12-7-2023

HOW VICTORIA SECRET MARKETING AFFECTS WOMEN'S SELF ESTEEM AND BODY IMAGE

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A PROFESSIONAL PROJECT PRESENTED TO THE SCHOOL OF
COMMUNICATION+JOURNALISM OF FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL
UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SCIENCE

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

[Fall 2023]

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Abstract

       With society and media beauty standards, the 'thin model ideal' can have a detrimental effect on women's self esteem and body image. Through extensive literature reviews, it can be seen how the media portrays body image of models which, in turn, causes women to be self conscious about their bodies and portrays unrealistic beauty standards. The research questions ask the impact of Victoria's Secret marketing on body and self esteem issues and how do women feel when they see these models on their social media. The methods used were both a focus group and survey. Results support the research questions. The conclusion explains that women are, in fact, affected by these types of marketing campaigns and there should be more inclusive and realistic brands that make women both look and feel good.

Keywords: body image, self esteem, Victoria's Secret, marketing, lingerie brands.

Introduction

Victoria's Secret is a fashion brand focused on clothing and beauty but it is most known for their lingerie. It is known as one of the top 'specialty' retailers in the US. This brand is notorious for their annual runway shows, exhibiting models who are skinny and seen as the personification of sexy. The topic for this study is how Victoria's Secret Marketing (advertisements of models on Instagram) affects women in their 20s and 30s today who have self-esteem issues. This would be before their rebranding in 2019. Seeing these advertisements first hand, made me realize that I am probably not the only woman feeling societal pressure to fit into a perfect body standard. This prompted me to study the underlying psychological effects in women in their 20's and 30's. The significance of this study is to not only understand the psychological and emotional well being of women who could internalize messages because of these advertisements, but also the impact that social media has on women and how they feel about themselves.

Literature Review

The model ideal of the fashion industry and the media is to be thin which causes body dissatisfaction in women. According to statistics, 91% of women are not happy with how they look and resort to dieting and other methods to achieve the ideal body shape, which in turn causes a decrease in self esteem (Palmer, 2014). Research from the Florida House Experience also notes that 'a whopping 88 percent of women said they compare themselves to images in the media, with half saying the comparison is unfavorable' (Murray, 2018). According to Posavac (2002) and Vartanian (2009), women endure 'self discrepancies' when comparing themselves to not only their peers, but models in the fashion industry which creates negative feelings for these women.

The platform that women use to compare themselves with others, is mostly Instagram. This social media platform which is used to like, share and comment on other peers posts, makes women doubt their physical appearance and in turn lowers self esteem. Furthermore, a study by Kozar & Damhorst (2009) viewed the age, body image and inclination of women to compare themselves to fashion models in the media and notes that the younger the participant, the more prone they were to compare themselves to models in the fashion industry.

Even though the fashion industry has started to be more diverse and inclusive of other size models, the common 'thin ideal' still exists which women who spend hours on social media, and unconsciously start to compare themselves to other women, could, in turn, lead to decrease in self esteem and dissatisfaction in their bodies.

This is why in this study, it is important to investigate the factors of thin ideal models and how women who are not the "ideal body shape", who view this daily, are affected and lower their self esteem and their body image.

According to Calgolero (2012), when women look at themselves as sexual objects, they examine themselves first, before being 'evaluated' by others.

'When girls and women view themselves through this self-objectified lens, they take a peculiar stance on their own bodies that is fundamentally disruptive to the self–body relationship. From the perspective of objectification theory, having a female body in a hypersexualized culture that chronically sexually objectifies the female body has consequences for women's emotional experiences. That is, the habitual body monitoring which results from recurrent sexual objectification may induce body shame and appearance anxiety, which represent psychological states that are difficult to alleviate' (Calgolero, 2012).

Furthermore, Dakanalis (2013) cites Thompson & Stice (2001) in his study on 'Mass Media, Body Image and Eating Disturbances: The Underlying Mechanism through the Lens of the Objectification Theory' that women absorb the belief of being thin to the point where they use it as a standard to measure themselves. Furthermore, the social comparison theory is mostly because of the constant use of social media. Escobedo (2023) cites in their study that women are prone to compare their body features to the models they viewed in the media, both lateral and upward comparison, either positive or negative, being most important. Moreno-Domingues (2018) quotes Festinger (1954); Gruder (1971) and Wills (1991) saying ' Social comparison theory stipulates that individuals routinely compare themselves to similar others to evaluate their own worth, opinions, and abilities'.

In addition to this, the study 'Images of Thin and Plus-Size Models Produce Opposite Effects on Women's Body Image, Body Dissatisfaction, and Anxiety' focused on Spanish women and how they are affected by social comparison when shown images of both thin and overweight models. Their findings proved that women being shown these images of such thin models are singled out because of these ads, especially the women who have preceding body image issues.

Cohen et.al (2019) quotes Grabe, Ward, & Hyde (2008) by pointing out in the study that 'It is well recognised that the media play a dominant role in influencing perceived social norms and cultural appearance standards, particularly that of the ideal slim female body, commonly referred to as the 'thin-ideal'. It notes that this ideal look for women is used in both social media as well as traditional content such as photos, text and videos and in general for most women, this look is not physically attainable.

In addition to this, Escobedo (2013) provides a study that gives an analysis of the relationship between body positivity and the social comparison theory. The underwear brand Sicurezza was used with images of models and shown to women 18-24 years old. Two of the five underwear models were thin, while the other ones had different characteristics physically. Some of the participants marked in the interview that thin looking models are the 'stereotype' and the body that is accepted by society. Other participants said that when they were shown the images of the thin models, they felt insecure about themselves and that the models were made to look 'perfect' with the many enhancements of the image itself. This study goes hand in hand with the study by Selensky (2021) which focuses on weight bias and how media campaigns influence women. In the study, 475 female participants were randomized to one of five conditions: Aerie, Dove, Victoria's Secret, an HBO documentary, or control group, which was a normal clip. Its goal was to look into their two body positive campaigns about self esteem, bias of weight, body image as

well as positive and negative influences. The study hypothesized that the participants , who were 18 to 30 year old women chosen randomly to look at body-positive, thin-ideal and appearance neutral posts on Instagram, looked at both the Dove and Aerie campaigns would have less weight bias and higher self esteem than the ones that looked at campaigns such as Victoria's Secret. Results showed that both thin-ideal and body positive instagram posts augment in self objectification in comparison to appearance neutral Instagram posts.

However, in the study by Mahmood & Malik (2022), one of their results was that the use of Instagram was a positive predictor for self esteem. The more women use Instagram, the more it changes their frame of mind of how they look and being shown different models with different physical characteristics as well as physical frames, which according to this study 'enhances self esteem in a positive way'. Moreover, Moreno-Dominguez et.al (2018) in their study their findings show that the effects of social comparison on women's body image could be because these women are not only being subjected to these thin looking models in the media but also when the women are shown average or overweight models, how they see themselves, improves. The similarities of these studies is mostly that they involved questionnaires and interviews as well as women's usage of the social media platform, Instagram.

Moreover, when it comes to the subject of self esteem, Selensky (2021) cites Bessenoff & Sherman, (2000) ' Regarding self-esteem, the women who viewed the Aerie and Dove campaigns reported improved self-esteem compared with the women who viewed the Victoria's Secret and control videos. Considering exposure to the thin ideal in print advertisements has been related to lowered self-esteem it is encouraging that the Aerie and Dove video campaigns increased self-esteem'. A study on Victoria's Secret Brand and Self Image on its visual communication and impact on its audience focused on doing a semiotic analysis with qualitative

research that included interviews as well as focus groups of the target audience for Victoria Secret. The conclusion of the research found that when the participants viewed these models, the image of themselves changed completely, because they were so affected by these 'unrealistic' body types (Salih, 2016). Yamamiya et.al (2005) cites Groesz, Levine and Murnen (2002) where a meta analysis was done and found that women are even more disappointed in their bodies after viewing media images of 'thin and beautiful' in comparison to average sized or even oversized media images of women. In this meta analysis study, the results showed that media does have a big effect on women and the slender or thin ideal that the media projects as beautiful. Cohen et al (2019) and Selensky (2021) point out in their respective studies that there were no differences between body positive conditions and the thin body ideal look of women. Halliwell et al. (2004) points out that because of the many advertisements and social media, not only can it have an influence on a women's self esteem but also cause 'body focused anxiety'. Cingel (2022) cites Robins (2014) by saying that even though self esteem is vital, it can vary because it can be of negative or positive effect, meaning 'success or failure'. This article of overviews of different studies done on social media and self esteem, mostly notes how both short term longitudinal relations and long term longitudinal relations where studies show how excess of social media use causes a negative effect on self esteem on teenagers as well as older women.

This is important to note because women, especially teenagers, are very vulnerable and believe that being thin is considered 'the standard'. However, even if there is some awareness and new campaigns in the media about average and oversized bodies, there needs to be even more awareness of the effects of this thin ideal.

Methodology

Methods:

In order to answer the research questions, this study is going to administer a focus group of 10

participants as well as a 12 question survey using Google forms. The researcher used a non

probability sample with 100 women participants, between the ages of 20-30 who fall in the

socioeconomic category of being middle class, who live in the USA and know about Victoria

Secret Marketing on Instagram.

Protection of Participants:

A link to the survey was posted on the researchers Instagram page as well as sent through group

and text messages with the following words:

My name is Marianne Kamhazi and I am currently doing my masters thesis in Global Strategic

Communications. My topic is about Victoria Secret, body image and self esteem. If you are

between the ages of 20 and 30, and interested in sharing your thoughts on Victoria Secret's

Marketing and how it impacts you, please fill out the survey. If you have any questions or

comments about this study, send me an email at: mkamh001@fiu.edu a direct message through

instagram. Thank you for your time.

The ones who wanted to participate in the survey would be anonymous when answering the

questions and completed surveys would be used to analyze data for results.

Instruments:

The researcher used qualitative methods for this study, which includes both a survey and focus group. The focus group included six questions. The survey included 12 questions and three of the questions included a blank box for participants to elaborate in detail. Ethics of study: informed consent, anonymity and protection. It was chosen to do a non probability sample, due to time constraints.

Collection of Data:

The researcher used the Google Forms system to analyze the response of participants in detail. For the focus group, the collection of data was made through Whatsapp group chat voice notes (The reason for this was because it was difficult to do a zoom focus group because of time constraints and busy schedule)

Process:

Surveys that were completed by the participants were saved in the Google software and then searched for trends and themes in the reporting results section of the software. The survey will include demographic questions on race, age, gender and if they are familiar with Victoria Secret's brand as well as their instagram page. The questions for the focus group include: 'Can you walk us through your emotional response when you come across a Victoria's Secret model on social media? What specific feelings does it trigger and why? Explain what you feel when you see these two pictures: Which makes you feel more self conscious of your body?', How do you deal with pressures from society about body image and self-esteem? Have you felt pressure

to maintain a specific body standard after seeing Victoria's Secret Advertisements? Any other brands preferred other than Victoria's Secret.'

The questions on the survey included questions such as: how do women feel when they see a Victoria Secret advertisement or billboard? How do these models impact self esteem and how these women see their bodies? If there is any comparison between VS models and themselves? With the focus group, the researcher will analyze the responses of each participant and the patterns of the responses which helps make the survey questions.
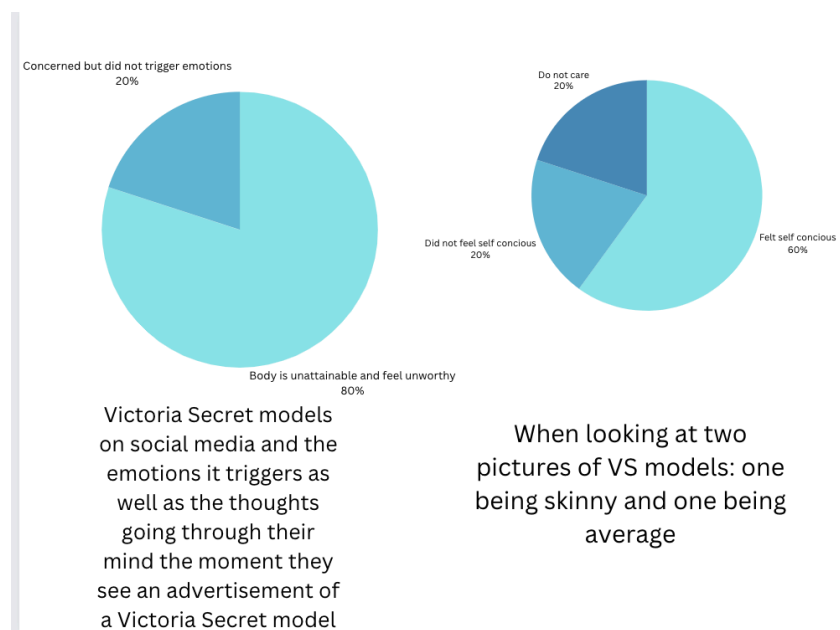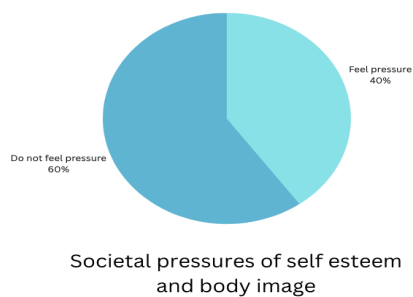
Results

Focus Group

During the focus group, it was learned that Victoria's secret social advertisements are seen as negative, especially before their rebranding. The decision to make these questions for the survey came from the focus group we did before writing the survey and the different responses we received from participants. We asked these questions to the participants because the responses from participants in the focus group served as a guide to write the survey questions.

Ten participants volunteered to be a part of the focus group. All participants either had a full time job or were in college. Most of the participants actively use social media especially during these times of uncertainty in the Middle East, between 2 and 4 hours. Two questions spoke about Victoria Secret models on social media and the emotions it triggers as well as the thoughts going through their mind the moment they see an advertisement of a Victoria Secret model. From the ten participants in the focus group, eight participants said that the body of a Victoria Secret model is unattainable by most people and makes them feel unworthy because of what they see on

social media. Most of the participants in this question said that they are concerned with women being that skinny because of society expectations and not for themselves When shown two pictures of Victoria Secret models, one of them being skinny and beautiful and the other being average models, six of the ten participants admitted that when they looked at the first picture, they felt self conscious because they would never look like that and feel more comfortable with the second image that is portrayed. Two participants said they did not care for either image because it did not make her feel self conscious. Four participants preferred the second image because it is the way women are supposed to look. When it came to the question of societal pressures on self esteem and body image, six participants felt that they do not put pressure on themselves because their body is the way it is, and they are comfortable with themselves. However, the rest of the participants who answered this question did feel somewhat pressured because it is what society thinks women should look like, so they assume that crazy diets and changes in their bodies will make them acceptable.

 All of them prefer other brands such as Target, Skins, Venezuelan brands, modest brands because they include all types of bodies and catered to all types of bodies. Some participants said because of their bra sizes, inclusive brands with normal girls with all types of women makes them feel good and easier when shopping.

Concerned but did not trigger emotions 20%

Body is unattainable and feel unworthy 80%

Victoria Secret models on social media and the emotions it triggers as well as the thoughts going through their mind the moment they see an advertisement of a Victoria Secret model

Do not care 20%

Did not feel self concious 20%

Felt self concious 60%

When looking at two pictures of VS models: one being skinny and one being average

12

Feel pressure
40%

Do not feel pressure
60%

Societal pressures of self esteem
and body image

Survey

The survey was conducted through Google Forms and distributed by word of mouth, Instagram and Facebook. It received a total of 100 responses and the total number of forms accessed was 96.

The purpose was to understand how Victoria Secret advertisements as well as their models have an effect on women's self esteem and body image issues. Of the 100 respondents, 92.7% were women and 7.3% were men. Participants of this survey were part of Generation Z and Millenials, with 7.4% being under 18, 39.4% being from 18 to 25 years of age, 18.1% being from 25 to 30 years of age and 41.5 % being from 30 to 35 years of age.

When asked about the word Victoria's Secret, 45.8 percent of the participants said the word

Victoria's Secret has a neutral connotation, while 35.4 percent said it had a positive connotation,

15.6 percent said negative and 3.1 percent had no opinion. This factor is important to note

because participants feel indifferent when they hear this word, however there is a percentage who
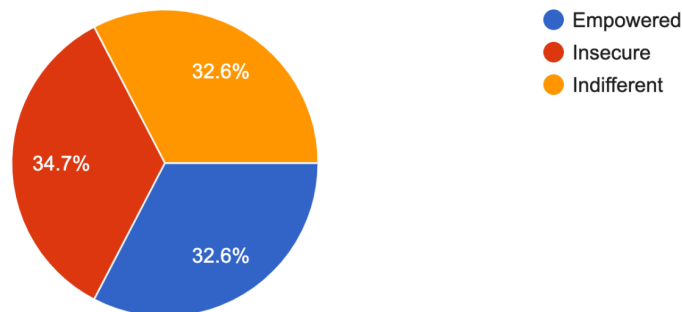
does see this connotation as positive.

What do think about the word 'Victoria's Secret'?
96 responses
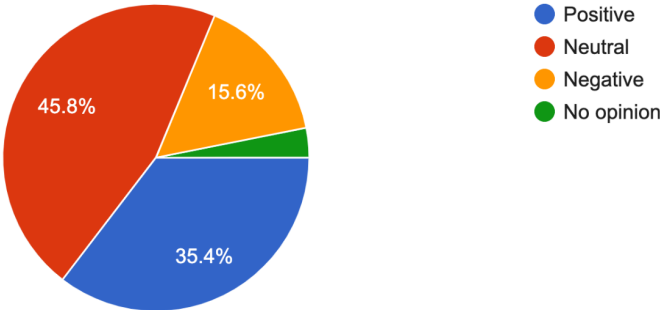
In the question: how do you feel when you see a Victoria Secret model on an instagram

advertisement, 34.7 percent of the participants felt insecure, 32.6 percent felt empowered and

32.6 percent felt indifferent. This factor is important in the discussion further ahead.

How do you feel when you see a Victoria's Secret Model on an Instagram advertisement?
95 responses

Legend:
- Empowered (blue)
- Insecure (red)
- Indifferent (orange)

32.6% (Indifferent, orange)
34.7% (Insecure, red)
32.6% (Empowered, blue)

When asked the participants if they could describe a specific instance where a Victoria Secret advertisement made them self conscious about their body, 90% of these women compared themselves to these models and felt bad about their bodies and portraying unhealthy body standards when looking at Victoria Secret Runway shows. Not just this, but because when they tried on Victoria's secret lingerie, it did not fit the same way as the models looked in the advertisements.

Furthermore, when asked if Victoria's Secret models have influenced you in any way, how see your own body and to elaborate, from eighty two responses, sixty of the responses said it has influenced them because it made them feel insecure and doubtful about themselves and if they are not beautiful like these models, then they do not feel beautiful enough. However, twenty two of the responses said Victoria's Secret model did not influence their bodies in any way because the standards are unrealistic and they feel comfortable in their own bodies.

In addition to this, the question of describing a specific instance where a Victoria Secret advertisement made them feel self conscious about their body, the majority of the responses ranged between looking at the Victoria's Secret runway fashion shows to walking inside the store, trying on their garments and seeing themselves not look like the models.

In the question of how Victoria's Secret marketing impacts the self esteem of women, 60 percent of women said it decreases their self esteem, while 26.3 percent said it increases their self esteem and 13.7 percent said the marketing had no effect on self esteem.

How do you think the marketing of Victoria's Secret impacts a woman's self esteem?
95 responses

- Increases a woman's self esteem
- Decreases a woman's self esteem
- The marketing has no effect on a woman's self esteem
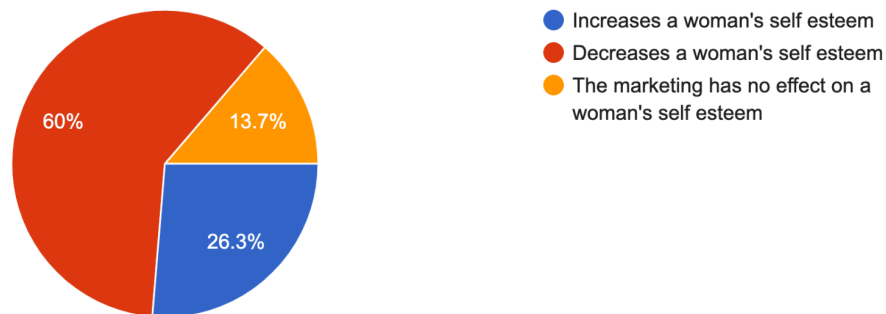
In the question of how do Victoria Secret models affect the perception of body image of women, 44.8 percent said it makes them feel self conscious about their bodies, 35.4 percent said the models do not have an effect on their body image, and lastly 19.8 percent said these models make them feel confident in themselves.

How do you think these models affect the perception of your body image?
96 responses

● They make me feel confident in myself
● They make me feel self conscious about my body
● No effect

35.4%
44.8%
19.8%

In the question of comparing yourself to a Victoria's Secret model, 41.7 percent of the participants said they occasionally compared themselves to the model, followed by 36.5 percent who said they never compared themselves and lastly 21.9 percent who frequently compared themselves to Victoria's Secret models.

Have you ever compared yourself to a Victoria's Secret model?
96 responses

● Yes, frequently
● Occasionally
● Never

36.5%
41.7%
21.9%
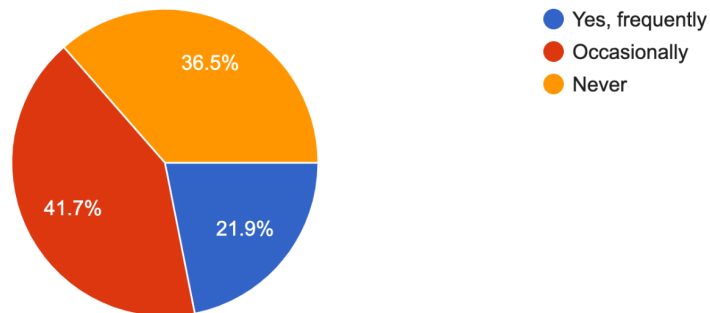
42.7 percent of the participants said they strongly agreed that Victoria's Secret advertisements portrayed unrealistic beauty standards, followed by 30.2 percent who agreed, 14.6 percent 'neutral', 7.3 percent strongly disagree and 5 percent disagree.

Do you believe Victoria Secret advertisements portray unrealistic beauty standards?
96 responses
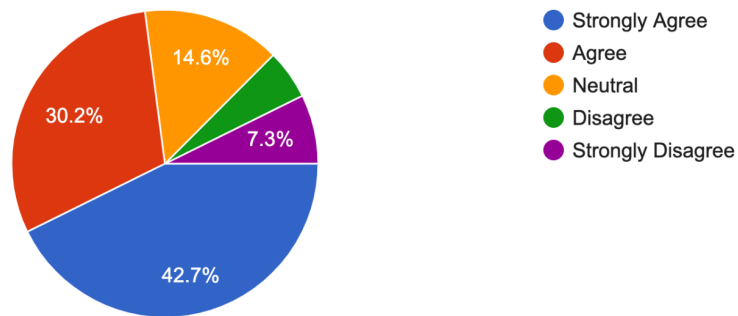
Discussion

Both the focus group and survey presented important findings.

The first vital finding is that the data is similar when it comes to responses. Results show that most of the participants, regardless of their age, in charts 1 and 2 agree with the statements that when they look at a Victoria Secret model, they feel self conscious about their bodies which in turn decrease their self esteem. The correlational analysis indicated that the marketing of Victoria Secret because of their portrayal of unrealistic beauty standards does have an impact on women's self esteem. This falls in with the body image literature about the harmful effects of women being exposed to such media.

In addition to this, In the question of 'How do you motivate yourself to keep a positive self esteem amidst marketing campaigns where the ideal body shape is being skinny', the range of answers shed light on how women in Generation Z and Millennials. The majority believe that eating healthy and exercising regularly as well as not trying to compare themselves to others and accepting themselves for who they are. Furthermore, in the question of 'Do you think looking at Victoria's Secret models has influenced in any way how you see your own body?' From the 82 responses, 90 percent of them noted that looking at Victoria's Secret models does, in fact, have influenced how women see their bodies and makes them feel insecure about themselves because the brand sets 'unrealistic beauty standards' that they can not attain. This points out the brand's promotion and advertisements with skinny models which makes average women feel the need to attain these unattainable body goals.

In the focus group, which led to the making of the survey, participants argued that their emotional response to the brand is not just jealousy and envy but also the need to have the

'perfect body' and society's expectations of what the symbol of beauty is. In the focus group, about half of the participants agreed with the fact that they did feel pressure to attain a specific body standard after seeing VS ads on social media, it made them feel the need to compare themselves, which revealed a positive correlation between the media and low self esteem. It is noticeable that the marketing that VS portrays to their audience, before their rebranding, enhances the fact that the self perception of women when they look at these models is negative. Furthermore, the second finding is that all of the participants in the focus group stated that they would rather buy from Target or Skims, even non-US brands, than from Victoria's Secret. Assuming the reason is because before the rebranding, participants felt it was not worth it to buy there because of their small sizes. This demonstrates the need for more body inclusive underwear brands. The shift in the new of choosing other brands emphasizes how consumers change their preferences on how they believe the ideal body image should be.

Overall, findings from the focus group and survey questions related to the past research papers and literature reviews conducted. The findings are supported by other research which included Strathan (2003) where five studies demonstrated how women being exposed to 'thin images' has effects that are harmful to women's bodies. Especially in the first study where the results showed that being exposed to 'thin images' led women to feel more self conscious about their appearance as well as weight. Therefore, knowing how to address these issues of body image and self esteem in women who are not ideally thin, will increase the likelihood of awareness of well being and self confidence.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine if there is any difference between how women feel regarding both body image and self esteem issues when looking at Victoria's Secret posts on Instagram. The hypothesis is that women feel self conscious when they see a Victoria's Secret model which, in turn, affects their self esteem because they do not look like these models. This research contributes to the existing literature of Salih (2016) which proves that when participants viewed the models on Instagram, their body image changed because of how much they were affected by the unrealistic standards and body types. It does contradict in some way the research by Mahmood and Malik (2022) in the part of self esteem since the results showed that the more women use Instagram, the more it positively affects their self esteem.

Limitations

The biggest limitation was diverse sample size and time constraint. Participants were just recruited from the USA, age group and gender. It would have been interesting for this survey to be sent to different countries around the world to see how women believe in terms of body image and self esteem standards in Victoria' Secret advertisements. Furthermore, the time constraint was a limitation. Further research should extend data and demographics as well as Generation X and Generation Z, comparing views of body image and self esteem. Moreover, it would have been best to do a post focus group interview to analyze how the participants felt after questions and how they feel about themselves.

Recommendations

After doing this research on Victoria's Secret, there should be more body inclusive brands that do not focus on the ideal thin body type. Furthermore, more brands should start being realistic and specifically doing better at body positivity, not just for women to look good but feel good with themselves.

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Student Bio

Marianne Kamhazi is a graduate student at Florida International University completing a Masters of Science degree in Global Communication upon the fulfillment of this professional project. She was born in Miami, Florida and raised in Caracas, Venezuela obtaining her bachelor's degree in psychology from Yeshiva University in New York. After finishing her undergraduate career, she started her graduate program where she obtained a 4.0 GPA in all of her courses and graduated Magna Cum Laude. Her constant learning for new marketing techniques and strategies as well as media tactics in past internships allowed her to learn how people use social media in different ways and the new marketing strategies that are always on the rise. She understands and believes that social media is a powerful tool in today's world that is vital to stay connected and learn from others as learning how social media can have a big impact on individuals. Aside from this, Marianne enjoys traveling, spending time with friends and family and playing sports.