

**From Objectification to Self-Subjectification:
Victoria's Secret as a Do-It-Yourself Guide**

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In the U.S. and now across the world, a multi-billion-dollar corporation has been fighting a tough battle for female empowerment since 1963, and according to their unmatched commercial success, women appear to be quite literally buying what this ubiquitous franchise is selling. Holding tight to a mission statement that stands first and foremost to “empower women,” and a slogan stating the brand is one to “Inspire, Empower and Indulge,” the franchise “helps customers to feel sexy, bold and powerful” (limitedbrands.com, 2010). This is being accomplished through the distribution of 400 million catalogs to homes each year, a constant array of television commercials all hours of the day, a CBS primetime show viewed by 100 million, and 1,500 mall storefront displays in the U.S. alone (VS Annual Report, 2009). And to the tune of 5 billion dollars every year, women are buying into the envelope-pushing “empowerment” sold by Victoria’s Secret, the nation’s premiere lingerie retailer.

Due to Victoria’s Secret’s ubiquitous media presence and radical transformation from a modest, Victorian-era boutique to a sexed-up pop-culture phenomenon in the last decade, a critical reading of VS’s media texts is highly warranted. Having been almost completely ignored in academia, particularly in the last 15 years as the company has morphed from a place for men to shop for women to a women-only club (Juffer, 1996, p. 32; Workman, 1996), this critical analysis is an essential contribution. In the UK, Dee Amy Chinn (2006) has focused analysis on the government censorship of WonderBra and Gossard advertisements, and McRobbie (2004) has analyzed WonderBra ads of the mid ‘90s in the UK, but Juffer (1996; 1998) is the only U.S. scholar to analyze VS’s media texts. In a media world inundated by popular post-feminist notions of consumption and objectification as a means to empowerment, a critical reading of the various VS messages will uncover how “constraining, enslaving, even murderous” conditions come to be experienced as “liberating, transforming, life-giving” (Bordo, 1997, p. 2376).

To inform my reading of the media texts produced by VS, I review a history of the company and use a close textual analysis (Gill, 2008; Mooney, 2008) to analyze the 2010 VS Winter Catalog and 2010 Winter Fashion Show on CBS. While VS's various messages may be considered texts unworthy of close feminist criticism, cited by Ott (2004, p. 195) as the type of topic that is "simple, banal, predictable," I have no desire to "reveal" some hegemonic, patriarchal force with which we are all-too familiar. Sexual objectification is in no way subtle here – it is central to VS's promotions and operates at the forefront of the texts. My purpose in this essay is to extend the framework of commodity feminism set out by Goldman and associates, by borrowing from Winship and others (Berger, 1972; Bordo, 1993; Gill 2008) to claim media messages like VS's, framed in terms of commodity feminism, not only work to encourage women to consume as a form of empowerment, but to desire "to be consumed" through self-subjectification and the acceptance of normalized pornography.

Where once sexualized representations of women in the media presented them as passive, mute objects of an assumed male gaze, today women are presented as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in an objectified manner because it suits their "liberated" interests to do so (Gill, 2008, p. 42). I argue VS advertising adds a further layer of oppression. The Limited Brands' official slogan is "We are redefining what it means to be sought-after" (limitedbrands.com, 2010), and in this regard, the company is not exaggerating. Not only are women objectified as they have been, but through sexual subjectification, they must also now understand their own objectification as pleasurable and self-chosen. As an aside, the Limited Too, a retail chain owned by Limited Brands that targets girls ages 7 on up sells "sexy lingerie" such as camisoles and lacy panties – including thongs – in what can only be interpreted as a move to prepare their girl customers to consume VS lingerie as soon as they are

able to do so. Further, if we take pornography as referring to a state of undress as well as a mode of representation that invites the sexualized gaze of the viewer (Mooney, 2008, p. 250), VS effectively contributes to the pornographication of culture (Mayer, 2005; McRobbie, 2004). In an era when females learn to treat and experience their bodies as sexual objects from a young age (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996), VS's nearly inescapable media messages render it not only likely but *normal* for females to engage in self-subjectification as self chosen and empowering (APA, 2010; Frederickson & Roberts, 1997).

While no academic work has analyzed VS's media texts since Juffer in 1996 and 1998, this analysis is timely and necessary. Since that time, the company has undergone a radical transformation from the '90s professional woman shopping the pastel-painted stores for European-inspired lingerie to lacquered black stores with "oversized images of scantily clad models, pounding music pumping and seductively posed mannequins" according to the *Wall Street Journal* (Merrick, 2008). Thus, close textual analysis of the chain's ubiquitous advertising is now more highly warranted than ever, especially due to studies that demonstrate repeated exposure to sexualized female bodies encourage women to self-objectify (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; McKinley & Hyde, 1996; Tiggemann, 2005), positively endorse sexually objectifying images (L. M. Ward, 2002; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006), and experience body hatred (for recent reviews, see Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002).

Specifically, vital psychological research done in 2008 demonstrated that college-aged women who were exposed to Victoria's Secret "Angel" commercials reinforced their belief that they should measure their self-worth with their appearance, and negatively affected their body satisfaction (Strahan, et al, 2008). If temporarily increasing salience of these specific VS ideals in the lab can influence the domains on which women base their self worth and self esteem, one

can only imagine how repeated exposure to these norms in our society – through incessant catalogs, commercials, storefront windows, television shows, and a flourishing website – might influence the bases of women’s mental and physical health. In this research, I argue VS advertising – while explicitly claiming to empower women – hail the viewer to self-subjectify by turning herself into a commodity desiring only to be consumed.

I will begin by providing a review of how sexualized female bodies have been situated as acceptable in popular media and how commodity feminism (Goldman, Heath & Smith, 1991) speaks to the theme of self-subjectification and normalized pornography in VS media messages. Following a review of the VS franchise history, I will provide a close textual analysis of the 2010 VS Winter Catalog and the 2010 Winter Fashion Show on CBS.

Femininity Objectified

The sheer abundance of sexual representations of women in the mass media is upheld as one of the most significant developments in twentieth and twenty-first-century U.S. history and the history of popular culture. With sex now visible on reality TV and VS fashion shows and commercials displaying nearly-nude models in action, academics and journalists seem to concur the line between popular culture and pornography has shifted and blurred over the last decade (Mayer, 2005, p.302). Such representations of sex in mainstream media have proliferated in the last decade, prompting discussion on the ‘sexualization of culture’ (APA, 2010; McNair, 2002), the rise of ‘raunch’ (Levy, 2005) a ‘porno chic’ society and marketing tactics as ‘corporate paedophilia’ (Rush and La Nauze, 2006). Feminism itself has become a commodified form of power known as post-feminism and commodity feminism (Goldman, et al, 1991, Stanley, 2004). Critical scholarship forges the phrase “striptease culture” to mark the 1980s emergence of a “less regulated, more commercialized sexual culture,” in which mainstream media contribute by

incorporating sex in their texts, while explicitly denying that they are pornographic – as specifically declared by Victoria’s Secret as early as 1996 (McNair, 2002, p. 12; Juffer, 1996). As Dines (2010) explains, the pornography industry has worked strategically to “sanitize its products by stripping away the ‘dirt’ factor and reconstituting porn as fun, edgy, sexy” (p. 25), and VS’s ads have flourished, without censorship by the Federal Communication Commission, despite their striking similarities to pornography (Robertson, 2005).

According to Berger’s (1977) reflections on classical European nude art, the painters were usually men and those treated as objects were women. This unequal relationship is deeply embedded in our culture, he said, so as to be constantly reflected in popular media as female sexual objectification. Within classic art, many painters believed the ideal nude ought to be constructed by taking the face of one body, the breasts of another, the legs of a third, the shoulders of a fourth, the hands of a fifth – and so on. “The result would glorify Man. But the exercise presumed a remarkable indifference to what any one person really was” (Berger, 1977, p. 31). Fragmenting the model into parts of a whole transforms the model – a living, breathing person – into something less than human, even a commodity, meant to gratify the objects’ owner.

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, public displays of nudity in any fashion were socially acceptable only when deemed as “fine art” housed in art museums (Gerdtts, 1974, p. 46). After the Civil War, underground sexual images that once stayed in saloons and sex trade markets made their way into mainstream society. Sensational “scandal sheets” such as the *Police Gazette* and *Munsey’s* magazine boosted circulation with pictures of women in tights and swimwear (Mott, 1938, p. 43). By the early twentieth century, a new slang term, “cheesecake,” came to represent publicly acceptable, mass-produced images of semi-nude women (Gabor, 1972, p. 23). Scantly clad women became a regular part of popular culture in the 1930s in

magazines such as *Life*, featuring women in swimwear (Meyerowitz, 1996, p. 10). But it was during World War II, as popular media outlets sent “pinups” to soldiers overseas in an effort to boost morale, when “cheesecake” became pervasively acceptable in social circles as something “empowering” for women and able to be consumed by men (Hegarty, 1998, p. 113; Stein, 1974).

“The gal with the G-string, the taxi-dancer, and the chorine in the nightclub with black net stockings up to her mezzanine; in their own way they’re all doing war jobs,” reported *Coronet Magazine* (Whitman, 1943). During WW II, magazines, posters, and movies overtly urged women to provide sexualized support for the military in various types of public and private entertainment. Female sexuality was, in essence, mobilized as a commodity to be sold in support of the war effort and a way to “empower” women (Hegarty, 1998, pp. 113, 121). Women were asked to “objectify” themselves for the sake of men, to transform into an object to be consumed by those at war. Military wives heard messages telling them they must maintain their sexual allure while their husbands were off at war and look as “youthful and attractive” as ever (Hegarty, 1998, p. 124). Today, normalized pornography like that in VS’s media texts, seeks to “empower” women in similar ways: “Inspire, Empower, Indulge,” according to their company slogan (limitedbrands.com, 2010). But instead of the age-old “male gaze” so outwardly normalized in advertisements of old, men do not explicitly enter the shot in VS ads. While men are never spoken about in text or featured in the images, the willful objectification of women posing for women is presented not as a way to seek men’s approval, but as pleasing themselves, and in so doing they might “just happen” to win men’s gazing admiration (Gill, 2008, p. 42).

Dee Amy-Chinn (2006) illustrates this emphasis on women pleasing themselves in the title of her article about lingerie advertising in the UK: “This is just for Me(n).” Such advertising hails women using a photographic grammar directly lifted from heterosexual pornography aimed

at men, targeting men as the consumers while advertising a product for women. She successfully connects “me” and “men” and argues there is no difference between what women want and what men want of them. In VS’s case, the PR department in the ‘90s said: “Our main appeal is for women. We are not for men to look at but for women to feel good about themselves” (Juffer, 1996, p. 32). In a swift move to differentiate themselves from the male gaze apparent in their media texts of the ‘90s, VS’s official statement speaks to the way advertisers have begun “reclaiming” the female body as a site of women’s own pleasure and as a wellspring for her power. Goldman’s (1991) term “commodity feminism” illustrates this capturing of the ways VS incorporates the cultural power of feminism while simultaneously neutralizing and undoing the force of its social and political critique. Essentially, there is no difference between what women want and what men want of them. A closer look at VS’s media texts later is more detailed encouragement against a too-soon celebration of the “empowerment” perpetuated by VS.

By 1933, *Esquire* and *Gentlemen’s Quarterly* magazines had claimed consumption as a new area for masculine privilege previously reserved for women (Breazeale, 1994) where pinup drawings of always blond, busty, long-legged models in each magazine issue went from a single page to two-page gatefold to three-page spread, indicating an “expectation that the reader would prop up or tear out this apotheosis of fetishism” (Breazeale, 1994, p. 12). The centerfold was born, only to reappear in VS catalogs “for women to feel good about themselves” years later. Essentially, *Esquire* paved the way for a consumer marketplace ready to embrace *Playboy* in the 1950s, *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue* and the VS franchise in the 1960s, and the current “pornographication of culture” (McRobbie, 2004). *Playboy* has been credited with the mainstreamed consumption of male desire and female bodies that *Esquire* worked so hard to justify and normalize. But today, the *Playboy* brand is a phenomenon for men *and* women all its

own – featuring the hit TV shows “The Girls Next Door” with Hefner and his harem of busty blondes, “Kendra,” “Holly,” movies, calendars, YouTube channels, etc. Little girls adorn themselves in *Playboy* T-shirts and teens apply to be *Playboy* Playmates every day as the ultimate in cultural capital (McRobbie, 2004). Similarly, published since 1964, and ushered in by the popularity of *Esquire* and *Playboy*’s sexual displays, the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue*’s 200-plus pages of nude to semi-nude female swimwear models is truly an event, generating global media coverage to push *SI*’s sales through the roof every spring (SI.com, 2010). Today, SI.com claims 32 percent of male *and* female adults in the U.S. regularly read the *SI*, and with 250-million-plus online viewers in 2010 alone, this magazine is a global spectacle.

Directly reflecting the men’s magazine genre and pornographic imagery, media texts created by the Victoria’s Secret franchise established in 1963 (catalogs, commercials, fashion shows, storefront windows) perpetuate a sexually objectified feminine ideal sold to women as consumers of *women*. The formula, though self-contradictory, is simple: Self-fetishization offers women an avenue to empowerment (Goldman, 1991, p. 335).

Feminism Objectified

By the 1970s, as sexually objectifying media messages had become normalized and acceptable for men as consumers of women, the women’s movement brought female equality into the spotlight. As quickly as the movement began, media producers and advertisers with profit to gain began to repackage feminism into something to be bought and sold. Many academicians have documented that media representations re-contextualize feminist advances in ways that make them ultimately function to reify dominant patriarchal codes and discourses (e.g., Dow 2003; Shugart, Waggoner & Hallstein 2001). Specifically, media critics have identified post-feminism as a popular feature of contemporary media, which assumes society has

adequately transformed to provide female equality, and builds on the presumption that the goals of feminists have been achieved. Based on such assumptions, continuing problems faced by women are attributed to poor choices on the part of those individuals, are can be remedied by consumer behaviors, packaged as empowering feminist ideals. A number of scholars have discussed this (e.g., Douglas, 1994; Gill, 2008; Macdonald, 1995; McRobbie, 2004).

Feminism, then, is cast aside, where at best it can expect to have some afterlife, and “might be regarded ambivalently by those young women who must in more public venues stake a distance from it, for the sake of social and sexual recognition” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 255). Essentially, popular post-feminism is a hybrid media discourse that blends “feminist” and post-feminist elements with consumerism to produce a de-politicized “power femininity,” suggesting women today can have it all as consumers *and* the consumed (Lazar, 2006, p. 505). Thus, VS’s mission statement stating a driving force to “empower women” and help women “feel sexy, bold, and powerful” is paired alongside thongs on digitally altered pornographically posed in unquestioned ways on our coffee tables, TV sets, and storefront windows.

Grounded in envy, power, and desire, much of the advertising of the early ‘80s validated an image of a “new,” independent and equal woman by subtly reframing the “male gaze” from the surveyor to the surveyed (Berger, 1972; Gill, 2008; Goldman, 1992; Mulvey, 1975). Advertisers like VS began “reclaiming” the female body as a site of women’s own pleasure and as a wellspring for her power in a broader marketplace of desire by selling *to* women *for* women over the course of the last decade as the stores have transformed from a place for men to buy for women to a place for women only. Williamson (1978) claims consuming advertisements results in “appellation,” meaning the ads hail the viewer, inviting her to enter the space of the advertisement. Consumer ads like the perpetually running VS commercials and catalogs name

the viewer through modes of address, asking her to insert herself when the model fits. Then, seeing a potential self in the mirror of the ad, she is invited to perform a critical interchange of meanings – “exchanging self for the self-made-better-by-the-commodity in the photograph” (Goldman, p. 342). Self-subjectification, in this way, is normalized through incessant ads for her to “feel good about herself – not for men to look at” (Juffer, 1996, p. 32).

Goldman (1991) coined the term “commodity feminism” because it reflects directly on commodity relations, which articulates turning the relations of acting subjects into relations between objects (p. 336). When appropriated by advertisers and commercial interests, Goldman describes feminism as having been cooked to distill out a residue – an object. Feminism itself is thus objectified. Such objects are made to stand for feminist goals of agency, independence and professional success. In the case of VS, a push-up bra is made to stand for “empowerment” in a way that objectifies feminism and femininity simultaneously through its commodification of the female form. This framework is based on an understanding that advertisements are vehicles for commodity narratives (see Williamson, 1979). The means of achieving confidence, liberation and strength, then, is to be found in commodified body images (Goldman, p. 338). Further, Goldman illustrates how media frames not only feminism as a commodity, but women consumers as commodities to advertisers. Ads for magazines, for example, regularly market women readers as the “product.” The key commodity sold is an audience of women, Smythe (1977) so concisely put it. But as I extend commodity feminism’s reach within VS texts, I argue women are not only sold as commodities to advertisers, but to women themselves. In a world flooded with VS messages, women learn to value themselves as commodities to be perfected by consumerism and to position themselves as commodities, desiring foremost to be consumed.

According to Winship (1980), femininity is recuperated by the capitalist form: the exchange between the commodity and “women” in the ad establishes her as a commodity too. Referred to as “midriff” advertising by Gill (2008), this regime represents a dangerous shift in the way power operates: it moves from the external male gaze to a self-policing, internalized discipline (Gill, p. 45). Berger further articulated his insight into the male gaze: “Men act and women appear. Men look at women... This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object” (Berger, 1977, p. 47). Today, women are not only objectified, but through wildly popular campaigns VS’s, they must now understand their objectification as pleasurable, normal, and self-chosen. Agency and “empowerment” become the very vehicles that regulate women – that get “inside” and reconstruct feminine notions of what it is to be a sexual object (p. 45).

Thus, my purpose in this essay is to account for particular features of the ever-present VS media campaign in an attempt to understand how VS effectively “empowers” women to buy their products (to the tune of \$5 billion per year) and make sense of – nay, even celebrate and willfully perform – what could be considered blatant sexual objectification as normal and natural (thus, escaping FCC regulation). In the section to follow, I review a brief history of the company and use a close textual analysis (Gill, 2008; Joseph, 2009; Mooney, 2008) to analyze the 2010 VS Winter Catalog and the 2010 Winter Fashion Show on CBS.

Victoria Doesn't Keep Secrets Anymore

In the past three decades, Victoria’s Secret has grown from one to 1,500 stores across the globe, brings in a revenue of more than \$5 billion every year, and carves out a middle-ground in intimate apparel between Hanes bulk-packaged underwear and gasp-inducing nipple pasties

ordered online (limitedbrands.com, 2010). It was in San Francisco in 1982 that Lee Wexner discovered VS, founded by Roy Raymond, a Stanford M.B.A. graduate, and purchased the four stores and catalog for \$1 million on intuition: “Most of the women I knew wore underwear most of the time, and most of the women that I knew I thought would rather wear lingerie most of the time, but there were no lingerie stores,” he told *Newsweek* in June 2010. Today, nearly 400 million VS catalogs are distributed to homes each year, 100 million viewers tune in for the semi-annual VS Fashion Show on CBS primetime, the VS website is one of the fast growing e-commerce destinations online, and countless millions view the commercials and 3,000 VS storefront displays on a daily basis (limitedbrands.com). Today’s women are being constantly told they “would rather wear lingerie most of the time.”

Owned by Limited Brands company making \$9 billion a year based in Columbus, Ohio, VS stands out amid the rest of their family of brands (and makes more than half the overall profit): Bath and Body Works, La Senza, and others (VS Annual Report, 2009). Wexner started the corporation in 1963 based on a “set of shared values important to both our customers and associates.” The first of these values, addressed in the company’s mission statement, is on “empowering women” (limitedbrands.com, 2010). And if the cause of empowerment is best advanced by wearing lingerie, and seeing that lingerie modeled by the most digitally manipulated models, VS has been perpetuating this ideal successfully for years. Post-feminism, as readily employed here by the VS franchise, is “perniciously effective,” according to scholars like McRobbie (2004) because contemporary culture can simultaneously “undo feminism” while appearing to be engaged in a well-informed and well-intended response to it (p. 255).

The commercial marriage of feminism and femininity plays off a conception of personal freedom located in the visual construction of self – appearance. As Douglas (1994) put it:

“Advertising agencies had figured out how to make feminism – and anti-feminism – work for them...the appropriation of feminist desires and feminist rhetoric by major corporations was nothing short of spectacular.” Since its inception, when VS’s heterosexual male CEO decided women (should) rather wear lingerie, VS has framed bodies in a commodified form as liberating, while edging out their competitor, Frederick’s of Hollywood, as “pornographic” (Juffer, 1996).

Frederick’s of Hollywood, a lingerie company born in 1946, reigned supreme in the lingerie market before VS entered the scene. VS edged its way into the lingerie market in the ‘80s and ‘90s by setting itself apart from the glitz and glamour of its only competition, Frederick’s. Instead, VS appealed to “privacy, British sophistication, and a more refined, classically beautiful femininity” (Juffer, 1998, 150-152). Raymond, the original owner, told *Vogue* the stores were “designed to make men feel comfortable, so we used dusty rose and dark wood...Private, fanciful, a little bit sexy.” Thus, store designs created a turn-of-the-century bedroom ambience (Workman, 1996, p. 61). This appeal to the male gaze, in a comforting space for men, worked to situate VS ads within the media landscape of the time – an age of male-as-consumer magazines and a prevalent male gaze across film and other mediums (Mulvey, 1976).

And as VS’s profits soared and Frederick’s dwindled, it seemed VS had successfully “negotiated its closeness to and yet distance from porn” (p. 153). VS was eager to disassociate itself from its raunchy competitor; a top executive explained, “We represent beauty and artwork. We’re not as explicit or cheesy as Frederick’s” (cited in Juffer, 1998, p. 159). VS began legitimating itself as a “safe” and non-pornographic entity by insisting that lingerie is an accessory or a decorous product in a Victorian manner, to evoke a sense of personal intimacy – an argument that sounds eerily similar to the nineteenth century displays of nudity deemed as “fine art” to escape the pornographic frame (Gerdt, 1974, p. 46). Moreover, they used several

strategies to facilitate the “safe” circulation of the catalog: Covers have included “London” on the corner and have listed the price in both pounds and dollars even though the business is headquartered in Ohio (Juffer, 1998, p. 154). Such tactics effectively invoked a distinction between “high art” and mass culture that has been used historically to differentiate between art and pornography, but today’s VS relies on no such artistic indicators. Instead, dim lighting, blaring music, and sky-high posters of nearly nude women fill the stores while digitally altered pornographic imagery in the form of centerfolds adorn the advertisements.

In her criticism of mid ‘90s VS catalogs, Juffer (1996; 1998) discussed the dichotomy between the kind of sexual prudery invoked by Victorian architecture and lingerie so prevalent in the VS of the 90s and the overtly sexual female bodies depicted right alongside (1996, p. 31). “[VS] seems to revel in constantly telling its secrets, displaying the female body in a manner that is not at all shy or repressed but close to soft-core pornography, with models who also pose for *Playboy*” (p. 31). As a mass-culture text, she argues its very ubiquity renders it a public artifact; one whose garters and thongs enjoy a privileged status others do not because it has been careful to sell sexuality under the guise of privacy. VS functions as a kind of soft-core porn, Juffer argued in the ‘90s, arriving free in mailboxes around the country to both male and female consumers’ delight. The company rhetoric, not surprisingly, does its best to distance itself from the male gaze, another defining trait of pornography. As a PR official said in 1996, “We are not for men to look at but for women to feel good about themselves” (Jane Juffer, p.32).

But the VS of the 21st century does not believe in keeping secrets any longer, and no academic work has analyzed its media texts since Juffer in 1996. Since that time, VS has undergone a radical transformation and a close textual analysis of its advertising is highly warranted, especially due to the previously cited studies that demonstrate exposure to sexualized

bodies encourages females to self-objectify, positively endorse sexually objectifying images, and experience body hatred. While VS presented models as “corporate, working women” in the 80s and 90s (Workman, 1996, p. 70) and past models had shapely but “not enormous” breasts, wore minimal makeup, little jewelry, and moderate heels (Juffer, p. 35), that is a thing of the past. In the last decade, VS has become controversially explicit not only with increasingly risqué catalogs, but also with the semi-annual VS fashion show, which began in 1995 and first aired online in 1999 with one billion people in 100 countries watching the show, according to *Newsweek* (Adler, 2010, p. 3). In 2001, the fashion show was broadcast on ABC and was cancelled in 2002 due to FCC regulations after the 2002 Superbowl “nipple-slip,” but returned in 2003 to CBS, where it has been broadcast every year since (Robertson, 2005). Despite thousands of complaints, the “pornographication of culture” argument is alive and well as VS’s media texts are nearly inescapable for TV viewers, mall shoppers, and mailbox owners.

Today, VS’s campaigns often surpass Frederick’s in terms of sexed-up images of women reflective of porn. Digital retouching renders each woman more like a silhouette of her former self, lit with the softest and most “flattering” light, surgically enhanced bodies as a near industry standard, taller, thinner, and bustier than ever before. The “angels” in the catalogs are wearing less than the most risqué of past VS images – often with only a bra and no underwear or vice versa. If underwear is worn, entire buttocks are often visible. The women are shown tugging at their panties and bras more often than not, with open mouths and tousled hair, reflective of pornography (see VS Christmas Catalog, 2010). In earlier regimes of advertising, women were presented as sexual objects, then this was understood as something being done to women by a sexist advertising industry – something that many people began to realize and critique through the impact of feminist activism (Gill, 2008, p. 42).

The current VS, in its functioning within the boundaries of everyday life, enters the home through its “safe” appeals to femininity and intimacy, and legitimates a kind of pornographic consumption in a way rarely presented to females (Juffer, 1996, p. 46). The entire franchise has managed to escape the wrath of the FCC, despite thousands of filed complaints since VS commercials and fashion shows have aired on national TV, and has flown beneath the radar of conservatives such as the Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography, who preach the threat pornography poses because of its ubiquitous presence in our everyday lives (Berlant, 1995, p. 390-395). Yet even as it relies on “privacy,” VS uses precisely the strategy the Commission notes as pornography’s most harmful tactic: VS integrates the pornographic with the everyday. This strategy makes the home precisely the site where explicit representations of female bodies can be normalized and openly consumed (Juffer, 1996, p. 46). This hegemonic feminine ideal – hyper-sexual and “empowered” –materializes the ideology of this fantasy. Today, women are endowed with the status of active subjecthood so they “choose” to become commodities through willful and desirable self-subjectification, normalized through years of sexualized images.

Victoria’s Secret Christmas Dreams Catalog 2010

I echo Gill (2008) in claiming these images are constructions of femininity that come straight out of the most predictable templates of male sexual fantasy, yet which must also be understood as authentically owned by the women who enact them (p. 42). In the VS “Christmas Dreams” 2010 catalog, 175 pages of glossy, high-end printing are dedicated to commodity feminism of the highest order: the selling of commodities as a vehicle for empowerment and the packaging of women as commodities to be consumed. Forbes estimated VS distributed roughly 400 million catalogs in 1997 and VS has not revealed circulation numbers since (Del Franco,

2000). Though we can speculate in the last 14 years, as VS has experienced major growth, those numbers have increased, VS reports that circulation remains steady (VS Annual Report, 2009).

The cover sets the scene for the pages within: A supermodel tugs at thigh-high stockings and neon pink garters, bending over to expose massive breasts with an open-mouth, blow-up-doll-esque face. “One gift, a thousand fantasies,” the cover states. The pages within feature VS angels ranging in age from 19 to 23 wearing as much as a corset and garters (p. 10) and as little as a thong with no other clothing (featured in five photos on page 32 alone). Notably, only two women of color are present within the 175 pages and both represent the “white ideal” with small features, long, shiny hair, and tan skin (ex: p. 21, 79). In addition to being thin and ideally beautiful, beauty ideals presented here are almost always white (Perkins, 1996), and the two women of color who made the cut closely represent the white ideal. Thus, only some women are endowed with the capacity to be a sexual object, and those women are most often white.

While men are never spoken of in text or present in any images, the “angels” are constantly tugging and pulling at their lingerie while staring intently into the camera, effectively enacting the “to be consumed” role to satisfy the male gaze. But taken one step further, they are working within the realm of Goldman’s (1991) postulation that within commodity feminism, woman is endowed with “privileged access to her own sensual body, to touch and feel her own softness and smoothness, to luxuriate in her own sensuality” (p. 343). While Goldman claims this is reflective of the male gaze, I argue the male gaze has become so internalized by today’s women so as to reappear as self-subjectification due to the “over-presence” of the images (Bordo, 2003). Instead of women as passive objects for men’s sexual pleasure, this shift is towards women as sexually “autonomous, active and desiring subjects” so that their most urgent desire and power comes from being consumed (Gill 2003, p. 105). In this regard, patriarchy

reigns supreme and female bodies, as Foucault has argued, become a direct locus of social control – even as “docile bodies” regulated by the norms of cultural life (1977).

On the first page, a full-page spread features a blonde in a sparkly bra and garter belt with her finger in her mouth, gazing intently at the camera. Pages 2 and 3 feature the first of many centerfolds, where supermodel Adriana Lima lies on a fur rug, stroking her hair in thigh-high stockings, garters, and a bra. Each page to follow features models “luxuriating in their own sensuality” as they touch themselves and appear to be acting on themselves as a partner would (Goldman, 1991, p. 343). The centerfold on Page 22-23 is spread across the pages in a black bra and tiny, lace panties, appearing to have an orgasm. For these women, the “privileged access of their own bodies” is given to them with the aid of these commodities as endowed power from on high and is enough to produce intense arousal by adorning them. Page 24’s full-page depiction of a blonde tugging at her hair, staring directly into the camera’s gaze, with breasts enhanced by a black, push-up bra stands alongside text reading: “Out of this world & made just for you” – what a privilege! The text tells the consumer the bra is exclusively for her – in a nod to commodity feminism’s empowerment through the fetishized self. In the catalog, women have the opportunity to buy panties with sayings, like Page 32’s “ALL NIGHT SHOW” and “Unwrap Me” thongs. If these photos and the lingerie itself is “for women to feel good about themselves and not for men to look at,” who do they expect to read these slogans behind the women? On Page 32, a full-page photo of a model wearing a thong and push-up bra states “There’s just 2 things I want for Christmas: The ‘Miraculous’ instantly adds 2 sizes.” Sexy, bold, power means big breasts are key to feminism’s ultimate goals: personal freedom and self-definition.

The Christmas 2010 catalog represents a drastic shift in the representation of the models and the lingerie, far from anything resembling “art” VS claimed in the ‘90s. Besides the obvious

employment of digital and surgical enhancement as a new industry standard (Danziger, 2009), the current “Angels” are oiled up, with long, flowing hair, heavy makeup, decadent jewelry, and sky-high platform heels. While Juffer’s analysis claimed no models were featured in beds or bedrooms so as to not appear overtly pornographic, today’s models are sprawled across bear-skin rugs in centerfold spreads (p. 4-5), posed on beds wearing panties with buttocks’ jutting in the air with fingers in their mouths (p. 64), and lying on only pants on, tugging at their hair (p. 68).

It is no wonder VS has smoothly shifted from a classical boutique to a “too sexy” industry and media powerhouse “exclusively for women” in the last decade, free from commercial regulation or censorship, considering the pornography industry’s jaw-dropping growth in the same period of time. The internet has contributed to skyrocketing production of pornography, with 420 million pages of pornography online, and 13,000 porn videos released and 900 million rented annually (MEF, 2008). Moreover, corporations like CBS (who gains massive profit from airing the VS Fashion Show each year), Time Warner, and News Corporation collectively earn \$1 billion annually from pornography, either by direct distribution through video on demand or by producing and licensing porn-related content (MEF, 2008).

The violence imposed on women’s bodies through pornographic imagery, rendered “safe” as it is delivered to the mailbox or broadcast any hour of the day, is degrading at best. Thus, images like catalog Page 71’s flannel PJs advertised by a very young-looking model with an unbuttoned PJ top and no pants, leg spread directly toward the camera on a bed, thumb in her mouth, position her in a dangerous “to be consumed” moment. The accompanying text further proves she’s “up for it,” as any empowered female is: “The dreamer flannel PJ: Picky girl seeks cute sleeping partner for nighttime trysts (*and possibly more*).” Turn the page and another flannel PJ ad positions another teen-looking model in low-rise PJ pants, a widely unbuttoned

shirt to expose her pelvis, navel, and cleavage, and text that reads: “24 colors. 3 inseams. She insisted on *lots of variety in bed*” (p. 72). VS is not shy about using text that invites the male gaze and the internalized male gaze as normal and most desirable.

Once porn and real human sexuality were distinguishable. “Not even porn’s biggest advocates would suggest a porn flick depicted reality, that women were gagging for sex 24/7,” Turner (2005) states. But as the “pornographication of culture” has been made real by the likes of VS, “the sexually liberated modern woman turns out to resemble – what do you know! – the pneumatic take-me-now male fantasy after all” (Turner, 2005). Through normalized, everyday pornographic imagery hailing the willful self-subjectification of the consumer as the consumed, these “constraining, enslaving, and even murderous” VS messages come to be experienced as “liberating, transforming, and life-giving” (Bordo, 1997, p. 2376). Limited Brands’ most profitable brand, VS does as it claims to do by “redefining what it means to be sought-after” in a way that asks women to be sexually and completely fulfilled by disciplining themselves through an internalized male gaze – one which they consume and desire to be consumed.

2010 Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show

Fourteen million viewers tuned in live to VS’s 2010 Semi-Annual Fashion Show, broadcast on CBS primetime on Nov. 30, to see the likes of “Angel” Adriana Lima strut the runway in a \$2 million diamond-encrusted bra as pop-music sensation Katy Perry serenaded the crowd (Nielsen Media Research, 2010). The show had a 17 percent ratings increase from last year and the CBS and VS websites hit record-breaking site traffic as millions more enthusiasts caught the event, thousands of photographs and behind-the-scenes interviews online (Domanick, 2010). For VS, the show appears to pass uncensored because of its framing within the realm of

“fashion,” though the vast majority of these “fashions” are not for sale, its “empowering” theme, and its profit-making appeal with the likes of Katy Perry entertaining the crowd with hit songs.

The eight featured “Angels” range in age from Chanel Iman at age 19 to Alessandra Ambrosio at 29, though the other six models are all 25 and under (VictoriasSecret.com, 2010), representative of the youthful beauty ideals at play. The one-hour “fashion” show featured six segments, including “Heavenly Bodies,” where teen Iman received her “Angel wings” and tearfully exclaimed the moment was a “total dream come true – a real-life fantasy.” In that moment, she tromped down the runway while the audience stood in applause, celebrating her ultimate goal realized: to qualify for the title of desirable sexual object. “When I put on the wings, I know I’m going to feel magical,” she exclaimed.

In the “Wild Things” segment, where the women were ornamented to look like different types of birds and jungle animals, metal pasties adorned models’ breasts, ultra-small loin cloths covered the most private of areas, and faux fur made up larger-than-life angel wings. For the segment, the women were exoticized as less than human, made to look like thoughtless animals. In Segment 2, “Country Girls,” the models bounced down the catwalk in spiky, platform heels, pigtails, and tiny “down-home”-inspired outfits. As they strolled, the song “What You Are” by Jewel blasted through the halls, and the lyrics (lyricskid.com, 2010) speak to the contradictions inherent in this “Inspire, Empower, Indulge”- themed media text:

*I'm driving around town/ See a girl on the bus stop bench/ Dressed to draw attention/
Hoping everyone will stare/ If she don't stand out she thinks she'll disappear/ Wish I
could hold her, tell her, show her/ What she wants is already there/ You already are what
you are/ And what you are is beautiful/ And strong enough/ And good enough/*

An inspirational song on its own, when paired with girls in thigh-high boots and tiny jeweled thongs strutting a runway, the meaning is lost. When appropriated by VS’s commercial interests, Goldman describes this “feminism” as having been cooked to distill out an object (1991).

Feminism itself is thus objectified. In the case of VS, a million-dollar bra is made to stand for agency, beauty, and success in a way that objectifies feminism and femininity simultaneously by commodification of the female form.

Moreover, as these models stroll down the runway with their hands on their hips, winking and air kissing along the way, they signify a sort of “empowerment” through their confident demeanors, but quickly lose their power when the camera pans up and down their bodies in an all-too-familiar hailing of Mulvey’s classic male gaze (1976). What is striking is the sheer amount of time spent focusing in on the models’ pelvises and vaginal regions as they walked, often wearing barely-there G-strings or thongs. While breasts have been sexually objectified for years, this is the first time I have witnessed women’s vaginal areas so closely featured on basic cable. Perhaps VS is pushing the envelope to commodify a region previously left for pornography? For example, in the “Wild Things” segment, a model wearing (hopefully) faux cheetah fur had a miniscule loin cloth covering her just enough to see some form of “wild” tribal ink tattooed on or near the top of her vagina.

In the first 15 minutes, the eight angels are interviewed in an “exclusive, behind-the-scenes” fashion. Each model is asked to speak about the other models and objectification abounds: “What’s my favorite feature of hers? Definitely her ass!” says one model. “She is a sexy bomb,” says another. “Lili is smoking hot!” and “Candice has an amazing body,” exclaim the women. Then, the music begins to bump and the models strut again down the runway. These “Angels” seem to be vocally appropriating the male gaze upon each other, though never asked by the interviewer to speak about bodies specifically. Featuring the women talking excitedly about each other in exclusively sexually objectifying ways not only normalizes the blatant objectification for CBS’s viewers and VS consumers, but also frames it as “safe” because

it is women speaking about women. In this way, the “pornographication of culture” (McRobbie, 2004) moves forward unscathed, passing off the incessant male gaze as empowering for those (very few) women who qualify for the endowment of “sexual object.” Sexual subjectification, then, is a highly specific and exclusionary practice and pleasure is actually irrelevant here (Gill, 2008, p. 43); it is the power of attractiveness that is important.

VS media texts represent a simulacrum of empowerment. “Many women have internalized these hegemonic gender norms such that they desire only to be desired. Indeed, if this were not the case, ‘hegemony’ would lose its power” (Mooney, 2008, p. 261). If this were not the case, millions of VS consumers would not help the franchise rake in \$5 billion a year and the fashion shows and constant barrage of ads and catalogs would not be wildly popular in the US and across the globe (Ambartsumyan, 2010). For CBS, VS, and the plethora of advertisers, the 2010 Fashion Show was a resounding success, garnering new consumers and new women desiring to be consumed. Notably, in the fifth of six segments during the show, the song “Vox Populi” by 30 Seconds to Mars sent the models down the runway with these lyrics: “This is a call to arms, gather soldiers, time to go to war, this is a battle song brother and sisters” (30 Seconds to Mars, 2009). While this song provided a steady beat and a commercialized form of faux empowerment for women with hands on hips hitting the catwalk, the words are strikingly meaningful within the context of this research. As has been suggested by others, critical research must address these dangerous, enslaving issues so prevalent and normalized in popular culture (APA, 2010; Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2008). Thus, this research is my own call to arms.

A Call to Arms

This is *my* call to arms, “gather soldiers, time to go to war, this is a battle song brothers and sisters” (30 Seconds to Mars, 2009). While it is easy to celebrate an advertising move away

from the age-old male gaze, this new, internalized disciplinary regime (Gill, 2008, p. 44) is nothing to cheer about. This critique is difficult, in that it represents a shift in the mode of power from external oppression to internal regulation, producing “new subjectivities” (Gill, 2008, p. 45), but it is never more vital as companies like VS’s ubiquitous advertising frame this new discipline as natural, desirable and the highest form of empowerment. The accompanying self-subjectification, endorsement of sexually objectifying images, and body hatred proved to go hand-in-hand with such “bold, sexy, powerful” ideals (limitedbrands.com, 2010) – though ideal for an industry raking in \$5 billion a year and expanding across the globe – is not conducive to real progress as individuals or as a culture.

Feminist values include self-definition, control over one’s body and personal freedom (see Russo, 1987, p. 104), and VS represents a simulacrum of feminism – a “power femininity” (Lazar, 2006) proclaiming women can have it all *if* they can be it all. When the desire only to be desired – to be packaged as a commodity and openly consumed – is a woman’s primary objective, she loses herself, her control, and her freedom. Particularly, dozens of studies prove feminist values are literally lost when sexualized female bodies inundate our media landscape: adolescent girls with a more objectified view of their bodies had diminished sexual health, measured by decreased condom use and diminished sexual assertiveness (Impett, Schooler, and Tolman, 2006) and in a particularly insidious consequence of self-objectification, research proves undue attention to physical appearance leaves fewer cognitive resources available for other mental and physical activities, including mathematics, logical reasoning, spatial skills, and athletic performance (Fredrickson et al. 1998; Fredrickson & Harrison, 2004; Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003; Hebl, King, & Lin, 2004).

In an effort to fight back against such pervasive, post-feminist ideals, the American Psychological Association (2010) recommends scholars: 1: Document the frequency of sexualization and whether sexualization is increasing across mediums; 2: Examine and inform our understanding of the circumstances under which the sexualization of girls (and women) occurs and identify factors involving the media and products that either contribute to or buffer against the sexualization of them; 3. Examine the presence or absence of the sexualization of girls and women in all media, and particular research is needed to examine the extent to which girls are portrayed in sexualized and objectified ways and whether this has increased over time.

Aligning myself with these goals, I have attempted to document the frequency of this sexualization in one media powerhouse over time, while examining and informing our understanding of the circumstances that work to situate willful self-subjectification and normalized pornographic bodies as acceptable and desirable in the VS franchise and within its ever-present media texts. Breaking the silence surrounding these anti-feminist ideals is imperative for girls and women who value feminist ideals like self-definition, control over one's body, and personal freedom. Specifically, research has confirmed media literacy can be used to teach girls and women to become more critical consumers of sexually objectifying media images to prevent the development of self-objectification and increase body satisfaction and self esteem (Bergsma & Carney; Grabe, Hyde, & Ward, 2008; Bissel, 2006; Irving & Berel, 2001, 2008; Mann et al, 1997; Martz & Bazzini, 1999; Nicolino, Martz, & Curtin, 2001; Posavac et al., 1998; Ridolfi & Vander Wal, 2008; Strahan et al, 2008). Bissel (2006) found media literacy – specifically by way of a visual presentation – to be an important factor in helping young women better understand the social effects of mass media. Irving and Berel's (2001) study of college-age women determined media literacy interventions could enhance students' critical thinking

capabilities surrounding media images in an effort to reduce negative perceived body image. Results showed an increase in media skepticism, reduced beliefs that models were realistic, and reduced the desirability to be like the model.

In the case of Victoria's Secret, a push-up bra and thigh-high boots are made to stand for "empowerment" in a way that objectifies feminism and femininity simultaneously through its commodification of the female form. Speaking up against such practices works to bring the hegemonic nature of such naturalized displays to light, and further research on similar texts and corporations that encourage willful self-subjectification as natural and desirable is highly warranted. This is a call to arms, "gather soldiers, time to go to war, this is a battle song brothers and sisters" (lyricskid.com, 2010).

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