Brand Image and Self Image:
A study on the semiotics behind Victoria’s Secret’s visual communication and its impact on its target audience

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores how a brand’s image affects consumers’ self-image through a case study of the lingerie brand Victoria’s Secret in order to reflect over the role of graphic designers as visual communicators in society. The study conducts a semiotic analysis of the brand and a qualitative research consisting of interviews and a focus group of a selection of women within the brand’s target audience. The conclusion is that Victoria’s Secret, through its models, contributes to an unrealistic feminine ideal that the study participants’ self-image was perceptibly affected by. While perception is personal and signs are context reliant, semiotics is not only useful for analyzing visual communication but also as a tool that graphic designers can use for creating ads with the consumer’s needs in mind.

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INTRODUCTION

Brands communicate their identity to their target audience and attempt to influence them primarily in order to sell and distinguish themselves from competitors. For my graduation design project, I created a fashion brand for which I designed a graphic and brand identity; the brand's image intended to encourage self-empowerment, and self-expression. The aspect that I found most interesting in branding, which inspired this essay, is that the largest focus in terms of visual communication lies on benefiting the brand without much regard to the implications it might have on the target audience. Through a proper brand strategy, products can obtain meaning to consumers that goes beyond function. This is why advertising has been critiqued as one of the social institutions which perform a function of naturalizing dominant ideologies in our culture—for example, that it naturalizes ideologies based on consumption, or ideologies that oppress women. This impact that the visual communication (advertising) of a brand has on society is what this essay intends to investigate. This is relevant to graphic designers who work within branding and design of visual communication, to brands who care about their image, to consumers who are bombarded by brands’ visual communication on a daily basis, and consequently, to society who relies on the well-being of its members to function positively.

In this essay, a case study will be done on Victoria's Secret—an international women’s lingerie brand which is famous for its portrayal of sexiness and luxury—to explore what values and ideals that its brand image creates and the signals it sends through its visual communication to its target audience and what impact those signals have on their self-image. The brand has a consistent identity that is widely recognizable, and it often communicates images of “the perfect body” to sell lingerie. A group of women in Sweden who fit into the brand’s target audience were interviewed in order to get an insight into the influence the Victoria's Secret brand image might have on them.
BACKGROUND

The scope of this essay, and the area of graphic design on which it focuses, is branding and brand identity—specifically, the production of visual communication for a brand which is delivered through advertising, and the influence it has on consumers.

Graphic Design and Brand Identity

Graphic design is a cultural phenomenon that is embedded in culturally and historically shaped institutions, such as the design studios, advertising agencies, publishing houses, and media companies (Drucker and McVarish, 2009). With the development and proliferation of printed text, the development of print technology and industrialization, and the creation of the public sphere and then mass mediation, the role of graphic design became more visible as well as necessary and influential. In the early twentieth century, it "became the source of stylish fantasies that were crucial to the growth of consumer culture" (p.213). Soon, the idea of simply promoting products and services was replaced by one of constructing a consumable "image" (p.213). And so, graphic design "earned new clout by its ability to push consumption beyond the satisfaction of needs" by presenting "a polished image of modernity as a desirable, ever-changing way of life whose attributes were embodied by the newest product and the latest style" (p.214).

By the 1950s, the changes in the business culture required the field of graphic design to adapt: companies turned into corporations with subsidiaries and offices worldwide which cater to different markets, creating the need for a unified "corporate identity" to achieve "brand recognition across wider ranges of products and contexts" (Drucker and McVarish, 2009, p.260). Moving from layout and style choices for print, the role of graphic designers expanded to large-scale campaigns that "not only maintained the identity of a corporation but also added value to its products through symbolic investments in this identity," making the corporation "seem like an individual entity with a voice and personality" (p.261). In other words, the graphic designer’s role was "to convey the essence of an organization’s identity" (p.262). By the 1990s, this role became more prominent as big manufacturers shifted more of their spending towards brand promotion: "creating brand awareness came first," even at the expense of production (p.311). One prime example of this inversion of marketing and manufacturing is the Nike versus Reebok brand war: "Graphic designers were among those responsible for the campaigns that invested these brands not only with general associations of goodness, but also with specific cultural meanings via visuals and stylistic references to recognizable contexts" (p.312).
With the boom of television in the 1950s and 60s, new markets opened for graphic design in film and commercials. “Graphics entered time-based media,” and graphic designers were no longer limited to static images (p.270). There was also a growth in the mass-circulation magazines market, and so these publications relied more on the graphic design of their covers to draw more attentions to them (p.274). Towards the end of the twentieth century, graphic design went from static composition of advertising, packaging, and editorial design and moved into special effects, animation, film, television, and music video graphics, and eventually disappeared into global corporate identity systems, branding, and so on, producing a significant share of mass visual culture (p.317).

What Is a Brand?
In *The New Strategic Brand Management*, Kapferer (2008) attempts a comprehensive definition of the term *brand*—one that is financial-, legal- and customer-based: “A brand is a name that influences buyers” (p.11); it is “a shared desirable and exclusive idea embodied in products, services, places and/or experiences. The more this idea is shared by a larger number of people, the more power the brand has” (p.13). Wheeler (2013) takes a similar approach in her definition, highlighting the significance of customers/people in the making of a brand:

As competition creates infinite choices, companies look for ways to connect emotionally with customers, become irreplaceable, and create lifelong relationships. A strong brand stands out in a densely crowded marketplace. People fall in love with brands, trust them, and believe in their superiority. How a brand is perceived affects its success, regardless of whether it’s a start-up, a nonprofit, or a product (Wheeler, 2013, p.2).

A brand gives meaning and purpose to a product that is otherwise mute. It is the way a company invites its customers to perceive its products. As brands help guide customers’ perception of a company’s products, the products themselves send signals that guide the company in building their brand identity (Kapferer, 2008, p.42-43).

Brand Image
A brand image is a set of associations that are created in the mind of the consumer regarding what the brand stands for and what it promises: how it is communicating its brand identity and how it is perceived by its target audience as a result of the
messages the brand is sending out.

Brand image is on the receiver’s side. Image research focuses on the way in which certain groups perceived a product or a brand. The image refers to the way in which these groups decode all of the signals emanating from the products, services and communication covered by the brand. (Kapferer, 2008, p.174)

Brand image is formed through communication. By communicating with their target audience, a brand gradually builds up character and obtains a personality, “the kind of person it would be if it were human,” thus making brand personality the main focus of brand advertising since 1970 (Kapferer, 2008, p.183). But advertising has another function besides selling products, and that is creating structure and meaning: “ads ask us to participate in ideological ways of seeing ourselves and the world” by decoding their linguistic and visual signs (Bignell, 1997, p.33).

In ads, and in the ideology which ads reproduce, we are distinguished from others by means of the kinds of products which we consume. Social status, membership of particular social groups, and our sense of our special individuality, are all signified by the products which we choose to consume (Bignell, 1997, p.38).

The brands’ consumers become indexical signs of their social identity. Brands become “signs with a certain social value,” a value that is passed on to their consumers, impacting their self-image (Bignell, 1997, p.38).

**Self-Image**

Self-image, as defined by Dr. Maxwell Maltz (2010) is “your own conception of the sort of person you are. It is a product of past experiences, successes and failures, humiliations, and triumphs, and the way other people react to you, especially in early childhood.” These factors lead to you building up “a picture of yourself which you believe is true.” Smith, Baish, Willett and Watson (2012) define self-image as follows:

Self-image is how you see yourself from the inside. This includes how you see yourself physically and how you think others see you, what kind of person you think you are, what kind of personality you think you have, if you think others like you and if you like yourself. Self-image affects your self-confidence. Your self-confidence is what you project to the outside world and how other people see you (p.7).
According to Schiffman, O’cass, Paladina and Carlson (2014), there are four kinds of self-image. The first two have been mentioned above and they are actual self-image (how you see yourself), and social self-image (how you think others see you). The two remaining kinds of self-image are ideal self-image (how you would like to see yourself) and ideal social self-image (how you would like others to see you) (p.133).

Self-image has an impact on the actual projected image of oneself in the outside world. Having a negative self-image can have a negative effect on one’s life. A big part of self-image, according to Smith, Baish, Willett and Watson (2013), is body image (p.5). They state that a negative body image is not something you are born with but something that is developed over time and is generated through the experiences you go through as you grow older, as earlier mentioned by Maltz, as well as the messages that society often sends out—messages that connect “personal success and happiness with being thin and beautiful” (Smith, Baish, Willett and Watson, 2013, p.5).

**Victoria’s Secret**

According to L Brands (2015), Victoria’s Secret is the largest American retailer of women’s intimate apparel as well as other apparel with fashion-inspired collections, fragrances, and cosmetics. The company was founded in 1977 and had men as its target audience. By 1982, the company was nearing bankruptcy, which resulted in a change in ownership and consequently a change in target audience: the customers the products are designed for—women (Barr, 2013). The new owner of Victoria’s Secret studied European lingerie boutiques and brought the same approach to America (Barr, 2013). To describe the brand, the words most used by the brand itself are sexy, feminine, luxury, beauty, elegance, and fantasy.

Despite its success and massive media profile, the brand nevertheless encounters some unfavorable reactions and criticism over its visual communication. A few examples from online media responses include (1) the “#ImNoAngel” Campaign, which features famous plus-size models sharing their own definitions of sexy by wearing lingerie and showing off their curves, implying that being an Angel is not the ideal and inviting women to join them in breaking the ideals created by brands like Victoria’s Secret (Harrison, 2015); (2) the “Truly.Madly.Cheeky” ad that featured a model facing a wall wearing only underwear and showing an obvious photo editing mistake of the model’s butt, where they edited one butt cheek and missed the other; and most importantly, (3) the reaction to the Victoria’s secret “Perfect Body” campaign (see Appendix 5), which featured a series of “similarly built supermodels” and generated a lot of criticism and resulted in a petition requesting that Victoria’s Secret apologize and change the campaign. The petition came with a message that women are constantly “bombarded with advertisements aimed at
making them feel insecure about their bodies in the hope that they will spend money on products that will supposedly make them happier and more beautiful.” The petition remarked,

“all this does is perpetuate low self-esteem among women who are made to feel that their bodies are inadequate and unattractive because they do not fit into a narrow standard of beauty. It contributes to a culture that encourages serious health problems such as a negative body image and eating disorders.”

The petition received over 27,000 signatures and led to the brand changing the tagline to “A Body for Every Body,” but with absolutely no change in models (Bahadur, 2014)—showing that the brand either does not understand or just has no real intention to actually make a change.

PROBLEM

A brand like Victoria’s Secret, through the communication of its brand identity, contributes to creating and naturalizing ideals and values about femininity, which might affect the way its target audience (women) view themselves as women and as individuals. Feeling that you do not measure up to the ideals set by society can make you disregard your real accomplishments in life, creating a negative self-image and, consequently, making you project yourself in a negative way to the outside world (Smith, Baish, Willett and Watson, 2013). In other words, brands, being a part of a person’s daily experiences, are a factor in the shaping of the person’s self-image. By being exposed to the messages sent out by brands in order to encourage consumerism, consumers’ self-image and, consequently, their self-confidence and self-esteem are affected.

Smith et al. (2013) state that self-image is changeable and that a negative body image, and in turn overall self-image, is something that you can, and ought to, unlearn. Maltz (2010) agrees with the idea that self-image is changeable and stresses on the importance of having a positive self-image in order to live a happy and successful life (Maltz, 2010). Graphic designers, being the creators of a brand’s visual communication, have a responsibility not only towards the brands they work for but also towards consumers—whose best interest should be one of the brand’s main priorities along with profit. This leads to the purpose and question of this essay.
**Purpose**
The purpose of this essay is to explore the influence of brand image on the consumer through the use of the theory of semiotics as a tool in constructing as well as analyzing visual communication and to reflect over the responsibility graphic designers have towards consumers.

**Research Question**
How does Victoria’s Secret’s brand image influence its target audience’s self-image?

**Hypothesis**
I hypothesize that Victoria’s Secret, by portraying images of “the perfect body” consistently throughout its visual communication, is creating an unrealistic standard of beauty for women who come in constant contact with these images, which might make them feel that the way they are is less than ideal/perfect.

**EXISTING RESEARCH**
This section will present a selection of existing research and studies that are relevant to this essay and the research question; they are looking at the same topic, using different methods for different purposes. Similarly to this research, these studies should not be used to generalize.

**The Impact of Advertising**
In Richins’ article *Social Comparison and the Idealized Images of Advertising*, he reviews theories explaining the role of advertising in causing consumers’ dissatisfaction with the self in order to test the hypothesis that consumers compare themselves with idealized images in advertisements, that being exposed to these images causes consumers to be less satisfied with themselves. Richins (1991) mentions how advertising has had social consequences for which it has received complaints, and one of those complains is that “advertising presents an unrealistic or idealized picture of people and their lives.” These images cause consumers to compare themselves and their lives with what they see, whether they do so consciously or unconsciously. He argues that although the ads promise that the consumption of the product or brand would help bring the consumers closer to the ideal, this promise is not fulfilled. The exploratory and experimental research done in this article focused on idealized images of physical attractiveness in ads targeted at young women, and found evidence to back up the hypothesis, that these images did in fact raise comparison standards for attractiveness and cause lower
satisfaction with the women’s own attractiveness.

Bell and Dittmar (2011) conducted a study that examined girls’ media consumption and identification with media models and investigated whether the different media formats, be it TV or magazines, in which “body perfect” ideals are presented affects their impact on body image. The participants of this study involved 199 adolescent girls in the UK, aged between 14 and 16. The study showed that the type of media and the amount of exposure to it had no relation to body dissatisfaction, but that the models in the media did. The study demonstrated that being exposed to the perfect body in the media caused higher body and appearance dissatisfaction in those girls. To conclude their research, Bell and Dittmar (2011) express that this issue needs to be addressed universally, in order to reduce the impact of the thin ideal in all forms of mass media.

Rutledge (2002) conducted research on the content of advertisements depicting idealized images of women. Her research was shaped by influences of the analytical tools of psychoanalysis, semiotics, and post-structuralism. She was interested in the audience of advertisements as well as the advertisements themselves, and the relationship between the two. In her book, she “examines how women in particular are mandated to measure up to the perfect bodies in the media on a daily basis” and offers an in-depth look at how these messages are encoded with cultural ways of seeing the perfect female form.

Rutledge (2002) was specifically interested in what kinds of influence, if any, that the images of the ideal female in advertising have on both women and men. She states that there is evidence suggesting that girls and young women in this culture are particularly vulnerable to the kinds of mass media messages concerning body image, size, and appearance due to the cultural overemphasis on female body perfection. She talks about semiotics, how advertising operates in the realm of symbols, using already familiar signs and inventing new ones. She talks about codes, how they, in advertising, are the store of experiences upon which both the advertiser and the audience draw in their participation in the construction of meaning.

Her study included interviews with 73 participants, men and women, about the portrayal of the ideal female body in magazine ads. She explores a way of understanding gender and advertising through semiotics: Ads or images are signs that convey meaning that is culturally and ideologically agreed on. People experience advertising as a code. The female body in ads and the idealized female image is a naturalized way of seeing in this culture, which the subjects of her study agreed on. Rutledge (2002) talks about how advertising affects self-image—that it causes women to exploit themselves, allowing men to exploit them too, and that people connect their feelings about their self-image with feelings about security and comfort. Rutledge concludes that advertising messages are one of the major
instigators keeping not only girls and women but also the entire culture "body obsessed," and that advertising images are therefore the primary media images to be interrogated.

**Brand Image and Self-Image**

A study by Mocanu (2013) was conducted investigating the relation between brand image and self-image and how the consumption of brands contributes to consumer's construction of self. It tests the relevance of self-image to brand image and brand-self-connection. By referring to a collection of existing studies on this subject, Mocanu (2013) states that products have psychological and social value that consumers are aware of and that affects their purchase decisions, and that products have symbolic meanings; ownership of a certain product works as a symbolic communication between the consumer and society. Mocanu discusses mainly adolescents as consumers, how they use brands to project a self-image that is idealized by their peers in order to “gain social acceptance and avoid bullying,” and how they use brands during this phase of “identity crisis” in order to form the self, to reinforce their self-identity.

Referring to symbolic interactionist theory, Mocanu (2013) states that consumers who suffer from insecurities buy brands or products that are consistent with the image of themselves they wish to project or the social role they wish to master. He finds that brand exposure is influential on consumer behavior. This study had a total of 119 participants, both male and female, ages between 20 and 25; it used descriptive test instruments to capture the range of cognitive and emotional reactions of consumers in response to advertisements. Mocanu found that the possession or non-possession of specific brands within fashion directly impacts self-esteem among the young participants, that fashion brands specifically are a psychologically central aspect in self-evaluation. Participants showed that they evaluated their self-worth with material possessions rather than more traditional indicators of self-worth, like academic performance, for example (Mocanu, 2013).

**Graphic Design and Semiotics**

The value of semiotics in the education of graphic design is discussed by Ockerse and Dijk (1979), who maintain that semiotics is not only a significant, but also an essential tool for a graphic designer. They state that graphic design is “visual communication design wherein the designer purposefully marks, signs, and names thoughts, events or facts, and conveys information with a definite meaning and significance.” They further define the role of graphic designers in the development of visual communication stating that they “coordinate structural and functional relations to produce concise and clear communication for both sender and receiver.”
In semiotic terms, the graphic designer aids his fellow man in the process of generating and digesting “signs”. Semiotics is the theory of signs in which one studies problems of sign production and interpretation. (Ockerse and Dijk, 1979)

**Graphic Design and Social Responsibility**

In an article by Frascara (1988), which is relatively old yet still relevant and accurate today—and very relevant to the purpose of this essay—he discusses the social responsibility of graphic design, and how the quality of a design should be measured. Frascara (1988) writes that graphic design has developed lacking of theoretical reflection, focusing more on esthetics and less on ethics, with less consideration of communication and social significance. He proposes that the esthetic quality of a design does not determine its *overall* quality—graphic design is more than just an art form. Frascara defines quality in graphic design, stating, “It is measured by the changes it produces in the audience.”

Frascara (1988) names a few of the flaws present in the discussion of visual style as one of the aspects of graphic design, stating that it leaves out important areas of graphic design such as signage, that it does not distinguish between visual creation and visual manipulation that occurs in the communication process, that it does not look into problems of performance related to visual perception, and that it “omits problems related to the impact that graphic communication has on the public’s attitudes and ideas.” He talks about communication and how designers need to be aware that it requires a sharing of codes that they need to communicate with regards to the codes of the public (Frascara, 1988).

Frascara defines graphic design as “the activity that organizes visual communication in society”; it is therefore concerned with social responsibility. He adds that the main reason to the existence of any piece of graphic design is that “someone has something to communicate to someone else,” which involves a perceptual and behavioral concern—the perceptual concern involving problems of visual detection and communication such as visibility, legibility, and esthetics, and the behavioral concern regarding the effect the communications have on the target audience.

Frascara’s (1988) thesis contends that the designer’s job is not over when the design is produced and delivered, that the evaluation of the design and its effects must be a part of the design process, as the final purpose of visual communication is a certain behavioral change in a target audience which occurs *after* the occurrence of the communication: “The designer produces a piece that only comes into full existence when the communication with the audience takes place.”
THEORY

The theoretical basis of this essay is the study of signs: semiotics. This will guide the essay into understanding how a consumer’s self-image is affected. Through relevant literature overview and existing studies related to the scope of this essay, this chapter presents the theoretical grounds that will aid in analyzing the case study and guide the qualitative research used in answering the question of this essay. First, it will discuss branding as a form of visual communication and consumer perception of branding that impacts self-image. Second, it will explain semiotics, how it is (and how it can be) used by graphic designers when communicating with consumers on behalf of brands.

While there are many theories that study visual communication, this essay chooses to focus on the study of semiotics as it falls within the theory of visual perception, and the main focus of this essay is the consumer—the target for whom the message is intended.

1. Branding

Brand Image and Brand Identity

As mentioned earlier, brand image is on the receiver’s side, but in order to discuss brand image and how it affects consumers, we need to discuss brand identity, which brand image is a product of. Brand image is the result of how a brand communicates its identity. Kapferer (2008) explains brand identity as follows:

Identity is on the sender’s side. The purpose, in this case, is to specify the brand’s meaning, aim and self-image. Image is both the result and interpretation thereof. Before projecting an image to the public, we must know exactly what we want to project. Before it is received, we must know what to send and how to send it. (p.174)

Kapferer (2008) maintains that a brand is not simply the name of a product; rather, it is “the vision that drives the creation of products and services under that name,” and it is this vision, “the key belief of the brands and its core values,” that is called identity. This vision is also what drives successful brands that are able to create devoted consumers or advocates, “a real cult and loyalty” (p.171). Wheeler (2013) takes it a step further and explains brand identity as something more concrete:

Brand identity is tangible and appeals to the senses. You can see it, touch it, hold it, hear it, watch it move. Brand identity fuels
recognition, amplifies differentiation, and makes big ideas and meaning accessible. Brand identity takes disparate elements and unifies them into whole systems (p.4).

The main focus in this essay is the target audience. Kapferer (2008) explains the target audience: “The target specifies the nature and psychological or sociological profile of the individuals to be influenced, that is, buyers or potential customers” (p.178).

**Designing for the Target Audience (the Consumer)**

Insight into the characteristics, needs, and perceptions of the target customer is critical for defining a brand’s strategy and, ultimately, designing an effective identity. Through understanding the needs of the customers, designers develop solutions that are appropriate and compelling (Wheeler, 2013, p.64).

Identity designers must create a visual identity with a look and feel that resonates with customers and becomes synonymous with the brand: “Look and feel is the visual language that makes a system proprietary and immediately recognizable... This support system of color, imagery, typography, and composition is what makes an entire program cohesive and differentiated” (Kapferer, 2008, p.173). In other words, it is important for a brand to know who it is (identity), whom it is for (target audience), and finally create a graphic/visual identity that helps it to be perceived accordingly by the chosen target (brand image). A brand’s graphic design defines the norms for its visual recognition, which needs to reflect the brand’s deepest values at first glance: “You should be able to cover up the logo and still identify the company because the look and feel is so distinctive” (Wheeler, 2013, p.148).

**Brand Image and Consumer Self-image**

*Brand image* is how the consumers see the brand as a result of the constructed *brand identity*, and *self-image* is how consumers see themselves. The purpose of the essay is to look at branding from the consumer’s point of view—how they perceive a brand and ultimately the effect this perception has on their self-image—and, ultimately, discuss graphic designers’ role and responsibility for the consumer. Therefore, it is important to find a clear link between brand image and consumers’ self-image, which can be done by looking into the brand identity prism.
Brand identity is represented by a hexagonal prism (see Figure 1) which includes the following facets: personality (the kind of person it would be if it were human), physique (physical qualities and aspects that represent the brand. Example: the famous Coca-Cola bottle), culture (the set of values inspiring the brand and its products and communication. Example: Coca-Cola stands for America), relationship (how the brand functions. Example: Nike suggests a relationship based on provocation, delivered through the tagline ‘just do it’ which encourages people to let loose), customer reflection (who the consumers perceive the brand is meant for, what kind of customer they think it is for. Example: dairy products that are positioned on lightless or fitness projects a sporty young female customer reflecting, although they are mainly purchased by older people), and finally self-image (whether the brand speaks to the target’s reflection of themselves. Example: buying a Porsche in order to prove financial capability) (Kapferer, 2008, p.182-187).

The last two are especially relevant to the focus of this essay as they are directly connected to the mind of the consumer. Kapferer (2008) clarifies the difference and relationship between the two facets, describing customer reflection as “the target’s outer mirror (they are...)” and self-image as “the target’s own internal mirror (I feel, I am...).” Kapferer adds, “reflecting the customer is not describing the target; rather, the customer should be reflected as he/she wants to be seen as a result of using a brand. It provides a model with which to identify” (p.186). A brand speaks to consumers’ self-image, a brand is perceived however the brand communicates, and consumers who choose to use that brand feel their self-image being enhanced through the brand or their ideal self-image being created by the brand. An example is the brand Lacoste: it is perceived as a sporty brand, and a
study showed that its customers see themselves as a member of an elegant sports club despite the fact that they may or may not practice any sports (p.186).

Kapferer (2008) calls for us to remember, “it is advertising which writes the history of a brand” (p.196). For Wheeler, “Advertising is influence, information, persuasion, communication, and dramatization. It is also an art and a science” (p.182). It is one of the main ways of informing consumers about products, and despite an increasingly resistant audience, it still makes the desired impact. The following section on semiotics will provide the tool with which this study analyses the brand Victoria’s Secret through its advertising to discern its brand image and understand its impact on the consumer and its effect on their self-image.

2. Semiotics and Visual Communication (Advertising)

What is Semiotics?
One way of finding meaning in visual communication is through semiotics. According to Zakia (2007), “Semiotics can be described as the study and application of signs, signs being anything and everything that conveys meaning,” and meaning is conveyed in many ways such as words, symbols, and colors, for example. Semiotic means “sign” in Greek, and images are signs that convey meaning and emotion (p.302).

The two major theories in the field of semiotics were developed by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and American philosopher Charles Pierce. This essay will mention Saussure’s but will focus more on Pierce’s study of semiotics as it is based and built upon Saussure’s study. Pierce’s semiotics studies signs in images and includes the viewer (the interpretant) as part of the study of signs.

All of our thought and experience, our very sense of our own identity, depends on the systems of signs already existing in society which give form and meaning to consciousness and reality. Semiotics shows us that the impression that we are individuals and unique subjects of our own life experience, is created by the language. (Bignell, 1997, p.6)

“Saussure referred to signs as signifiers and the information or emotion conveyed as that which is signified” (Zakia, 2007, p.302). The sign is classically portrayed in a dyadic relationship—something which stands for something; a correlation between the signifier and the signified—but in Pierce’s definition, it has a triadic structure: object-sign-interpretant (Colapietro, 1989, p.4). Charles Pierce took Saussure’s definition a step further, describing a sign as “a relationship between an object or an
idea, how it is represented, and how the object or idea is communicated” (Zakia, 2007, p.302). In other words, Pierce’s definition of a sign is “something which stands for another to a mind,” meaning that a sign does not only stand for something but stands for something to someone; someone’s mind. (Colapietro, 1989, p.4)

![Pierce's Semiotic Triad](image)

Figure 2: Pierce’s Semiotic Triad

Pierce’s triad (Figure 2) includes what Pierce calls the *representamen* (the signifier), the object or idea (what is signified), and the *interpretant* (the process of interpreting the representamen). As Zakia (2007) explains, “The process of interpretation includes the person looking at the photo/ad along with how and where the photo/ad was exhibited—in an expensive magazine, in a slick brochure, on the Internet, or whatever” (p.303).

If brand image, which is generated through communication and can be studied through semiotics, does affect consumer’s self-image, then semiotics is also connected to self-image. Pierce attempts to explain mind and selfhood through semiosis (sign activity), and in his book *Pierce’s Approach to the Self*, Colapietro (1989) studies the distinctive character of Pierce’s semiotic approach to mental phenomena and particularly human subjectivity. Colapietro (1989) refers to a paper by Beth Singer criticizing Pierce’s definition of a sign and arguing that it is not general enough and concludes that Pierce’s definition of it appears to be limited to *representational* signs, and therefore, it cannot be general and applied to everything (p.2-3). Justus Buchler and Douglas Greenlee have also criticized Pierce in their study of Pierce’s Semiotic. But in the case of this essay, this only shows that Pierce’s study of semiotics can indeed be applied in the field of graphic design and branding, as any form of visual communication is indeed “representational.”

According to Pierce and his view of the self, communication is the essence of our being and our identity (in Colapietro, 1989, p.56). Further, Pierce makes a connection between psychology and semiotics stating that one could benefit from
the other. Pierce’s view on the matter can be summarized as follows: if consciousness means thought, it means that we are in it rather than it in us, and the nature of thought according to Pierce involves “the attempt to interpret all manifestations of thought as instances of sign,” thus making his semiotic account of thought helpful in the experimental study of the mind (p.54). This aspect further supports the use of semiotics for the purpose of this study.

**Representation**

According to Pierce, an image has an **iconic**, **indexic**, and **symbolic** representation (representation is when one thing stands for another). An iconic representation is when the representation looks like the actual thing it is representing (e.g., a photograph of a car represents a car). An indexical representation is an indirect representation of the object being represented (e.g., a shadow of a car represents a car). And finally, a symbolic representation, where something culturally agreed on represents something else (e.g., a logo of a car).

The semiotic triad mentioned earlier can be used to analyze an advertisement by looking at it and associating it freely with a number of descriptive words (this is called *clustering*: a method of critiquing photographs, based on the *free-association* techniques by Freud and Jung), which then are analyzed by identifying their iconic, indexic, and symbolic elements which has led to that perception—the words which have been associated with the ad (Zakia, 2007, p.303-304).

**Semiotic Analysis of Brand Visual Communication (Advertising)**

The identity prism mentioned earlier shows that brands speak, a speechless brand is a nonexistent brand, and “brands only exist if they communicate.” Kapferer (2008) concludes that a brand is a speech in itself and can thus be analyzed like any other speech or form of communication” (p.187). This is where semiotics can be useful in this essay, to analyze how a brand’s visual communication is perceived by its target audience, how it is affecting their self-image, and ultimately, how the brand’s communication could be adjusted to send out positive images and perceptions.

Semiologists have taught us that behind any type of communication there is a sender, either real or made up. Even when dealing with products or retailers, communication builds on image of its speaker or sender and conveys it to us... Both the physique and personality help define the sender thus built for that purpose (Kapferer, 2008, p.187).
In other words, a brand is a sender, a communicator; it has an identity which functions as a guide to any form of communication sent out to the public. Designers create messages that are in line with the brand’s identity by using different signifiers and representamens, and ultimately, an image of the brand is formed in the mind of the consumer through what is signified. Meaning is carried through signs, the repeated exposure of which (through advertisements, for instance) creates recognition. This is where graphic design is integral in creating brand identity.

Visual identity triggers perceptions and unlocks associations of the brand” (Wheeler, 2013, p.50). According to Zakia (2007), “we remember things through association”, and association is something that advertisements are based on (p.84-86). However, perception is a personal matter; therefore not everyone interprets an ad in the same way. Zakia (2001) defines perception as “a psychological process that includes sensation, memory, and thought and results in meaning such as recognition, identification, and understanding” (p.371). By integrating meaning and visual form, identity designers are able to manage perception of the brand.

Bignell (1997) explains, “while semiotic analysis has been used in the past for a critique of advertising, it can also be used in the industry to help ads become more effective” (p.32); in the same way the semiotic procedure can be used to interpret and analyze visual communication, such as an ad, a designer can plan visual communication to deliver the wanted message (what is signified); by giving some thought to the kind of iconic, indexic, and symbolic elements (props, colors, etc.) that would work well together for that purpose (Zakia, 2007, p.306).

When it comes to color for instance, “it can trigger an emotion and evoke a brand association” (Wheeler, 2013, p.50). Colors are signifiers, and what they signify is reliant not only on context but culture as well. “Color is symbolic” according to Zakia (2007): “in its millions of hues, chromas, and lightnesses feeds our emotions with various connotations that are culturally agreed on (p. 88). Color expresses brand personality as well as triggers emotions in consumers. It also evokes association with a particular brand and differentiates it from another based on familiarity (Wheeler, 2013, p.50).

“Graphic designers are well aware of the importance of a logo or a logotype as a symbolic way of identifying corporations and products. Through extensive exposure, they become fixed in a person’s mind so that the logo becomes a memorable representation” (Zakia, 2007, p.145). This includes the colors of a logo. The attention to color becomes an additional way to achieve an identity; one thinks of a successful brand and associates it with a color (example: Coca-Cola and the color red).

As mentioned above, for Zakia (2007), “Advertisements are based on associations, and the associations made are personal. Advertising operates on the
basis of visual suggestion (p. 86). Ads are made up of props which act as signifiers, and what they signify or connote is context dependent. The purpose of these props is to deliver associative value (p.87). Zakia (2007) offers women’s products as an example: women’s products suggest “beauty, slimness, playfulness...”; thus, they are always in the context of signifiers that support these suggestions, such as beautiful attractive females, flowers, and diamonds, for example (p.86). This can help in planning an ad, by thinking of what is to be suggested or signified and in what context, what association you want the viewer to have, and choosing the appropriate props/signifiers accordingly (p. 87).

It will be helpful to know that Syntax is “the visual grammar, the design or composition of a photograph—how the various elements are arranged to convey a particular message,” semantics is “the meaning that the reader/viewer gives the photograph—what is signified”, and pragmatics is “the context in which the photograph is viewed, which includes not only the space or environment in which it is displayed but also the time in history” (Zakia, 2007, p.306). These three terms are borrowed from linguistics and can be used in visual mode: “If one changes the syntax of a photographs or the pragmatics, the meaning (semantics) will change. In this way, photographs can be altered or displayed differently to clarify, amplify, or alter their statement” (p.306). According to Zakia, this can be done either by adding something to the message, subtracting something from it, substituting something for another, or exchanging an element for another (p.306).

**Myth and Ad Analysis (Connotation & Denotation)**

In semiotics, denotation and connotation are “terms describing the relationship between the signifier and the signified” (Chandler, 2007, p.137). Denotation can be defined as the literal or obvious meaning of a sign (what it is depicting), whereas connotation is the underlying meaning of the sign, what the sign symbolizes/represents and what is really being said by it. The distinction between denotation and connotation operates at the level of the signified.

According to Chandler (2007), “connotation and denotation are often described in terms of levels of representation or levels of meaning” (p.139). The denotation of a representational visual image can be recognized and agreed on by all viewers from any culture in the world at any time. Whereas connotation is used “to refer to the socio-cultural and personal associations (ideological, emotional, etc.) of the sign” depending on the viewer’s/the interpretant’s class, age, gender, ethnicity, etc., as well as the context of the image (p.138).

The form of the signifier can be changed in a way that maintains the denotation but generates different connotations, like using a different typography but keeping the same text, changing the shade of color of the same object, and so on.
Both denotations and connotations can change over time as they are subject to socio-cultural variability and historical factors. An example of that is the fact that signs that refer to disempowering women have had more negative denotations and connotations in the past than they do now (Chandler, 2007, p.142).

In the case of advertising as visual communication, linguistic, visual, and other kinds of signs are used to both denote and generate a range of connotations attached to the sign. Barthes calls this the making of “myth”. Myth can be defined as “the bringing together of signs and their connotations to shape a particular message” (Bignell, 1997, p.16). The study of myth is a part of semiotics.

The way that myth works is by taking hold of an existing sign and what it connotes and using it to transfer meaning onto another sign for it to take a social role for a specific purpose, “to communicate a social and political message about the world” (17). By distorting and covering up alternative messages, myth appears to be the only truth rather than one of the possible truths (p.22).

According to Bignell (1997), “the semiotic analysis of the signs and codes of advertisements has often been used to critique the mythic structures of meaning which ads work to communicate.” Meanings of ads are designed by their creators, the brand itself, and ultimately the creative directors and designers behind its communication in order to shape and lend significance to consumers’ experience of reality, or so assumed by the semiotic analysis of advertising:

We are encouraged to see ourselves, the products or services which are advertised, and aspects of our social world, in terms of the mythic meanings which ads draw on and help to promote (p.33).

In order to study and analyze an ad in semiotic terms, it needs to be separated from its environment/context in which it exists, its pragmatics as mentioned earlier. After that is done, what needs to be identified is the visual and linguistic signs are featured in the ad, which are anything that carries a meaning, while noting how these signs relate to each other through coding systems, and the social myth the ad draws on and whether the ad is reinforcing or challenging that myth. An important fact to keep in mind is that not all viewers or readers will read an ad in the same way (Bignell, 1997, p.34), referring back to perception and how it is personal.

Signs in ads do not just have denotations; they also have connotations—cultural meanings, some of which are easily and consciously recognized and others which are unconsciously recognized and unclear unless we look for them. Bignell (1997) presents a perfume ad as an example to describe Barthes’ “mythic meaning”: a photograph of a beautiful female model in a perfume ad is not just a sign that denotes a person who has been photographed; it has connotations like youth, slimness, etc., which are positive connotations created by society regarding the
attributes of a sexually desirable woman, resulting in the sign becoming a signifier for the myth ‘feminine beauty’ (p.34-35).

By analyzing the signs in advertisements, “we pass from the sign’s denotative meaning to its connotative meanings.” These meanings are the “ingredients of myth,” meaning that all the signs in the photograph and everything they connote are transferred onto the advertised product or brand name. So a model, having become a sign for feminine beauty, transfers that meaning onto the advertised product and/or brand, consequently granting that specific product or brand a “mythic meaning,” a linguistic sign that also connotes feminine beauty (Bignell, 1997, p.35).

Buying the product seems to offer the person obtaining it a share in its meaning, whatever meaning the product obtained through the connotations of the signifiers in its ad, in this case “feminine beauty.” Bignell (1997) explains, advertising works by correlating feeling, mood, or attributes to tangible objects, “linking possible unattainable things with those that are attainable, and thus reassuring us that the former are within reach”; in other words, advertisements make the consumer feel that “buying and using the product (an attainable thing) gives access to feminine beauty (a social meaning).” Consumers believe or ‘buy into’ the myth, making them desire the product if they desire its social value (p.36). This is due to the fact that ads give products social significance, which provides the consumers of the brand with their own connotation, their good taste or trendiness for example (p.38).

“The mythic meaning of ‘feminine beauty’ is much more likely to be perceived by the reader of the ad if the photographic sign calls on social prejudices in favor of images of young, slim, and tall women as signifiers of beauty. The iconic sign of the model can signify beauty because she is not elderly, overweight or below average height.” (Bignell, 1997, p.37)

The positive connotations of a certain sign in our culture that favors that sign over its opposite is what creates the positive connotation of a women that is used as a sign in an ad (slim – overweight, young – elderly, tall – short, for example).

Myth makes particular social meanings acceptable as the common-sense truth about the world. The function of the criticism and analysis of myth must then be to remove the impression of naturalness by showing how the myth is constructed, to show how it promotes one way of thinking while seeking to eliminate all the alternatives. Using the semiotic methods enables you see through the myth. “The mythologist is able to separate the photograph from the myth, the sign from the signification, to undo the effect which the myth aims to produce.” (Bignell, 1997, p.24-25)
METHOD, MATERIAL, and RESULTS

In order to explore the impact a brand image can have on a target audience, the multi-billion dollar retailer Victoria’s Secret has been chosen as a case study. The case study helps give the essay real-life context to apply the theory into practice, and help test the hypothesis. Victoria’s Secret has been selected for this essay because it is a well-known, high-profile brand and because there has been a lot of criticism regarding how this brand chooses to advertise itself (specifically, that they use sex to sell) and the impact that their choice of models may have in defining the ideal female body and influencing women's self and body image today, which is what this essay aims to explore.

The method of this exploratory research consists mainly of two parts: the first is an analysis of the brand, which will help describe its identity and image and the semiotics behind them; the second is an analysis of the brand through its target audience by conducting interviews and a focus group with a selection of women in an attempt to find out the impact the brand image has on their self-image.

This essay is targeted towards the brand Victoria’s Secret specifically, and the participants of the study as a part of the brand’s target audience. On the one hand, choosing only one brand and a small group of women to conduct the study means that the findings of the research cannot be generalized and applied to all brands and all consumers; on the other hand, it allows the essay to be more focused and get into more detail about the selected brand to attempt an understanding of how the selected women specifically react to the brand.

1. Victoria’s Secret

1.1. Elements of the Brand’s Identity and Visual Communication

The Store
According to the CEO, Leslie Wexner, the main idea of the design of the Victoria’s Secret store was to create a British-inspired world for the American consumers: “a glamorous and luxurious shopping environment for women to fulfill their fantasies” (Barr, 2013). The stores are scented, the lighting is warm and soft, and music is played in the background (Barr, 2013). The stores are consistent with the use of the color pink. Both the interior and exterior design of every store, malls included, is consistent and coherent. (see Figures 3 & 4).
Logo
The main Victoria’s Secret logo is a word mark (see Figure 5). The brand also uses a letterform mark of the initials as a logo; it is an interlaced V and S in the same typeface as the main logo (see Figure 6), and it is used along with the main logotype consistently on all VS products, websites, marketing material, etc.

Key Colors & Shapes
Victoria’s Secret's signature color is pink, which is culturally known as the color of femininity. They also use the colors black and white along with the pink. Gold and silver are also used on their products.

The brand also uses striped shapes on its products, in stores, on shopping bags, on gift cards, etc. (see Figures 6-10)

Typography
A brand identity system utilizes specially designed typeface families (Wheeler, 2013, p.36), and in the case of Victoria’s Secret, Bell is the font used in the logo, and it is the font mostly used for product names on packages, titles on posters, websites, and correspondence (see Figure 9-10). A sans serif font is used for body text on the website, information on packaging, and marketing material. A script font (cursive/handwritten) is used for product names or signatures on products and gift cards (see Figure 9-10).

Packaging/ Shopping Bags
Victoria’s Secret offers customers scented pink shopping bags that are coherent with the brand’s visual identity, through the application of colors and shapes (see Figure 8).

Products and Product Lines
Victoria’s Secret has sub brands such as Victoria’s Secret PINK, for the younger female audience. Besides lingerie, they also sell swimwear, beauty
products, several perfume lines (see Figure 11-13), and more recently, sportswear.

**Catalog**

The catalog cover layout was designed to resemble fashion and lifestyle magazine covers (Barr, 2013). In 1990, super models replaced regular models and the Victoria’s Secret Angels were introduced, becoming the faces of the company (see Figure 16).

**The Models**

The Victoria’s Secret models are referred to as “Angels” by the brand. It started in the 1990s with renowned models; with the debut of a line of bras named “Angel” in 1997 in a commercial featuring Tom Jones, and so the Victoria’s Secret Angels were created, and the term was used to refer to the models contracted by the company to represent the brand—be it in catalogs, posters, commercials, fashion shows, or as the faces of new fragrances and product lines. The original Supermodel angels were replaced by young models whose careers are launched by Victoria’s Secret. Chosen by the brand’s Chief Marketing Officer, Edward Razek, for their looks and personalities that embody the brand, these models are trained and supported and propelled into success. Victoria’s Secret Angels are most of the highest ranked and paid models according to *Forbes* (2010) (see Figure 17).

The models are walking advertisements of the brand no matter where they are, even when they move on from the brand. Models play a big role and take up a large space in the visual identity of Victoria’s Secret. Victoria’s Secret scouts and hires their own models, trains, develops, and launches them into celebrity status. These models become part of the brand, a visual product in a way. Their fame is tied to being “Angels,” so even when Alessandra Ambrosio, for example, walks the runway for Chanel, makes an ad for Ralph Lauren,
or launches her own brand (Ále by Alessandra), she is still known first and foremost as an “Angel.”

**TV Commercials and the Annual Fashion Show**

Wexner’s experimentation with the brand’s marketing strategies led to the launch of a low-key lingerie fashion show in 1995. The result was one of the greatest coups in marketing history. As a part of their marketing strategy, the brand produces an annual fashion show where their models walk the runway in jeweled bras and feathered wings. The show features a “multi-million dollar bra” as a centerpiece each year (from The Fantasy Bra line) and special performances by top artists from the music industry (2014 featured performances by Taylor Swift, for example, see figure 18). Victoria’s Secret does not even pay for television time “CBS reportedly pays Victoria’s Secret over $1 million a year for the rights to air what is essentially an hour-long infomercial” (Alexander, 2014).
Figure 13: Victoria by Victoria's Secret perfume - Winner of 2014 Fragrance Award

Figure 14: Official ad for Victoria with model and "Angel" Behati Prinsloo

Figure 15: VS Angel Behati Prinsloo, the face of the fragrance Victoria, accepts three 2014 Fragrance Awards

Figure 16: Victoria's Secret Catalogs, with an "Angel" as the cover model

Figure 17: VS Angels make the Hollywood Walk of Fame

Figure 18: Taylor Swift and a VS Angel at the 2013 Fashion Show
1.2. Visual Communication Analysis

As mentioned earlier, a set brand identity means that all forms and channels of communication sent out by the brand are coherent and consistent, giving the same brand experience to the consumers and producing one brand image. In order to make the research more focused, photographic advertisements have been chosen to be analyzed as a representative for Victoria’s Secret’s visual communication. One ad will be analyzed. Using one ad to represent a brand may seem a generalization, but if Victoria’s Secret does indeed have a consistent brand identity then their every ad should send the same message about the brand.

The chosen ad is for the perfume “Victoria by Victoria’s Secret” (see Figure 19), for the reason that this perfume won the 2014 Fragrance Foundation Awards Fragrance of the Year Consumer Choice Award, indicating popularity among consumers and, possibly, quality. The brand describes the fragrance: “It’s a fresh, floral, fruity blend that captures the timeless appeal of Victoria’s Secret. Fresh. Sexy. Totally irresistible. Victoria” (vspressroom.com, 2014). The following analysis will look into how the brand advertised the product. The study of semiotics introduced in the theory section will be the guide and basis of this analysis:

![Figure 19: Victoria by Victoria’s Secret Official Ad](image-url)
The sender of this ad is Victoria’s Secret. Despite the absence of a brand logo, as well as the brand’s signature colors, but the sender is identified through context and the recognition of the model. The model, Behati Prinsloo, is one of the brand’s famous “Angels,” who as previously mentioned have become a known symbol for the brand over the years. The receiver (or interpretant) of the ad are Women, the brand’s target audience.

**Denotation**
The ad is a photograph of a young woman, with no visible aging wrinkles on her face, possibly in her mid twenties. We can see she is slim, as her bones are showing through her revealing outfit. Her hair is a mix of light brown and blond, slightly messy, braided, and lying on her right shoulder. There is a silver-colored crown on her head with what appears to be small crystals. Her eyes are lined with black eyeliner, with light and soft makeup on the rest of her face. She is wearing a studded black leather jacket; the jacket is slightly falling off and revealing her left shoulder. She is wearing a light rose pink lace bra underneath. Her collarbones, neckline, and some cleavage are visible. She is holding light pink roses in her hands, the same color as the bra, and the roses slightly cover her left side breast.

The model’s body is pointed slightly towards the right corner of the photograph; her face is looking forward but with a very slight turn to the right. The background is blurry, and there is a golden object that is difficult to identify. The background is a light beige color. The model is making direct eye contact with the camera. Her lips are slightly open, showing some teeth.

**Connotation**
The model in the photograph, Behati Prinsloo, is a Victoria’s Secret Angel. Her light makeup suggests natural beauty. The eyeliner emphasizes her eyes; she is drawing the viewer in with her gaze by looking into the camera, giving a sultry seductive look with her eyes and lips, presenting the brand’s sexy identity. She is very lightly dressed and showing a lot of skin which again emphasizes the sexiness. The crown connotes royalty and luxury. The leather jacket gives her an edgy and dangerous quality. As for the flowers in her hand, the light pink roses connote sweetness and innocence; they also connote elegance and grace, according to *The Flower Expert* (2016), one of many online sources. Her placement and torso positioning in the photo show that she is not walking towards the viewer: she is going her own way, and as she passes by, she gives the viewer a seductive look, suggesting that she is not yours, but she could be.

The three words used by the brand to describe the perfume will be used as
the words of association for the ad to see if there are any signifiers that signify those specific words.

Fresh
- Iconic: roses
- Indexic: light makeup
- Symbolic: the color green

Sexy
- Iconic: open lips, neck, breasts, bra, messy hair
- Indexic: jacket falling off shoulder, gaze
- Symbolic: cleavage, lingerie

Irresistible
- Iconic: skin,
- Indexic: gaze in the eyes, jacket falling off shoulder
- Symbolic: the direction and positioning the model

As it appears, many of the signifiers in this image have not been mentioned in analyzing the associated words set by the brand as they did not fit the words’ iconic, indexic, or symbolic representations. However, the signifiers did signify Victoria’s Secret’s brand identity.

It is also important to note the absence of a perfume bottle or a reference to a perfume bottle; there is no text anywhere in the photo either, so the model along with the props are doing all the communication. This is where pragmatics (the context in which a photograph is viewed) are of importance: this ad needs to be seen in a context which reveals what the ad is really for—in a Victoria’s Secret store placed by the actual perfume display, for example, or on the internet with some reference to the perfume. But the absence of the perfume in the ad (which is quite untraditional compared to how perfume ads usually look) suggests that the model represents the object of the ad, the perfume. The model is the perfume. All the qualities the model embodies are those of the perfume (transferring meaning). As a viewer, I would say that this is a Victoria’s Secret ad (or a lingerie brand, if the recognition of the model does not take place) but would not be able to guess that it is a perfume ad, more likely a lingerie ad. The design of the perfume (see Figure 13) and its scent are understandable inspiration sources for the ad, at least regarding the color choice and the roses as a reference to the scent—referring back to synesthesia, which allows an image of roses to trigger the sense of smell.
2. Qualitative Research on Victoria’s Secret

In order to answer the question of this essay (How does Victoria’s Secret’s brand image influence the audience’s self-image?), a qualitative research has been done by interviewing a selection of women of various ages as well as conducting a focus group where the participants discuss an ad by Victoria’s Secret (the same ad analyzed in the previous chapter). This qualitative research helps provide insight into the target audience’s mind, to find out their feelings, thoughts, and opinions on the chosen brand. Since the target audience of Victoria’s Secret is relatively broad, including all women, the selection of participants was purposely random.

The main purpose of this research is to discover two things: what is Victoria’s Secret’s brand image (how is the brand perceived), and how does it influence the target audience’s self-image? The research will also help in defining the brand’s identity prism as perceived by their target audience. It must be noted that his essay will not attempt to define the selected women’s self-image or state that it is a product of Victoria’s Secret’s brand image, as it is a feasible task; it will simply attempt to explore whether the brand has any effect on these women’s self-image and, if so, how?

2.1. Interviews

Participants
Four women were interviewed, aged 22, 24, 29, and 32. The participants will be numbered from 1 to 4 according to their age (e.g., the youngest, aged 22, will be referred to as Participant 1; the oldest, aged 32, will be referred to as Participant 4).

Material
A collection of images that represent Victoria’s Secret visual identity (see Appendix 1 and 2).

Procedure
The women were shown the aforementioned images. They were then asked questions (see Appendix 3) in order to (a) investigate what image the brand occupies in their minds and (b) derive a better understanding of whether the brand’s identity, and ultimately its image, does in fact have an impact on these women’s self-image, and if so, in what way, how, and why it is so.

Results
Victoria’s Secret is very well recognized by the participants: Whether they are fans or not and whether they have a positive or negative perception of the brand, they
know and recognize Victoria's Secret through its models, products, logo, colors, and overall brand style. They have been exposed to visual communication by Victoria's Secret, be it through TV and the internet or shops and ads in airports, malls, etc.

**Participant 1** used to be a big fan of the brand when she was younger but is now less into consumerism and only buys things she “needs.” **Participant 2** considers herself a fan of the brand thanks to their various product lines that have good quality, look, and pricing. **Participant 3** enjoys some of Victoria's Secret products such as lotions and fragrances but does not consider herself a fan of the brand; she justifies this by saying that she is more “practical” than what Victoria's Secret is as a brand. **Participant 4** expressed that she is a huge fan of the brand, purchasing their products and following their models on social media.

Participants 1, 2, and 4 like the brand and do so because they appreciate the products it offers; the variety, quality, and affordability of the products; and the style of the brand—that it is “sexy” and “cool” according to Participant 4. Participant 3 could not say that she was a fan of the brand. She said that she still appreciates some of their products but have negative thoughts about their lingerie and models, being uncomfortable, impractical, and unrealistic.

The brand is applauded by all four participants for their quality. Participant 2 described its products as having “great quality,” and Participant 4 expressed her admiration for the practically and comfort of the products; they have made use of everything they ever bought from the brand.

All four participants admire the brand’s feel, its smell, its look and way everything is packaged—including Participant 3, although she expressed fear of purchasing their lingerie: “you aren’t sure enough of yourself to buy their lingerie because you see their very thin models and you know you might not look like that.” Participant 1 shared that fear, saying that she is unsure how good she would look wearing their lingerie: “it’s impossible to look like them,” she added.

When asked about their experience of being inside a Victoria’s Secret store, they all had positive thoughts and used words like “luxurious.” **Participant 3**, who is not a fan, said,

“I remember going to a Victoria’s Secret store for the first time, in San Francisco. I was 12 or 13 years old, and I was with my mom. I remember being wowed, that’s the word I would use, because it was a lot of pink, but in different shades and it felt glamorous walking into the store, the divisions of products, it just felt glamorous, the floor was shiny.”

**Participant 4** said, “It smells nice. There are so many pretty things. I felt like I wanted what they had; I wanted to buy a lot of things.” Participant 2 said that “the stores smell great; they look great; the colors are fun and attract the eyes. The entire design as well as the product lines make you want to stay and look through the whole place.”
The color most associated with the brand was indeed the color pink, “shades of pink”, and black was also mentioned.

The word most used and agreed upon to describe the brand was “sexy.” Other words included “luxurious,” “glamorous,” “intimidating,” “playful,” “feminine,” “stylish,” “bubbly,” and “sporty.”

As for the brand’s models, the participants used words like “sexy” first and foremost, followed by other words such as “bubbly,” “sporty,” “fun,” and “beautiful.” Besides using the word “sexy” and “beautiful,” Participant 3 also used the words “intimidating,” “skinny in a bad way,” “lacking shape,” and “the same.” When asked to elaborate, she said, “Tall, very thin women wearing lingerie, when in fact you should be showing that their lingerie fits anyone. That’s what I would want at least. I feel like the models don’t portray that the lingerie is for every one unless you are thin, which feels intimidating, makes me feel turned off to purchase this.”

In contrast, participant 4 used the word “variety,” and when asked to elaborate, she said, “variety meaning all colors and regions: diversity. Even though they don’t have plus size models, not all of them are stick-thin; some have curves, a shape, and some don’t, depending on the model. Some are white and blonde, others dark skinned or Asian, etc.” Participant 1 said that people compare women to Victoria’s Secret models, “like oh you look like a Victoria’s Secret model, as a compliment.” However, she does not believe they are “realistic looking.”

The participants who could not identify themselves with the brand (all except Participant 2) explained that they felt intimidated by the brand’s models and their bodies; they did not feel as if they could live up to that and look as good in Victoria’s Secret lingerie. At the same time, they expressed that they wish they could and that it would be “fun” (Participant 4). Participant 4 said that she wants to be sexy and cool like the brand. Fun was a word used by Participant 2 as well; she was able to identify herself with the brand and described the brand as “sexy, but fun and bubbly”—her use of the word “but” gave the impression that she, too, did not think she was as sexy but that she felt she was fun and bubbly. Participant 1 said, “I don’t look like that.”

The participants were asked about their femininity on a scale of 1 to 10. Participant 3 was hesitant between 6 and 7 and finally settled on 6. When asked to explain, she instantly made a connection to the factor of sexiness: “I don’t wear very sexy lingerie. I go for more practical clothing. [...] Usually I feel like if you want to be more sexy, that’s more work. [...] and that’s time consuming and you need to spend a lot of money.” She feels less feminine due to her self-image of being more “natural,” as she describes herself, rather than sexy and made up.

Participant 4 rated herself a 7 on the femininity scale, describing herself as not overly feminine “but not too boyish either.” Participant 2 rated herself the
highest among the participants with an 8 and said, “I’m quite feminine in how I dress and act and how much I invest in clothing and beauty, but I’m also laid back and relaxed”—implying that being laid back and relaxed are not feminine qualities and reasons why she is an 8 rather than a 10.

When asked directly about the “image” of the brand, some of the answers were related to the perception of the models. Participant 2 said, “fun, sexy, sporty, and bubbly.” She continued to explain,

“They invest in all aspects of beauty as it is perceived today. The most famous models that represent the brand are sporty; they have amazing bodies, slim but also fit and toned. Like Candice Swanepoel; she practices boxing among other things to keep fit. They sell perfumes and body splash (women have to smell great), lingerie, swimwear, and sportswear for women to look and feel sexy.”

Participant 4 said she understands that some people do not see the brand positively and she understands why:

“well, because a lot of people like to attack brands, instead of attacking the way people think, as in society and culture, they attack objects. The brand is only giving people what they want, they attack them for not being diverse enough, and I think they are more diverse than other brands...some people think they promote the perfect body, what people aspire to be, people criticize that, and if that’s what you want then it’s what you want, it’s not the only option. You like what you like.”

She further explained that she would not mind having a body like theirs but that if she did not think it to be realistic she would not blame the brand, “we should choose our own role models, and be realistic.” Participant 2, who saw the brand negatively, described the image as “luxurious” and “sexy” but not practical or realistic. Participant 1 shared that opinion.

When asked about the brand’s advertising and how it affected its image, Participant 2 expressed how those made her feel intrigued about the brand to watch their ads and annual fashion show, that the products were secondary; she wanted to see the beautiful models, same as Participant 4. Participant 4 understands the purpose of the models is “to show you their different personalities and make sure that you associate them exclusively with the Victoria’s Secret brand.” She thinks the models have different personalities so that they would appeal to different kinds of women. She mentioned how she follows the models on social media platforms like Instagram, and she feels like she knows the models and is connected to them because of this; she sees them as real people, not just models. Other comments were that the ads make the participants think of luxurious products, “lingerie that you can dream about” (Participant 3), and that “they portray it as if it is only for very thin people with that body type and no curves” (Participant 3).

The participants were asked explicitly about whether the brand affects their self-image and why they feel that way, to prompt them to actively reflect over it. The
outcome of this question is this: they all expressed that it did affect their self-image, some positively and some negatively; however, even the positive thoughts revealed that the participants felt they needed to change themselves. On the negative side, one participant said, “Well, yes. Basically, feels like I am not as thin as their models to be able to pull it off, to wear this, and it discourages me from even wanting to go in to see if they have lingerie in my size for instance.” She feels like they wouldn’t have her size even when they in fact do, and she “would still feel like it wouldn’t be a good fit.” She also expressed, “Just doesn’t make me feel like I’m as pretty in nude or semi-nude, let’s say lingerie, as they are.” On a more positive side, one participant said, “It makes me want to work more on myself. Be fit. So I can wear things. I think it’s motivating. It can be positive motivation to be a better version of myself because I can be; it’s not unrealistic goals. You look at them and you think they are normal people, so if they can be like that then so can I.” (Participant 4)

Another participant focused on the fitness motivation: “Yes, it makes you want to be as fit and sexy as their models. You want to buy the products to see how they will look on you and to try to reach fitness goals to look as great in their products as their models do” (Participant 2).

The participants expressed that Victoria’s Secret are either the, or at least one of the, definitions of beauty and sexiness today: “No matter how much you try to resist it, you know in the back of your mind that this is how other people, men in particular, view sexiness and beauty. So only if you are as fit as they are and have flawless skin like they do that you will feel good enough” (Participant 2).

On the other hand, Participant 4 maintained, “There is beauty and sexiness in different things. Victoria’s Secret are one option, not the only. They should not be dismissed.” Participant 3 was more hesitant on the brand being the definition of sexiness: “Yes and no. Yes because they are beautiful, and no because they are too skinny.” She explains that the models could put on more weight to be more “realistic”: “a real woman is not that thin, not all of us.” One of the taller participants mentioned how the brand has evidently taken part in defining beauty and sexiness: “They contributed, over the decades, to the definition of beautiful and sexy. That is why people compare women to them, like when people say ‘oh you look like a Victoria’s Secret model!’ as a compliment. I feel intimidated by that. These people aren’t realistic looking. I am not a superficial thing.” (Participant 1)

Participant 1 added that it does not make her feel bad about the way she looks but that she “kind of” wishes she looked like their models.

Finally, the participants were asked to give thoughts on how they would like
a brand like Victoria’s Secret to be, what image it would have to have in order to make them feel good about it and about themselves. The participants expressed a shared desire for a brand that expressed “confidence,” “comfort,” and “body type diversity,” while maintaining the “sexiness,” “beauty” and “glamour.” Another word that was interesting was “natural” (used by Participant 2). Participant 3 commented on what she thought was hurting her image of the brand: “For me it’s the models; it would be nice if they had more diversity, more curves, different bodies, bigger chests, butts, just diversity. We are all different, realistically, we have different shapes.” Participant 4, who was the biggest fan amongst the four, also expressed that she was missing the “body type diversity.”

2.2. Focus Group

Participants
The focus group included six female participants. Their ages ranged between 20 and 32. The focus group discussion lasted 90 minutes.

Material
An ad for the perfume Victoria by Victoria’s Secret (Figure 19), Victoria perfume bottle (Figure 13), and a collection of images that represent Victoria’s Secret visual identity (see Appendix 1 and 2).

Procedure
The group was presented with the perfume ad and asked questions about it (see Appendix 4). At first, they were not given any context or indication as to what brand or product the ad was selling. They were asked to use the clustering and free-association method in order to establish their perception of the ad and discover the iconic, indexic, and symbolic signifiers for the chosen associated words. As the question-guided discussion went on, the participants were provided with the context and shown the actual product (the perfume). The discussion about the ad continued until they were finally presented with the same images as the interview participants—Victoria’s Secret Visual Identity (see Appendix 1 and 2)—and they were asked questions about the brand and themselves as they are a part of the brand’s target audience. The main purpose of the group discussion was to further explore the brand’s image and how its visual communication works on its target audience, if and how it affects their self-image, and also to map out the brand’s Identity Prism.

Results
Based on the brand analysis and qualitative research, the brand’s image and identity
prism in the minds of the selected women have been concluded, as well as the brand's impact on these women's self-image. This part will summarize the input provided from the interviews and focus group.

**Results: Semiotic Analysis of Perfume Ad**

The focus group consisted of six women, aged 20, 21, 22, 26, 29, and 32. Initially, the group was shown the perfume ad for “Victoria.” They were asked to identify the sender and the product being advertised. Only three of the participants knew the sender since they were familiar with the model (or Angel), Behati Prinsloo, but only two of those three knew the product as they were familiar with the ad itself. The others started discussing and trying to guess what it could be for. Some of their speculations for the sender included *Playboy*, and Miss Universe. As for the product, their guesses were “escort service,” “leather jacket,” “tiara,” “not flowers for sure,” “lingerie/bra.”

Later, the sender was revealed and the group started discussing their thoughts. One of the things that were said was that it felt a bit “cheap” for a Victoria’s Secret ad: “The crown and the hair and half naked model, looks cheap in this particular combination. Not what I expect from Victoria’s Secret.” The colors did not feel very Victoria’s Secret, a couple of the participants thought. But one reaction was, “When you said Victoria’s Secret it made sense; the tiara feels very Victoria’s Secret.” After they all knew the sender, the ones not familiar with the ad instantly thought that the bra was the product being sold, but they were questioning why the brand would then hide the bra with the flowers? “Are they selling jackets now?” They do sell a lot of different products so it was possible, they thought. Another guess for the product being sold gave this answer: “They are selling this woman with this underwear,” which led other participants to follow up on that comment:

- “Selling the idea of an ideal person that you can become if you assemble their products.”
- “Selling the idea of a Victoria’s Secret woman.”
- “This is the look you can have.”

Then once participant guessed *perfume* “because of the flowers?” and another followed up on that saying, “exposing the neck which is an area you would put perfume on.”

Before revealing the product being advertised, the participants were asked to agree on four words to associate with the ad. The words finally agreed upon after a discussion were “sexy,” “provocative/flirty,” “fake,” and “romantic.” They were then guided to find the iconic, indexic, and symbolic signifiers of the ad, which looked as follows:
**Sexy**
Iconic: skin, eyes, cleavage (breasts)
Indexic: the look, the lips, messy hair, exposed shoulder, the lighting
Symbolic: underwear, a bed in the background (they guessed the gold was a bed frame)

**Provocative/flirty**
Iconic: the contrast in the combination of what she is wearing
Indexic: the gaze, the exposed shoulder, the posture, the open mouth, the semi-coverage of the breasts
Symbolic: flowers in her hands

**Fake**
Iconic: a model and not a real person, makeup, tiara
Indexic: the combination of items and clothing (“why is she holding flowers?” and “why is she looking at the camera this way?”)
Symbolic: (inapplicable)

**Romantic**
Iconic: lingerie, the model’s hair
Indexic: looking at the camera as if looking at a lover
Symbolic: roses, soft warm colors

Some of the participants thought the ad looked shallow, and some had problems with the way the photograph was cropped or that her breasts are in the focus point of the photo, without showing much of the bra (which later made sense to them as the focus point is the areas a woman would spray perfume). One participant showed frustration towards the ad: “I don’t know what they are selling. It is too “male” for me to appreciate it.”

The more positive participants of the group (the ones who said they liked the ad) thought it was visually appealing; they liked the color combination and the contrast of the elements. One participant said, “I like it but I don’t like it; I like the play on the jacket and tiara, innocent but not.” Another added: “Nice fantasy, not real but great if it were. I would prefer more focus on her rather than the background. I would like to see more of what she is wearing. They should show what they are selling.” A few of the participants thought the image was “sexualized” rather than sexy because of the way she was presented, that the sexiness feels “imposed on her.”

The participants were asked about how this ad makes them see the brand. One expressed disappointment, saying she’d seen better and nicer things from the
brand and that she likes some of their stuff but certainly not this one. Another agreed, saying, “this confirms my image of the brand, but I’m disappointed. I’ve seen better.” On the other hand, one participant drew focus on the model in relation to the brand, saying that she likes the model, the model represents the brand, and therefore, she likes the brand. One said that she thinks Victoria’s Secret is a good brand but that this ad was bad and sends mixed messages. Another said that it was too much, but still “cool” at the same time.

A seventh male participant sat in on the focus group and gave some input from time to time as well. This unplanned addition to the group gave some valuable insights that could be explored in future research. The male participant, not being a part of the brand’s direct target audience, was showing a lot of negative feelings towards the brand and brought up his girlfriend while giving his opinion, which could be summarized as follows: he did not like the models that are used, he would not want his girlfriend to look up to them because they are “not real,” and the brand does not define beauty. “It reminds me of Miss America or something, shallow beauty. I prefer more intellectual beauty.”

The participants seemed to take two different sides. The younger part of the group were more critical of the ad and the brand; they had a lot of negative things to say about the brand’s choice in visual communication, using the word “fake” quite a few times. In contrast, the older participants were more positive and appreciative of the imagery and appreciated the brand’s products and the way everything is packaged and advertised, including the models. One of the participants said that the models are a part of Victoria’s Secret brand identity and it is what sets it apart from other brands selling similar products. She added that she likes the fact that they are more daring with their visual communication.

When asked about how the brand makes them feel about themselves, some of the participants said that it made them feel “disconnected,” that they cannot relate to it. Most of the comments were in relation to and generated by the models in the ads, some of the powerful comments include,

“All their models are tall, I’m not tall.”
“I don’t feel like I’m the target.”
“I am not like their models.”
“I don’t even go fix my eyebrows that often; I’m not in that group.”
“Images like that bother me. She is trying to challenge me.”
“I feel lacking.”

Some of the positive comments and arguments against the negative ones during the discussion include,
“It’s challenging in a positive way. When I see her, I feel like why not, this could be me. It doesn't make me feel less, it just makes me think of more possibilities.”
“I would want to do it just to prove I can, but I don't want to.”
“I couldn’t be bothered to put in the effort to try to get there.”
“I don’t feel like I’m the same species as her, but I think I’m more woman than her”.

Results: How could the brand improve its image in order to improve the group's appreciation and perception of it?
Finally the participants were all made aware of the fact that the ad was for a perfume, and they were presented with a photo of the perfume bottle (Figure 13). They were asked to choose their ideal four words to associate the ad with. The words were “flirty,” “spontaneous,” “feminine,” and “youthful”—as opposed to the earlier choice of “sexy,” “provocative/flirty,” “fake,” and “romantic.” They were then asked to give their opinion about the perfume bottle. The words they used were “pretty,” “girly,” “feminine,” “youthful,” “luxurious,” “comfortable luxury,” and “cute.” One participant commented that she would like to smell it because it looked “adorable.”

As a follow up question, they were asked what they would change about the ad in order for these later associations to be fulfilled. They said that a more “natural” approach would have been good, that the model could have been wearing something more comfortable and softer makeup, and her gaze could have been softer to appeal more to women rather than be “sexualized” to target men. One of the participants, on the other hand, did not agree and was happy with the ad the way it was.

On the question of whether they thought an ad with the perfume bottle, without the model, would be as appealing as the one with the model, the discussion can be summarized thus: they all thought the presence of the bottle in the ad would have really helped the ad: “You would understand and appreciate the image better if the bottle was there.” Some thought that the bottle alone would have been sufficient to make them curious to check the perfume, smell it, and possibly purchase it. Another argued, “The bottle isn’t interesting enough completely alone but doesn’t mean the model is important.” One participant suggested flowers along with the bottle to give a hint of what the perfume smells like and involve other senses than vision, so that she could “feel it.” Others thought the presence of the model was important because it was an important part of the brand’s identity: “I prefer with the model, for it to stick out against other perfumes. There are a million other perfume ads. I wouldn't think it was a Victoria’s Secret perfume without the model.” One participant mentioned the absence of context and how that played a role in her
reaction: “If you are in the store and you see the image there and you see the bottle there as well, you would react differently than seeing it out of context on the screen.”

Focus Group Results: Victoria’s Secret Identity Prism
The focus group was later shown the collection of images that represent Victoria’s Secret visual identity and asked questions to find out the identity prism of the brand from their perspective:

Personality
Sorority girl, confident, positive, intimidating, Western, blond, fashionable, stylish, insecure (needs to buy these things to feel good about herself)

Physique
Tall, lace, pink, soft texture, underwear, bras

Culture
Female empowerment, sexiness, femininity, active, extrovert, women having fun together, consumerism, targeting younger women (PINK line), selling the fantasy of “this could be your girlfriend”

Relationship
Sexiness, luxury, indulgence, projecting the idea that looks and sex are the most important (but it is justified since they sell beauty products), “I buy their products to make me feel good about myself,” you are “more womanly” or “girlier” if you buy the products, selling one body type and one type of woman, promoting the idea of “the ideal beauty” and “the ideal body”

Customer Reflection
Young “conventionally” attractive women, exclusivity, for all girls, middle-class white women, young women (max 35 years old)

Self-Image
You feel sexy if you buy it, you are sexy if you wear it, you can buy quality underwear, it feels luxurious, you are buying what models and “Angels” wear, you are taking care of yourself, you are treating yourself, you are buying status

To conclude the discussion, the group was asked to give final thoughts about the brand and the subject of brand-image and self-image (what they would like to say to brands like Victoria’s Secret). Again, there were two sides of opinions. In short, one
side said brands should not focus on the body but put more focus on their products, they should use real makeup and less photo-editing, that they should add more diversity in order to appeal to all kinds of women rather than “just the tall, skinny, white women,” and also to not seem like they are aimed at straight males. The other side of the group maintained that focusing on the products is not enough to differentiate the brand against its competitors, and that they would not buy the product if there was nothing special about it—referring to the models being the special thing about Victoria’s Secret brand identity.

ANALYSIS and CONCLUSION

The input gathered from the interviews and group discussion generated a lot of value to this essay. It was interesting what these women had to say about the brand and about themselves and how their answers to all the different questions revealed the things they did not explicitly say—like their perception of beauty and how much they cared or did not care, how much they were or were not affected by the images they see daily, and how it subconsciously did in fact shape their standards and perception of society and reality.

Interviews

On impulse, I asked the participants about their weight and height during some of the interviews as it felt to me that at least one of the participants’ answers portrayed her as an overweight person while in reality she was average if not under the healthy weight for her height. (It was a difficult task to conduct the interviews objectively without adding supportive comments.) This seems to me quite relevant as one of the reasons why this research is so important is the way in which a person can be made to feel and think about their self-image because of a brand’s image.

My conclusion from the interviews is that the participants who were fans of the brand were invested in surrounding themselves with the brand’s visual communication; they were fascinated with the brand and sold on the “myth” of the Victoria’s Secret models. The products had even more value than just their look and quality—they were Victoria’s Secret, not any other brand. And the models (Angels) were a big part of the products and values being sold. As for the skeptical participants who were somewhat averse to the brand, they were more into the products as products and appreciated the design and esthetics but were put off by the images and the models. While some expressed how they did not care about superficial beauty, they still revealed that their subconscious tells them that this is what beauty looks like. Others were more aware of it and admitted that they were self-conscious about their own outer image because they see these “sexy” and
“beautiful” models and they do wish they looked like them although they do not see it as a realistic goal or a priority; they simply accept it but choose not to let it affect them (or they think it does not affect them). To quote one of the women who were interviewed,

The image of beauty is constantly evolving, but one thing is always the same and it is that the models that wear the clothes and beauty products perfectly are those that have no extra fat hanging around on any part of their bodies. Even the chest area needs to be toned, and the models would wear a bra size between 65-70 A/B/C, and they have perfect flawless skin (no body hair, scars, or discolorations, and they will always be at least a little tan). I think this brand is good at identifying beauty standards and trends (sporty), they promote it and they use it to their advantage. So even if you hate the standards you still find their products attractive and you still want to buy them.

Focus Group
To summarize and combine the results of the focus group discussion, it can be said that the women (the participants) were quite ambivalent about the ad (they like it and not at the same time). They refer to it as sexy and beautiful yet unrealistic. They state that they do not think it’s the ideal but that it would be great to look like the Victoria’s Secret models. They have appreciation for the design and packaging, but they also need models to attract their attention for the product.

The consistency in the portrayal of the same type of women and the same style of advertising has set an ideal and a standard to what effective advertising looks like. Although these women say that they do not believe that this is the only definition of beauty or that they are not influenced by the images they meet from Victoria’s Secret and similar brands, their answers reveal that they do believe that if they look like those models, they would be “sexy,” and that if they purchase their products, they could be “sexy.” To quote one of the focus group participants: “Even though they are not saying ‘every other body sucks’ it still makes women who don’t look like this feel bad about their bodies.” Ironically, when asking the group questions to find out the cultural prism of the brand, the same participants who were critical of the brand contributed and agreed with words like “female empowerment” and “sexiness.”

The discussion revealed that the participants were aware of the brand’s strategy, whether they were critical of it or not, whether they consumed the brand or not. Nevertheless, the brand was successful in delivering the “myth” to at least the participants of this study, as they are a part of its target audience, although they
expressed that the brand’s visual communication felt as if it targeted a male audience and that they would be more appreciative of the brand if it were more “natural,” had more diversity, and focused more on the actual products in their advertising.

**Overall Conclusion**

Connecting back to purpose of this essay and research question (exploring the influence of the Victoria’s Secret brand image on its audience’s self-image), this study found that Victoria’s Secret brand image does indeed have an influence on the participants in both the interviews and the focus group. The meanings conveyed by the brand’s visual communication, which were revealed through the semiotic analysis conducted in this study, corresponded with what the participating women received and reacted to; the brand was found to have a clear brand identity that their visual communication was successful in delivering and, as the women who participated in the study revealed through their answers, the brand image was generally consistent with the brand identity.

How does the brand achieve this? Advertisements rely on the viewers reading the connotations the models in photographs “as if they were signs in a kind of a restricted language, a code.” Therefore, when an ad portrays certain physical qualities (youth, slimness, tallness) positively, it is in fact supporting an ideological myth of feminine beauty. Visual communication sets reality: through repetition and constant exposure, something can become an ideology and “the reality.” Associations take shape over time, and in this case, Victoria’s Secret models seem to become the definition of sexy. The brand previews the same models (introducing new faces every now and then but maintaining the same type or women) doing sports and eating healthy, suggesting that this is the way you become these women. This begs the question, does the brand really promote a better lifestyle and positive self-image or ruin it by portraying the perfect/ideal woman that women aspire to be? Training and eating healthy is a positive thing to promote, but what the brand ends up doing, as concluded from this study, is suggesting that these are the bodies women ought to have, as if they are selling this ideal rather than their products.

Part of the purpose of this was to reflect over the role and the responsibility of graphic designers as visual communicators in society. As previously mentioned, Frascara (1988) emphasized the social responsibility of designers and that it should not be neglected due to the impact that graphic communication has on the audiences’ attitudes. Considering that self-image influences people’s choice in products and brands (you choose products and brands that are consistent with your self-image and avoid products and brands that do not; you also choose brands that can help form your ideal self-image and ideal social self-image [Schiffman & Kanuk,
2009, p. 132-133)], brands attempt to personify their target audience’s perceived ideal self-image through their visual communication. In the fashion industry, a successful fashion brand’s logo would say: “wear me and you’ll become the person you always dreamed of being.” This is where the danger lies. Fashion brands create an imaginary person, which they present to their target audience and encourage them to emulate (Miller and Brown, 1998, p.62). This is where graphic designers need to consider both the brand’s interest and the public interest when constructing their work and the messages it communicates to the viewer.

The comments from the women participating in the study show that they see how “unreal” the person Victoria’s Secret is presenting them with is, but they cannot prevent the influence on their self-image. They were also clear about what they wanted (for instance, diversity), and this is something that graphic designers could take in and incorporate in their visual creation.

**SUMMARY & REFLECTION**

This essay was aimed at deepening the understanding of consumers’ self-image and the implications a brand’s image can have on it, and how the producers of the visual communication that delivers the brand image need to have that in mind when creating and before sending out their messages. Victoria’s Secret is a brand that was found influential on the participants of this study—particularly through their choice of models who perpetuate an unrealistic feminine ideal that the women participating in the study reacted to and their self-image was perceptibly affected by.

In today's society, women are surrounded by images from brands showing them how they should look and how they should be. The ideal self-image is being molded and naturalized by brands’ visual communication, and brands are creating ideals that consumers try to live up to. Ads featuring an iconic sign denoting a beautiful woman are considered controversial: “feminists have been critiquing ads and many other media texts for over three decades, showing that iconic signs denoting women in the media very often perpetuate oppressive ideological myths about real women” (Bignell, 1997, p.37). Communication can be a form of mind control, brands communicate their brand identity, and when consumers are exposed to the same signs in the same context over and over it creates associations and forms a reality and ideology. This makes graphic designers, as producers of visual communication, participants in the creation of and naturalization of a reality that is damaging to women’s self-esteem, which places a responsibility on them to ensure the messages they allow brands to send do not influence their target audience, and consequently society, in a negative unhealthy way.
Models are symbols for something, but they are no longer just props in visual communication to make products seem more appealing. Just like the choice in color, typography, sizing and positioning of elements, etc., the choice in models can make all the difference in visual communication. A brand like Victoria’s Secret, one that has a particular standard when it comes to the models representing their brand, is sending a very clear message that consumers cannot help but notice and react to. What Victoria’s Secret message should do is make women feel sexy, not show them what they believe sexy looks like and tell them to be that. The images consumers are exposed to have an impact on how they feel on the inside and consequently on how they are in the outside world.

Semiotics is a way of understanding signs, and while they are a great way to analyze images, they are an even better way to plan images. As communicators, graphic designers need to take in account every little sign they include in the messages they put together and send out. This does not have to affect sales negatively or go against a brand’s already functional identity. This is about making improvements and contributing to the well-being of consumers in society, really fulfilling their needs. Graphic designers need to be more involved in the model choices, and brands need to be aware of how important that is.

A brand as international and influential as Victoria’s Secret should take the lead in changing the unrealistic feminine ideals of today’s society and aim to affect their target audience’s self-image positively. The designers in charge of the brand’s communication need to reflect over the ethical side of the work they do, not just the esthetical. Graphic designers should challenge myths and ideologies that have a negative influence on society instead of giving into them and using them as a guideline for their design solutions. Their research should not be based on what has worked before on a target audience, in relation to sales, but to really look at what the target needs, not practically but personally, and construct messages that fulfill those needs while making sales. Graphic designers should design a brand’s communication that empowers and benefits the consumers’ self-image, and really deliver the brand’s promise.

Victoria’s Secret would highly benefit from including uplifting and positive, empowering messages and photographs in its communication, while maintaining its visual identity. Perhaps one way is by focusing more on advertising its products, the products that its consumers do love and appreciate. I suggest the brand looks at what women really need, which is to feel beautiful and sexy just the way they are, and aim to be the brand that provides them with the products that will enhance their sexiness and beauty rather than present them with false ideals and expectations that suggest that beauty and sexiness is what Victoria’s Secret models and “angels” represent. The implications of these ideals created by a brand like Victoria’s Secret could be dangerous on the generations of women to come. Let the
products speak for themselves, and spread positivity through visual communication. Ideals are shaped and set by society through communication and brands are responsible for a large portion of that; therein lies the relevance of this study. However, it is important to stress the point that perception is personal, and it varies from one viewer/interpreter to another. Furthermore, the same signs can have different connotations based on context and culture, among other factors. Therefore, it is not possible to generalize and suggest that this research can apply to all brands similar to Victoria’s Secret, or that it can apply to all women, but it would be beneficial to further research the extent to which these results are applicable. It would also be interesting to conduct a study on a brand that is designed to influence its audience positively and test its affectivity.

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1. Victoria’s Secret Visual Identity without Models
2. Victoria’s Secret Visual Identity with Models
3. Interviews

Age: Wight: Height:

1. Are you familiar with this brand? (Present them with Victoria’s Secret visual identity) How?

2. Do you consider yourself a fan of the brand? Why (not)?

3. Can you identify yourself with the brand? If not, do you aspire to?

4. Have you ever purchased their products? If yes, what do you think of their products?

5. Have you ever been inside a VS store? If yes, describe your experience (how you felt there etc.).

6. What color/colors do you associate the brand with?

7. Describe the brand in 4 words.

8. Describe their models in 4 words.

9. How feminine do you consider yourself to be on a scale from 1-10? 1 being the least feminine and 10 the most. Elaborate.

10. How do you see the brand/what is your image of the brand?

11. How do the brand’s advertisements and other visual communications make you feel about the brand? (Describe in as much detail as possible)

12. Does it make you feel anything about your own self-image? If yes, how? (Describe in as much detail as possible)

13. Do you think that they are the definition of beauty/sexiness?

14. What 4 words would you like to describe your perfect lingerie/women’s wear/beauty products’ brand? (Brand image not products)

Notes:
4. Focus Group Discussion Questions

Focus Group Discussion Guide Questions

1. Can you tell the sender of this ad? How?
2. Can you guess what product is being sold here?
3. Give me words you can associate with this ad, without thinking too much?
4. Can we agree on 3 words to describe it?
5. What elements exactly in this ad that makes us think it this word? (Do this with all 3 words)
6. What do you think about the ad?
7. What does it make you think about the brand?
8. How does this ad make you feel about yourself?
9. This is a perfume ad. What 3 words would you like this ad to be associated with?
10. What would you change with the branding of VS in order for it to make you feel feminine (the 3 words)?
11. What do you think about the perfume bottle/packaging? (Show them the image)
12. Would an ad with the perfume bottle along with a nice tagline be as powerful as the one with the model?
13. Would it make you want to buy or check the perfume? Why/why not?
14. Other thoughts?

Brand questions: (Identity Prism)

- What kind of person would the brand be if it were human? (Personality)
- What physical qualities and aspects represent the brand? Example: Coca-Cola bottle. (Physique)
- What would you say are the set of values that inspire the brand and its products and communication/what does the brand stand for? (Culture)
- What does the brand suggest? Example: Nike encourages people to let loose, tagline “Just do it”. (Relationship)
- Who do you think the brand is meant for? What kind of customer do you see that it is for? Example: Porsche is for show-offs, Coca-Cola for the youth. (Customer Reflection)
- What does the brand say to your self-image? Example: buying a Porsche makes you feel like you’re proving financial capability, Coca-Cola makes you feel fun and full of life. (Self-Image)
5. The Perfect Body Campaign & A Body for Every Body