

2019

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Original Publication Citation

Ouellette, M. A. (2019). "And nothing she needs": Victoria's Secret and the gaze of "post-feminism". *Visual Culture & Gender*, 14, 6-17.

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“AND NOTHING SHE NEEDS”: VICTORIA’S SECRET AND THE GAZE OF “POST-FEMINISM”

MARC OUELLETTE

Abstract

A study of the *Victoria’s Secret* catalogues, which frames the period 1996-2006, reveals that the models’ poses and postures manipulate the formulaic gaze of objectification with seemingly empowering themes. Instead of the indeterminate, averted looks that Berger (1972) and Mulvey (1989) considered in their analyses, the more recent versions of *Victoria’s Secret* photographs confront viewers with pouts, glares, and stares of defiance. In this essay, I contribute to current conversations regarding mixed messages that concern *post-feminism* and *third-wave feminism* (Duffy, Hancock, & Tyler, 2017; Glapka, 2017; McAllister & DeCarvalho, 2014; McRobbie, 2009). In this regard, the *Victoria’s Secret* catalogues constitute an important artifact of the turn of the 21st century decade, one which saw the rise of so-called “raunch culture” and increasing depictions of hyperfemininity and hypersexuality in popular and celebrity culture (Donnelly & Twenge, 2017; Renninger, 2018; Scott, 2006, 2010; Zaslow, 2018).

Keywords: visual culture, gender, consumerism, photography, objectification, femininity

Everything She Wants: Introduction

A study of the *Victoria’s Secret* catalogues published between 1996 and 2006 reveals a shift in the photographs within the catalogue from depicting women as passive objects of the gaze to showing more aggressive poses, which still objectify the models. This becomes an important means through which the \$30 billion global industry reduces feminism, or its image, to a set of consumerist practices, which paradoxically portray women in ways inconsistent with the usual tenets of modesty, passivity, and availability (Duffy, Hancock, & Tyler, 2017; Hume & Mills, 2013). The catalogue images from the early part of the decade analyzed in this study reflect the standard depictions of women, which inspired the original formulation of the gaze—that women are portrayed as the passive bearers of the look for the purpose of male pleasure—that has been a critical commonplace for roughly four decades (McAllister & DeCarvalho, 2014). *Forbes* columnist Melanie Wells (2000) describes a contemporaneous and conscious corporate shift by *Victoria’s Secret* to make the catalogues more like women’s magazines, including hiring writers and editors from that industry. Advertising executive Barbara Olsen (2003), who worked for rival Warner’s, recounts in a chapter of a business textbook that marketing the WonderBra™ push-up bra as a source of empowerment created a “revolution” in the lingerie and marketing industries in the late 1990s (p. 113). Olsen also explains that *Victoria’s Secret* changed its marketing in response to the success of Warner’s campaigns. Indeed, as *Victoria’s Secret* catalogues progress, the poses become another symptom of what feminist Cultural Studies scholar Angela McRobbie (2009) calls the “post-feminist masquerade” (p. 59). It is no mistake that the period in question saw not only the rise of that formation, but also the rise of so-called “raunch culture” and its concurrent emphasis on aggressive female sexuality defined largely through consumer choices (Donnelly & Twenge, 2017; Duffy, Hancock, & Tyler, 2017; Levy, 2010; Meyer,

2014; Nguyen, 2013; Wilkes, 2015).¹ Not surprisingly, then, in the newer images, in the 21st century, each model's posture reflects an awareness of the gaze, and even challenges the gaze. While Laura Mulvey's (1989) "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," considers the ramifications of portrayals of women as always avoiding a direct gaze, the contemporary catalogue copy confronts viewers with more confrontational looks borrowed from representations normally associated with men (Bordo, 1999; Gough, 2018; Kidd, 2018).

In depictions of male models, the confrontational poses are supposed to deflect vulnerability and homoeroticism association with objectification away from the male model and the male viewer (Bordo, 1999; Gough, 2018; Kidd, 2018; Wernick, 1987). Conversely, the effect of the newer *Victoria's Secret* depictions featuring more aggressive poses maintain the models' objectification. While the models' own looking might be masculinized, their miniscule apparel and its concomitant effect of optimizing the female body for a hypersexualized display remind viewers of the persistent presence of hyperfemininity. In this regard, the *Victoria's Secret* catalogues become an index of the decade that gave us "raunch culture" and saw feminism turned into a marketing tool. While much was and has been made of the ubiquitous thong as a symbol of the era, little work has been done to study the purveyors (Hollows, 2013; Hume & Mills, 2013; Martens, 2009).² That lingerie manufacturers and retailers receive little critical attention is surprising given the critical and cultural connection, as well as the consistent nine

percent growth of the lingerie industry that business law professors Margee Hume and Michael Mills find, even since the Great Recession of 2008 (Hume & Mills, 2013). While this still leaves the supply versus demand question, the catalogues provide a step-by-step enumeration of the development of the mixed messages of post-feminism. Thus, my essay begins with a consideration of the gaze and how it came to be reshaped in and through "post-feminism." Since post-feminism has been imbricated with consumerism, I proceed with considerations of the effects and the extent of this relationship in the changing compositions of the catalogues.

Surprisingly few scholars have taken up the study of the incorporation of feminist themes and messages into blatantly consumerist discourses. Within Cultural Studies, the concept of "incorporation," which refers to the strategies through which the dominant culture contains resistance, has been a critical commonplace since British sociologist Dick Hebdige's (1979) seminal study of subcultural style. The key here is style, especially since the most common means of incorporation is the "commodity form," through which the subculture's style becomes mass-produced and mass-marketed (Hebdige, 1979, p. 94). Yet, as consumer culture theorists Joe Heath and Andrew Potter (2005) observe, "few people realized what a boon feminism would be for the economy" (p. 27). Here, it is worth noting that the other form, the "ideological form" refers to efforts to trivialize, fetishize, and exoticize the subculture in order to disempower it (Hebdige, 1979, p. 94). I would argue that the commodity form is a subset of the ideological form. This terrain seems to be the nearly exclusive domain of advertisers and producers with academics left in the difficult position of arguing for the empowerment of women while simultaneously attempting to discourage certain (alleged) sources of empowerment (Maclaran, 2012; Meyer, 2014; Nguyen, 2013). The ruling discourse of the *Victoria's Secret* catalogues is ostensibly that empowerment is tied to hypersexualized bodily displays. The effect, however, is that agency becomes secondary to conspicuous sexuality through conspicuous consumption and the consumption of conspicuous sexuality. Indeed, Josée Johnston and Judith Taylor (2008), who are sociologists of globalization and consumption, adopt the term "feminist consumerism" to describe the widespread trend of feminism being reduced to a stylistic affectation (p. 943). While economic clout seems to be the ultimate arbiter in contemporary (consumer) culture, such a taxonomy reinscribes the criteria of the dominant culture and, as its own corollary,

¹ The term "raunch culture" refers to young (especially) women's attraction to and participation in self-objectification and hypersexualization under the guise of empowerment (Levy, 2010). Duffy, Hancock and Tyler (2017) cite the emphasis on the body as the site of power, identity, and value as hallmarks of post-feminism. The period Levy (2010) identifies saw the popularity of exposed thongs (the "whaletail"), extremely low-rise jeans, Brazilian waxes (exposed as a "bare spot"), "Cake" parties, all of which (and more) were popularized by artists such as Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera and others, as well as movies and TV shows like *Sex and the City*, *Girls Gone Wild*, and trends like pole-dance classes. Within raunch culture, these were taken to extremes in terms of performance. Indeed, Donnelly and Twenge (2017) suggest that alterations in androgyny values in the *Bem Sex Role Inventory* reports, beginning in the late 1990s, may be attributable, in part, to the rise of raunch culture.

² In fact, in searching for specific articles about *Victoria's Secret*, I found more attention paid to its environmental ethics—printing millions of paper catalogues—than to its depictions.

reduces feminism to a consumer choice (Mager & Helgeson, 2008; McRobbie, 2009; Renninger, 2018; Zaslow, 2018). Ultimately, the catalogues, along with their counterparts in women's magazines—*Elle*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Vogue*—provide another means of reducing feminism from a dissenting alternative practice to a consenting consumer category—from a politics to a posture (Twigg, 2017).³

Turn Around, Look at Me: Posing for the Gaze

By now, most scholars of visual culture and gender should be familiar with Mulvey's (1989) critique of 'the male gaze' along with art critic John Berger's (1972) similar, earlier contribution. Indeed, the gaze has been a critical commonplace for roughly four decades and the limits of its findings, its iconic status, and its analytical value still offer room for debate. In this regard, Communication Studies scholars Matthew McAllister and Lauren DeCarvalho (2014) note that Mulvey (1989) and Berger's (1972) positions have been found to be too essentialist and they enumerate the ways in which it excludes certain feminine subjectivities. In particular, the audience cannot reject the cinematic arrangement since this is assumed to be produced for a heterogeneous masculine audience through a uniform production code based on the active male-passive female dichotomy. At the very least, the binary system, Mulvey and Berger critique, does not allow for intra-gender difference in looking and in power. Thus, other scholars consider the advent of masculinities as objects of the gaze, beginning in the late 1980s (Bordo, 1999; Gough, 2018; Ouellette, 2002; Wernick, 1987). Even so, the basic conception of the gaze serves as a starting point. With respect to the female figure, Berger (1972) concludes that there is a specific way of looking at women, and even a way in which a woman looks at herself, that is different than the ways in which men are arranged and are viewed. He offers a shorthand rule: "*men act and women appear* (author's emphasis)" (Berger, 1972, p. 47). As of the late 1990s, this was the dominant mode of depiction and never really disappeared. The emphasis, then, rests on the construction Berger cites and its associated codes of representation. These codes, based on women as passive objects, can then be manipulated like any other set of codes.

³ It is worth noting that *Cosmopolitan* has been pulled from check-out aisles at major retailer Walmart because of its increasingly overt hypersexualization (Wang, 2018). Roughly contemporaneously, *Teen Vogue* has become one of the most celebrated voices of the resistance to the Trump regime (Warrington, 2017).

A more ambitious study of looking, and consuming the look, comes from Laura Mulvey (1989), as mentioned earlier. Although Mulvey focuses on the moving picture, her analysis continues to influence the study of images and of looking, regardless of location (McAllister & DeCarvalho, 2014). Moreover, scholars have extended and expanded Mulvey's findings, which were based on film structures, to include other visual media (Duffy, Hancock & Tyler, 2017; Glapka, 2017; Renninger, 2018). In terms of my analysis of the conflicting messages produced by the representations of aggressively self-objectifying women in more recent *Victoria's Secret* catalogues, two points are tremendously important. In the hands of subsequent critics, the masculine and feminine roles in advertisements have been fixed so that men are always active and women are always passive, but this began to change in the late 1990s, with the rise of the so-called "metrosexual" (Bordo, 1999; Gough, 2018; Noble, 2006; Ouellette 2002). The second, related, point is that the presumption of fixed gender roles leaves un(der)examined the possibility for multiple viewpoints, representations, and roles not accounted for in Mulvey's theory of the gaze (Douglas, 2010; Mager & Helgeson, 2011).

One such possibility appears not in contemporary scholarship but in Berger's (1972) statements regarding the positioning of women to emphasize "the principle that *you are what you have* (author's emphasis)" (p. 139). A person's success and standing in society are directly proportional to accumulated capital. Here, what one has is not only trendy, luxury branded lingerie, one also has sexuality. This deployment results not only in mixed messages in the catalogues, but also results in varied opinions from feminist scholars as to the actual empowerment offered (Douglas, 2010; Duffy, Hancock, & Tyler, 2017; Glapka, 2017; Maclaran, 2012; McRobbie, 2009; Scott, 2006). For its part in the process, *Victoria's Secret* depicts women as hyperfeminine and hypersexual by simultaneously employing poses and postures, hitherto, reserved for (the most masculine) men. It is worth pointing out that Scott (2010) finds that perpetual surveillance, particularly by other women, is taken as a condition of the post-feminist existence particularly because it is a style affectation produced through lifestyle marketing. Thus, the emphasis on distinction through conspicuous consumption ultimately results in women being hyperfeminized and hypersexualized to a greater extent than they were before the rise of raunch culture (Duffy, Hancock, & Tyler, 2017; McRobbie, 2009).

Grrrl (Power) Interrupted: Mixed Messages of Post-Feminist Poses

When first encountering Calvin Klein ads in the late 1990s, ads which featured male models, feminist theorist Susan Bordo (1999) notes a similar redeployment of the gaze. She writes of the models having feminine poses, including an averted gaze and a “languid posture” (1999, p. 171). In addition, Bordo finds two other forms of an open, inviting, objectifying pose, which she calls “rocks and leaners” (1999, p. 186). These feature aggressive and defiant stances. Just as the Calvin Klein ads depicted a hard masculinity that gay men found attractive but which would scream hetero to clueless straights, the *Victoria's Secret* pictures depict an empowerment which is really (about) attracting a hetero male and still reduces women to objects, not agents. All the while everything else, occasionally including the accompanying text, suggests the process is empowering and is fostering agency.

For example, one of the things that should be said for *Victoria's Secret* is that they are incredibly consistent. Many of the poses are basically the same across the time-span from 1996-2006, as are many of the individual garments on display. For certain models, such as Tyra Banks, one can overlay pose, model, and garment across a ten-year divide. In this last regard, the change is quite startling because, quite simply, Tyra Banks' smile seems to have disappeared from *Victoria's Secret* catalogues. For example, in a set of three poses (see Figures 1-3) that cover two pages in the Summer 1996 edition of the catalogue, Tyra's look and posture convey passivity (pp. 6-7).⁴ She is featured sitting, standing, and reclining while alternating between a smile and an open-mouthed, almost surprised expression. Her legs are crossed and her shoulders are rounded. Her hair is orderly and there is no jewelry to complement or alter the image. In addition, the pictures were taken outside—a common practice in 1990s era *Victoria's Secret* catalogues, which still clung to the lifestyle marketing with which the brand was founded—next to a pool in order to conjure images of lounging and relaxing.

⁴ All images come from high resolution photos taken by the author and are offered here under fair use.



Figures 1 to 3 are from two pages in the Summer 1996 edition of *Victoria's Secret* catalogue, in which model Tyra Banks depicts the woman as a passive object of the gaze.

These images were repeated in other catalogues throughout the year. The pattern continued so that in the “Fabulous Gifts” insert of the *Christmas Specials 1998* catalogue, Tyra again adopts a reclining pose, with her legs crossed for modesty, which invokes pin-up photos. The only difference in the latter series is the setting, a satin covered bed.

In contrast, by the middle of the next decade, Banks adopts the challenging, aggressive posture Bordo (1999) attributes to men's wear ads of the late 1990s. Here, it is worth noting that on her TV talk show, *Tyra*, the model refers to the generic pose as “getting my growl on” almost daily. The *Fall Fashion 2003* catalogue has a two-page spread (see Figures 4-6) of bras and panties modeled by Banks (2003, pp. 8-9). In the largest picture she wears a racerback bra. This is significant because at the time *Victoria's Secret* did not offer a “sports bra,” so there is little chance that Banks has an expression designed to suggest competition. She is not looking into the camera to invite or submit to a look, nor is she gazing dreamingly. Instead, she has a stoic, possibly determined but almost angry look to the eyes and mouth. The two accompanying photos show the same facial expression as in the previous one (Banks, 2003, pp. 8-9). Unlike the pictures from 1996, she has wildly unkempt hair and her shoulders are set squarely and

assertively. They seem to indicate a hands-on-hips posture of displeasure. The left shoulder is slightly forward, which signals a challenge or a confrontational stance. The look is basically the one my students have referred to as “cut eye”; that is, downward, sideways and eye-brow raised as if ready to respond or to offer a challenge.⁵



Figures 4 to 6 are from *Victoria's Secret* two-page spread in the Fall Fashion 2003 catalogue, in which model Tyra Banks's look and pose are adapted from the confrontational, “face-off” postures more commonly associated with masculinities.

In (first) analyzing this type of pose, Bordo (1999) assigns it to a masculine category, and perhaps with good reason. What becomes interesting is the gender assignment, masculinity, since such a move potentially reinscribes a binary gender system and limits potential modes of analysis even as it attempts to reconcile new poses with an (always) already dichotomous gender system. The distinction becomes important because the poses and postures have been adopted by contemporary models, photographers, and editors in compiling (at least) the *Victoria's Secret* catalogue. Instead of reconciling men as objects of the gaze, the style of representation attempts to justify hyperfemininity by posing it as female empowerment through the aggressive stances. In fact, the lingerie, like the clothes in the catalogues is far more revealing than those of the mid-1990s. This becomes

⁵ I have taught courses on the culture of the body at the undergraduate and graduate levels since the winter of 2006. Students in my courses have suggested that “cut eye” is a step beyond Bordo's (1999) face-off look.

particularly noticeable when, as will be discussed, the styles are listed under the same names. The empowerment is entirely superficial (Aune & Holyoak, 2018; Duffy, Hancock, & Tyler, 2017; Nguyen, 2013). It is a placebo, or as McRobbie (2009) calls it, a masquerade. You may be what you have, but what you have is precisely what men want (McAllister & DeCarvalho, 2014). The overall message is entirely contradictory and women are encouraged to participate in the process (Meyer, 2014).

The last of the poses associated with the ‘growl’ pose places Banks in a defiant, slouching, would-be rebel without a cause look. Her facial expression has expanded to an open-mouthed look that resembles disgust more than anything (*Fall Fashion*, 2003, p. 9). Variations of leaner poses are extremely common in the swimwear portions of the catalogue. Again, the new poses can be superimposed on the old to make direct comparisons easy. Thus, *Victoria Secret* also offers a catalogue of the larger process of associating hyperfemininity with empowerment (Duffy, Hancock, & Tyler, 2017; Mager & Helgeson, 2011). The *Spring 2006* catalogue (see Figure 7), for example, offers Karolina Kurkova (p. 102) in a pose identical to one featuring Daniela Pestova (see Figure 8) in the *Summer 1996* edition (p. 92). In fact, it is a fairly common pose, especially for swimwear.



In Figure 7 (left), taken from the Spring 2006 *Victoria's Secret* catalogue, Karolina Kurkova appears in the same basic pose as Daniela Pestova in Figure 8 (right), from the Summer 1996 edition. However, Kurkova stares directly at the camera and neither crosses her legs nor covers her mid-section.

This pairing of bikini clad models is more poignant given that even the garment, the Miracle Bra™ halter bikini, ostensibly is the same. Even so, there are key differences. For one, the newer swimsuit offers less coverage. Pestova looks to the right of the frame, towards something unseen, with her eyes slightly open and with the look of a day dreamer. She leans on her right hand while the left covers the space between the hip bones. In contrast, Kurkova stares directly at the camera with her mouth open as if grunting or sneering. Unlike Pestova, her hair is stringy and appears to be blowing wildly in the wild. A couple of locks run across her face. Her legs are spread apart and on her belly rests a large phallic canine tooth that hangs from a string around her neck.

The pattern repeats in standing poses featuring Adrianna Lima (Figure 9) and Gisele Bündchen (Figure 10) (*Spring 2006*, pp. 103-4), which similarly recast another of Pestova's (Figure 11) other 1996 selections (p. 92). These include one photo in which the model has—very common in *Victoria's Secret* swimwear pictures—one arm over or behind her head and another in which the model appears as though she has just stopped her walk to have her picture taken. In the former instance, the 1996 poses exemplified by those with Pestova, but also Yasmine Ghauri and Frederique van der Waal, differ sharply from the contemporary ones (*Spring 1996*). Again, the models stare into the distance and effect modest poses. Indeed, Pestova wears wrap skirts and in one instance looks down while her left hand again covers the hip and flashes a wedding band (1996, pp. 93-4). For her part, Ghauri wears a large button-up cover over one bikini and sunglasses invariably obscure her gaze. In contrast, Bündchen and the models in the more recent promotions adopt a pose in which the arm behind the head—sometimes both arms—becomes an aid for thrusting the bottom and the chest outward and upward. Another variation, found on the cover of the 2010 *Glam in the Sand* catalogue kneels facing the camera, with her legs spread wide apart and both arms behind her head to throw the chest forward. Furthermore, the recent and current models generally stare directly and aggressively into the camera, with Lima and Marisa Miller adopting a head-down look, as if ready to charge (2010).



Figures 9 to 11. Adriana Lima, in Figure 9 (left), and Gisele Bündchen, in Figure 10 (middle), in the Spring 2006 catalogue, aggressively transform the basic pose Daniela Pestova adopts in Figure 11 (right) from the Summer 1996 issue. .

The demure, understated figures of the earlier catalogues clearly reflect the chain's original theme of a mythical, British sense of taste and style. This produces lingerie and clothing photos which are basically repeats of the set for the swimwear. The locations suggest resorts and manors. In contrast, the contemporary catalogues have discarded the myth of Victoria and increasingly take their cue from popular and/or celebrity culture (Hume & Mills, 2013) as these have become the pre-eminent taste makers (Levy, 2010; Mager & Helgeson, 2011; Meyer, 2014; Wilkes, 2015). For example, the *Christmas 2004* version of the Miracle Bra spread shows Adriana Lima (Figure 12), with her head-down stare, gnawing on a pen (p. 54). The opposite page has her leaning on a door frame, head up this time in a look of near ecstasy (p. 54). She still stares at the camera. Less demure are images on the same pages of Rachel Roberts (Figure 13). Her hair and make-up give a resemblance to Gwen Stefani's contemporaneous "retro" look. In both cases, she sits on the edge of a chair in a bedroom decorated with gaudy wallpaper. Her legs are spread wide apart and she glares at the camera. Between the pairs of pictures of Lima and Roberts is a shot of Alessandra Ambrosio in front of bright lights, which look like the exterior of a theatre or casino. She is posed to appear as if she is flashing the lace push-up bra and matching g-string beneath her trench coat.



Figures 12 and 13. In Figure 12 (left) from the Christmas 2004 catalogue Adriana Lima (main), Rachel Roberts (upper right), and Alessandra Ambrosio reflect the influence of celebrity “raunch” culture through poses that project sexuality for its own sake. In Figure 13 (right) Roberts (main) and Lima (upper left) offer further examples.

Even the catalogue covers follow the trend. Angie Everheart appears in just a bra on the cover of the 2003 *Fall Fashion* catalogue (Figure 14). This is not uncommon. The *Summer 1996* catalogue similarly features Pestova (Figure 15); however, the presentation is completely different. Where Pestova wistfully looks just to the left of the camera and has arms folded, legs crossed and a man’s shirt for added cover and modesty, Everheart stares defiantly at the camera with an open-mouthed reverse pout while grabbing the straps of the bra while thrusting her breasts at the camera. She may as well be saying “Here it is!” Where the older pictures represent the passive object of the gaze, the newer pictures show a different kind conspicuous consumption, one through which empowerment can be purchased with increasingly revealing lingerie, swimwear, and clothes. The garments could be photographed on hangers or on mannequins, or the poses could continue in the style Berger (1972) and Mulvey (1989) posit as the default

mode. Instead, the contemporary—for it persists—arrangement has the models in more aggressive poses, in more open, available and exposed poses. These are the hallmarks of the selling of hypersexualization as (a kind of) empowerment (Duffy, Hancock, & Tyler, 2017).



Figures 14 and 15 show changes from woman portrayed as modest to defiant.

The question remains unsettled, however, as to what such a statement means. It also requires rethinking a general debate that has roots several decades old. Famously, media theorist Janice Winship (1987) sees the representation of women in girls’ and women’s fashion magazines as the “masculinization of femininity” (p. 80). Winship (1987) concludes that definitions of femininity, in its current form, depend on men but also on commodities. The latter offers democratizing potential in the limited form of consumer choice (Johnston & Taylor, 2008; Hollows, 2013; Machin & Thornborrow, 2006; Twigg, 2017). Echoing fellow marketing professor Linda M. Scott’s (2006) critique of what she calls an anti-fashion bias in feminism, Pauline Maclaran (2012) stresses the positive potential of consumerism. In contrast, Johnston and Taylor (2008) observe that this potential always exists but does so only within the capitalist need for new markets and expanded trade because of the ongoing overproduction of goods.

Therefore, expressing an identity, especially one based on alleged ‘nonconformity’ or greater freedom, purely through style effectively achieves nothing other than driving the market. In this regard, Hume and Mills (2013) find a surprising lack of scholarly analyses of *Victoria’s Secret* and other lingerie brands because the message of empowerment correlates to women’s perceptions of self-image. More importantly, as marketing professors, they encourage other marketers to take advantage of the fact that consumers conflate the ideology of the product with ideologies of empowerment.

In fact, such opportunism has been the goal of *Victoria’s Secret* from the outset. As *Victoria’s Secret* founder Roy Raymond’s admits, the approach stresses that “the woman [buys] this very sexy and romantic lingerie to feel good about herself” as a way of selling objectification “without seeming sexist” (as cited in Faludi, 1991, p. 191). Now, through images of woman adopting aggressive, powerful, masculine postures, it seems that they have reached a point of selling the message of feminism as a consumer choice, but not feminism as an ideology. Where scholars such as Winship initially encouraged the advertisement, as it were, of women’s sexual agency, McRobbie (2009) finds a presumption in post- or third-wave feminism that individual choice and intent precludes all other possible scenarios, including and especially self-objectification. In the popular press, this very process attracted notoriety in part thanks to Levy’s (2010) account, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*. The simple conclusion is that popular and celebrity culture encourage women to behave like frat boys. As peace and social relations scholars Kristin Aune and Rose Holyoak (2018) note, the contradictory images and messages of the third-wave have led to ambivalence within academic as well as popular media. Assertiveness, power, and independence derive not through political views, not through the way women act upon society, but rather through how they act sexually while seducing men. *Victoria’s Secret* is one part, then, of an intertextual web centered on lifestyle consumption (Glapka, 2017; McRobbie, 2009). Women’s magazines—*Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, and *Glamour*—provide the instructions for the lifestyle (Alverman, 2018; Twigg, 2017; Wilkes, 2015) and *Victoria’s Secret* supplies the goods. In completing the circle, the catalogues usually try to depict the lifestyle, as well, and the magazines regularly include *Victoria’s Secret* lingerie, swimwear, and clothes among their advertising and their recommendations.

When the Clothes Come Off: Conclusions

In her literature review of marketing and feminism, Maclaran (2012) argues that the presumption of a polarization of market versus feminism is reductive and “incorrect” (p. 463). Moreover, she argues that the debate has happened before (Scott, 2006). For their part, Machin and Thornborrow (2006) highlight that past attempts, like cigarette advertising, were hardly benign. In this regard, Martens (2009) finds that a “conventional” position against consumption developed within second-wave feminism (p. 43). This occurs because consumption has been seen to be outside the purview of feminist politics (Hollows, 2013). The result, then, has been that there have been few studies of what feminist consumption strategies might be, few studies of everyday consumption, and fewer still on specific segments like lingerie (Maclaran, 2012; Hollows, 2013; Hume & Mills, 2013). The lingering assumption *qua* conclusion that women are passive victims of marketers has proven less than satisfactory (Hollows, 2013; Machin & Thornborrow, 2006; Martens, 2009; Nava, 1987; Scott, 2006; Winship, 1987). Even so, I cannot disagree with Machin and Thornborrow’s (2006) assessment that the “discourse of women’s sexual power has been harnessed to western consumerist lifestyle ideology by placing it within a fictional lifestyle space with an emphasis on display and performance” (p. 174). It does seem foolish to believe that spending—making oneself poorer—is a source of empowerment and that spending on sexy things—turning oneself into an object—enhances, even doubles, that power, while also believing that self-objectification, commodification and hypersexualization constitute a politics which might even be feminist in its aims (Small, 2017). Yet, empowerment through sexualized style is precisely the argument put forth by Scott (2006), Maclaran (2012), and others. For example Marinucci (2005) in her evaluation of “third-wave” feminist messages in popular culture, extols the virtues of buying and wearing T-shirts adorned with “‘Porn Star’ or ‘Breeder’ [. . .] as expressions of a well-developed feminist consciousness” (p. 521). For such “feminists,” the responses to criticism comprise the complete cohort of binaristic banalities: either one is over-analyzing or one is lacking a sense of humor.

While *Victoria’s Secret* provides an obvious target for feminist and/or academic critique regarding the gaze and/or objectification (McAllister &

Carvalho, 2014), it is telling that one of the few studies to even mention the brand is a primer for marketers, not feminists (Hume & Mills, 2013). This runs the risk of leaving the realm of scholarly study to the marketers who are aiming to use empowerment through commodification as the basis of their pitches (Small, 2017). Even so, analyses of women's magazines offer a reasonably close starting point. It is in this regard that two concerns stand out as having significant impacts and bearing further scrutiny. First is the issue of age. This is not to repeat hysteria or panic about lingerie companies targeting young girls (George, 2007).⁶ Nevertheless, *Victoria's Secret* very clearly aims their products at the demographic of women with the most disposable income and the greatest willingness to spend it; that is, women between 16 and 49 (Hume & Mills, 2013; Schlossberg, 2016). This means that their very first generation of customers are likely outside the intended demographic range. Moreover, this emphasis becomes more significant given the emphasis in the fashions, the copy, and in the poses on a perpetual state of youthfulness (Nguyen, 2013; Small, 2017). Not only does this pit generations against each other (Douglas, 2010), it reifies the expectation that women hide, deny, or otherwise avoid aging in order to remain desirable. This reinforces the doubly destructive myth that women lose not only sexual attractiveness, but also sexual interest as they age (Gullette, 2011).

In the second regard, one of the key insights in McRobbie's (2009) analysis of post-feminist culture is that it is a largely White, middle-class project. The irony clearly is not lost on McRobbie, since this is a familiar criticism of the second wave. Here, the example of Tyra Banks, and her transformation into the growling woman of the more recent catalogues serves as an archetype. It would be too easy to argue that Banks' role shows inclusivity. However, this would ignore the broader implications of what is being achieved. Instead of inclusivity, Banks' positioning in poses and postures that are completely and utterly the same as those adopted by the other models—who are invariably and overwhelmingly White—places her within a context that actually emphasizes Whiteness. The latter serves as the guide to which all others must adhere. This is assimilation, not appropriation;

⁶ The cover of the issue of *Maclean's* magazine (2007) that features George's article carries a headless photo of an apparently teenaged girl wearing a cropped tank top, short skirt and fishnets and carries the title "Why are we dressing our daughters like skanks?"

it conforms rather than conflicts. Indeed, the combination of luxury items and uninhibited sexuality are hallmarks of the reaffirmation of the White beauty ideal in post-feminist productions (Alvermann, 2018; Wilkes, 2015). Thus, Banks' participation reinforces and reaffirms that project.⁷

Certainly, the corporate moves *Victoria's Secret* has made since 2006 echo the emphasis on youthfulness and on targeting a demographic that is ready to spend more of its money. These moves include the development of its youth-oriented brand, *Pink*, the termination of its everyday and office wear clothing lines, and the spin-off of the career-oriented clothing brand *The Limited*, which was originally the parent corporation. The only clothing items now sold are active wear and active wear inspired items, especially yoga pants, leggings, shorts, and tops. These blend seamlessly into the shift to active poses and postures, with youthfulness joining beauty as imperatives for women. Moreover, the *Pink* range, with its focus on teenaged women, exploits these tendencies in two ways: first, through an emphasis on college life as a predominantly White, middle-class endeavor; second, through the inclusion of bridal items as part of the natural succession of that White, middle-class endeavor (Ingraham, 2009; Freeman, 2002).

To be sure, I admit that my reading is one-sided in that it is an analysis—that is, a textual reading—of the catalogues' ideology. Therefore, mine is not a consideration of how actual women read the catalogues. However, I do not think that I am guilty of missing other readings or of treating women as passive or infantile, duped or manipulated, docile or unimaginative. Quite the contrary, the catalogues are offering representations which blatantly and deliberately contradict such notions while documenting the period during which this became the norm.

⁷ Although it is outside the scope of this paper, I am more than aware of the issues of race, class, and economics that derive from and contribute to the insights in this paper. For example, in her book, *White Weddings*, Chyrs Ingraham (2009) highlights the over-representation of White middle-class women in magazines, advertising, and consumption for weddings. As my own (Ouellette, 2018) research indicates, lingerie sellers like *Victoria's Secret* are among those who spread the image of a particular kind of consumer: slim, White, blonde-haired (preferably straight and long), lightly tanned, large breasted, etc. Conversely, Phil White and James Gillett (1994) offer an analysis of the ways African American men are under-represented in body building magazines and their ads but over-represented in the actual sport. Clearly, there is a need for work to be at the intersection race, gender, class, and consumption.

Women might consume the catalogues and the items in them as sources of pleasure for and about their sexuality. As cultural products, the *Victoria's Secret* catalogues suggest a sexuality, which is empowering, and, therefore, which seems to run counter to a variety of discourses in order to give the appearance of asserting power while remaining sexually available. These discourses include but are not limited to prudishness, sexual conservatism, sex as the domain for men, aggressive sex as not for women, aggressiveness—period—as masculine, and feminism, both pro and con (Wilkes, 2015). I do believe that the contradictory discourses only serve to confuse women and confine them to a restricted and largely formulaic role. Simply put, the most important thing we can teach our students is that sex empowerment is not the equal or the equivalent of social, economic, and political empowerment. This is even more important in the #metoo era when young women are also being told *by their mothers* as well as by the Supreme Court of the United States that “groping ain’t no big deal” (Moye, 2018). Thus, it is absolutely necessary to enumerate artifacts like the *Victoria's Secret* catalogue lest the domain remain exclusively in the hands of marketers. Here, it is my sincerest hope that more than a catalogue of catalogues, I have offered a repudiation of the simple calculus of role-switching in representations. An understanding of the gaze remains a powerful tool in theory and in practice. However, it is not a totality and those of teaching and learning about representations and their composition need to be mindful of the ways it can be manipulated. If the gaze can be manipulated to turn supposedly empowering poses and postures into pure objectification then surely it can be manipulated to produce positive effects. So too is it my hope that I have offered more than a sense of how these manipulations can be accomplished.

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Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the editors and the readers for their generous responses. As well, I would like to thank the students in my film and gender theory classes. Their reactions to portrayals of gender and the female body inspired not only this paper, it inspired several of them to create positive alternatives to pat objectifications; indeed some now make a career of doing just that.

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