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The Guardian

Opinion – Body Image

August 2, 2019

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Victoria's Secret was never female friendly – its schtick was always about pleasing men

The lingerie brand's runway show has been cancelled this year - it's clear women are abandoning its pornified aesthetic



The Victoria's Secret runway show in 2018: 'This was lingerie touted as empowering, but it didn't feel that way.' Photograph: Stephane Cardinale - Corbis/Corbis via Getty Images

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Lingerie brand Victoria's Secret seems to be having an identity crisis. For the first time since its launch in 1995, its runway show has been cancelled, with model Shanina Shaik telling reporters that the company is trying to work on its branding. This comes in the wake of falling sales and controversy surrounding the show's lack of diversity.

Furthermore, the show's whole shtick – a parade of almost naked models, each a perfect mix of skinny-curvy, decked in angel wings (an accessory the historians of the future will undoubtedly view with bafflement, if not complete derision) being ogled by men – looks dated after #MeToo. Donald Trump used to be a frequent guest at the shows; Les Wexner, CEO of Victoria's Secret's parent brand, L Brands, owned Jeffrey Epstein's New York mansion and was one of his former financial clients (the brand has distanced itself from Epstein).

Of late, women's magazines have jettisoned stories about the extreme nil-by-mouth dieting and exercise measures undertaken by the models in the run-up to the show, in favour of articles about body positivity. Lingerie brands aimed at young women, such as Aerie, ThirdLove and Lively, promote body diversity and oppose airbrushing. They seem miles away from the pornified aesthetic that girls – and I mean girls – were encouraged to adopt a couple of decades ago, in no small part due to Victoria's Secret. This was lingerie touted as empowering, but it didn't feel that way. That's not to say that lingerie didn't hold a sexual charge, but that charge felt mandated and tawdry.

Victoria's Secret was originally launched to appeal to men, to provide a place where they could buy saucy underwear for their wives and girlfriends without feeling uncomfortable. It was based on the idea of a Victorian boudoir – hence the name – and the original shops were kitted out that way, all drapery and chandeliers. Perhaps this is why the chain found itself in trouble and was scooped up in 1982 by Wexler who supposedly made it more female-focused.

Supposedly? Because, for me, being good at flogging products to women and acting in their interests is not the same thing; “female focused” doesn't mean “female friendly”. When I co-wrote a feminist book, *The Vagenda*, there was a whole chapter on the way lingerie is marketed. But whether you're critiquing lingerie or fad diets or magazines, the counter-argument was always the same: “but women are buying it” – a view that failed to take into account socialisation (as though we emerge from the womb primed to be buyers of crotchless thongs), consumer choice, media imagery and the complex nature of sexuality and desire, not least how it interplays with female objectification.

John Berger nailed the tension in *Ways of Seeing*, a decade before Wexner bought Victoria's Secret, when he wrote of the male gaze: “A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. While she is walking across a room or while she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to

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survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to men is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another.” It’s a fortunate woman who hasn’t felt this to some extent at some point in her life.

As with any aspect of feminist critique, lingerie will induce mixed feelings in women depending on their body shape, cultural background, politics, income, sexuality, etc. There are no absolutes, as the beautiful artwork *Every Curve*, by Zoe Buckman, demonstrates. Buckman hand-sewed Tupac and Notorious BIG lyrics about women on to gorgeous pieces of antique lingerie, in order to explore “the contradictory and complementary influences of feminism and hip-hop in her upbringing”. Tracey Emin’s use of blood-stained lingerie in *My Bed*, meanwhile, drew attention to feminine corporeality.

Women may have been buying Victoria’s Secret lingerie in their millions. Some women did undoubtedly feel empowered by it (just as others will feel empowered by simple cotton pants from M&S). Nevertheless, we all know the joke about the Victoria’s Secret catalogue, and its status as a male masturbation bible. Even those of us who didn’t grow up in the US knew that Victoria’s Secret was about pleasing men. The trick it so successfully pulled off was convincing many of us that pleasing men meant also always pleasing ourselves, but now women are voting with their feet. And I don’t blame them. There’s something cheap, tawdry and passé about the whole brand identity. It conjures Hugh Hefner, satin sheets, scenes from the novels of John Updike.

There is so much toss written about lingerie, about how it’s a way of “unleashing your inner goddess”, so it’s refreshing that comfort and inclusivity are now on the agenda. I’m curious to see how Victoria’s Secret will strive to reinvent itself in a post-#MeToo era. But some readers will no doubt say I’m overthinking it. After all, as Dorothy Parker said, “Brevity is the soul of lingerie.”

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