
  - d. Easy-to-use website
  - e. Product comfort
  - f. Range of styles
  - g. Frequency of sales
4. Rank these factors in order of importance (1 is most important and 7 is least important)
  - a. Extended size range
  - b. Racially diverse models
  - c. Size inclusive models
  - d. Easy-to-use website
  - e. Product comfort
  - f. Range of styles
  - g. Frequency of sales
5. When shopping for womenswear (bras and underwear), how often do you shop online rather than in-store?
  - a. I always shop online
  - b. I mostly shop online
  - c. I shop online and in stores equally
  - d. I sometimes shop online
  - e. I never shop online
6. Where do you typically purchase bras and underwear? Select all that apply:
  - a. Aerie
  - b. Savage x Fenty
  - c. SKIMS
  - d. Victoria's Secret PINK  
Department Stores
  - e. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
7. How often do you shop online at Victoria's Secret rather than other online stores?
  - a. I mostly shop at Victoria's Secret

- b. I often shop at Victoria's Secret
  - c. I shop at Victoria's Secret and other stores equally
  - d. I more often shop at other stores
  - e. I mostly shop at other stores
8. How many times have you visited the Victoria's Secret website in the past month? Please enter a number. \_\_\_\_\_
9. Based on what you know, how likely are you to recommend Victoria's Secret to a friend?
- a. A scale from not at all likely (0) to extremely likely (10)
10. Based on what you know, how satisfied are you with the diversity in Victoria's Secret's branding and advertising materials?
- a. Extremely satisfied
  - b. Moderately satisfied
  - c. Slightly satisfied
  - d. Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
  - e. Slightly dissatisfied
  - f. Moderately dissatisfied
  - g. Extremely dissatisfied

**Experiment:**

Image A:



Please look at the image above. Answer the following questions based on this image.

Image B:



Please look at the image above. Answer the following questions based on this image.

1. Based on the image, how likely are you to purchase a bra or underwear from Victoria's Secret?
  - a. Scale from zero through ten
  - b. Zero labeled not at all likely, five labeled neutral and ten labeled extremely likely
2. After viewing this ad, how unfavorable or favorable do you feel towards Victoria's Secret?
  - a. Scale from zero through ten
  - b. Zero labeled very unfavorable, five labeled neutral and ten labeled very favorable

**References:**

*Victoria's Secret Faces Backlash After Exec's Comments About Trans and Plus-Size Models*  
<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/victorias-secret-backlash-ed-raze-ks-comments-trans-size-models-spark-outrage-1160446/>