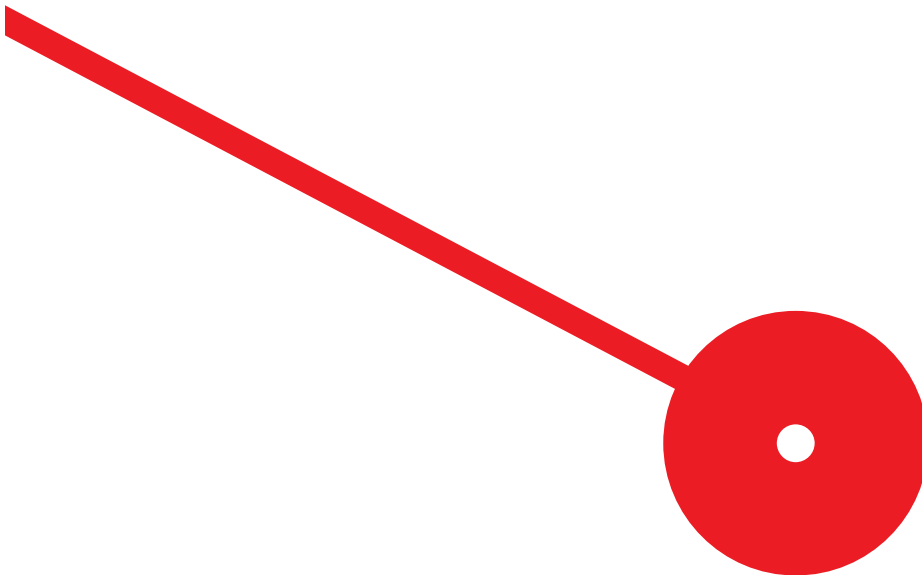




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Catarina Sofia Oliveira

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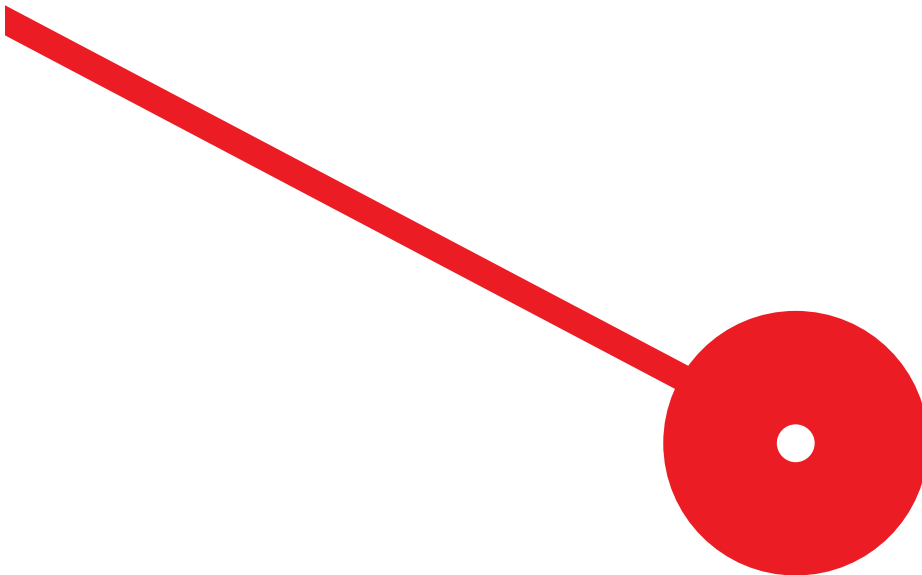




Rebranding for Inclusivity: The case of Victoria's Secret

Catarina Sofia Oliveira

**Dissertation presented to the Porto Accounting and Business School
in order to obtain the Master of Art degree in Intercultural Studies
for Business, under the supervision of Professor Laura Tallone.**



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Abstract:

This dissertation explores the intersection of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), brand identity, and body positivity through the case study of Victoria's Secret. Concepts such as CSR and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) have become increasingly important in today's business landscape. Companies are incorporating these concepts into their business strategies, to align with modern consumer expectations and societal trends.

Body positivity, a movement which emerged from social media and spilled over into the fashion industry, is one of the most recent cultural trends affecting consumer expectations. The 2010s saw the emergence of plus-size models in advertisements, and brands also expanded their size range as a response to the growing demand for inclusivity.

Victoria's Secret, a brand often associated with promoting a narrow beauty ideal, struggled to adapt to these new consumer demands. The following case study analyses the critical role of CSR strategies in the lingerie brand's rebranding effort and highlights the challenges companies face when attempting to reconcile their past image with contemporary values.

Key words: Corporate Social Responsibility; Body Positivity, Inclusivity, Diversity, Plus-Size, Rebranding

Resumo:

Esta dissertação explora a intersecção entre a Responsabilidade Social das Empresas (RSE), a identidade da marca e *body positivity* através do estudo de caso da Victoria's Secret. Conceitos como a RSE e Diversidade, Equidade e Inclusão (DEI) são cada vez mais importantes no panorama empresarial atual. As empresas estão a incorporar estes conceitos nas suas estratégias de negócio, de forma a alinhar-se com as expectativas do consumidor moderno e as tendências sociais.

A *body positivity*, um movimento que surgiu nas redes sociais e se estendeu à indústria da moda, é uma das tendências culturais mais recentes que afetou as expectativas dos consumidores. A década de 2010 foi marcada pelo aparecimento de modelos plus-size em anúncios e pelas marcas que expandiram a sua variedade de tamanhos como resposta à crescente procura de inclusividade.

A Victoria's Secret, uma marca frequentemente associada à promoção de um ideal de beleza restrito, teve dificuldade em adaptar-se a estas novas expectativas dos consumidores. Este estudo de caso analisa o papel fundamental das estratégias de RSE no rebranding da marca de lingerie e destaca os desafios que as empresas enfrentam quando tentam conciliar a sua imagem passada com os valores contemporâneos.

Palavras chave: Responsabilidade Social das Empresas, Body Positivity, Inclusão, Diversidade, Plus-Size, Rebranding

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER I – THE CONCEPT OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY	5
1.1. What is Corporate Social Responsibility?.....	6
1.2. Corporate Social Initiatives	8
1.3. CSR and consumer behaviour	14
1.4. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.....	17
CHAPTER II – PLUS-SIZE, FAT STIGMA, AND BODY POSITIVITY	23
2.1. The meaning and origin of plus-size	24
2.2. The perception of fatness in the Western world in the early and mid-20th Century	31
2.3. The Fat Liberation Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s.....	34
2.4. The late 1970s and 1980s: a shift in the plus-size industry.....	36
2.5. The Body Positivity Movement of the 2010s	38
CHAPTER III – THE CASE OF VICTORIA’S SECRET REBRAND	45
3.1. Company Background.....	46
3.2. Brand image	47
3.3. Victoria’s Secret rebrand.....	52
3.4. The VS rebrand: a Lesson in Authenticity	54
3.5. The future of body positivity.....	59
CONCLUSION	61
REFERENCES	64

Table of Figures

Figure 1 - Marketing Strategy Decisions.....	14
Figure 2 - Consumers and their beliefs.....	16
Figure 3 - Protests outside a New York City Starbucks	16
Figure 4 - Barbie Fashionistas line	19
Figure 5 - Gross sales of Mattel's Barbie brand worldwide from 2012 to 2022.....	19
Figure 6 - Representation in Leading Roles	20
Figure 7 - Netflix subscribers worldwide	21
Figure 8 - Diagram of Chapter Conclusions.....	22
Figure 9 - Interest on the term “plus-size”	24
Figure 10 - Lane Bryant size chart	26
Figure 11 - Evans Size chart.....	26
Figure 12 - Adidas size chart.....	26
Figure 13 - Forever 21 size chart.....	27
Figure 14 - "Misses Plus Sizes"	27
Figure 15 - Early 1920s Lane Bryant advertisement.....	28
Figure 16 - Early 1920s Lane Bryant advertisement.....	28
Figure 17 - Evans Outsize advertisement	29
Figure 18 - “Slendering Fashions”	30
Figure 19 - Footnote on Lane Bryant Style Book from the 1930s	30
Figure 20 - Footnote on Lane Bryant Style Book from the 1930s	30
Figure 21 - LIFE magazine article from 1954	32
Figure 22 - “The Plague of Overweight”.....	33
Figure 23 - “The Plague of Overweight”	33
Figure 24 - L'eggs and “Fashion Plus” Ads.....	37
Figure 25 - Lane Bryant Ad.....	37
Figure 26 - Tess Holiday on Instagram	39
Figure 27 - Tess Holiday post on Instagram.....	40
Figure 28 - Aerie “Real” campaign	43
Figure 29 - Victoria’s Secret Catalogue from 1980-1981	46
Figure 30 - Victoria’s Secret catalogue from the 1980s	48
Figure 31 - Victoria’s Secret Ad from the 1990s	48
Figure 32 - Victoria’s Secret Ad from the 1990s	49

Figure 33 - “The Perfect Body”	50
Figure 34 - Victoria’s Secret Ad from 2012.....	51
Figure 35 - “A Body for Every Body”	52
Figure 36 - “VS Collective”	53
Figure 37 - Models in VS “The Tour ‘23”	54
Figure 38 - Victoria’s Secret Revenue.....	55

List of Abbreviations

BBW - *Big Beautiful Woman* magazine

CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility

DEI - Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

LGBTQ+ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, plus (others)

NAAFA - National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance

UK – United Kingdom

UNIDO – United Nations Industrial Development Organization

US – United States

VS – Victoria's Secret

WHO – World Health Organisation

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a notable shift in media and entertainment towards greater inclusivity and diversity. This is partially due to the rise of social trends such as “woke” and accountability culture, and the #MeToo and body positivity movements (Willingham, 2019; Alfonseca, 2023). These cultural phenomena, fuelled by social media, aimed to address long-term issues related to gender, race, sexual orientation, and body image. They advocate for wider representation and inclusivity across various industries.

Population composition also plays an important role in this new demand for representation, in a global world. For example, the United States’ demographics are changing and becoming more racially diverse, with minorities growing significantly in the last decades. Between 2010 and 2022, the Hispanic/Latino group grew 2,7%, while the white (non-Hispanic) group dropped 4,9% (USA facts, 2022). This translates into a more diverse audience, who look to see themselves represented in the content they consume. Companies such as Netflix increasingly look to cater to today’s diverse consumer, whose viewing choices are influenced by the cultural trends surrounding them. From 2018 to 2019, 52% of Netflix films and series had women in leading roles; in 2020, people of colour accounted for 40% of lead roles in films (World Economic Forum, 2021, p. 8).

A report by the World Economic Forum (2021) presents the interconnection between content, audience, and creative diversity. Content diversity (characters and actors) can drive audience diversity: research shows that marginalised groups’ representation on screen is correlated to this group’s attendance rate. On another note, “content can shape what regular viewers choose to watch and activate new audiences.” Creative diversity can lead to content diversity: of 37 female-directed films released between January 2017 and May 2019, 31 featured a female lead or co-lead (World Economic Forum, 2021, p. 7-8).

Woke culture and body positivity have brought awareness to underrepresented communities, pushing industries to reflect the diversity of modern society (Viglia et al., 2023). This has also directly influenced the fashion industry, historically perceived as exclusive and strict in its beauty standards. This dissertation will focus specifically on the body positivity movement, which acknowledges the importance of catering to different body shapes and abilities. Brands are catching on to this newfound responsibility of reflecting the diversity of today’s consumers, as exemplified by the larger offering of

clothing sizes and the growing inclusion of plus-size models in marketing campaigns (Willingham, 2019; Okwodu, 2019).

But is body positivity just a passing, superficial trend or a larger cultural shift? The social media movement has faced criticism for being surface-level, but it has also been praised for influencing style and beauty trends, that challenged longstanding body image norms and standards that have excluded many individuals. Even brands that were historically associated with narrow beauty ideals – like the subject of this case study – succumbed to the public’s criticism and made drastic changes to their values and aesthetics. This change reflects the changing business environment, where companies are increasingly expected to not only deliver value to shareholders, but to also align their operations with the social and ethical trends of their customer base.

This dissertation explores the connection between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), brand identity, and social trends, with a particular focus on how these dynamics influence a company's market position and strategic decisions. Lingerie brand Victoria’s Secret, which has recently struggled with the pressures of modern consumer expectations, underwent a rebranding as a response to these new societal trends, and the consumer expectations that went along with them. To provide the necessary background for the case study, this dissertation is divided into three chapters:

Chapter I sets the foundation by exploring the fundamental concepts of CSR and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI). It demonstrates how these concepts have evolved and how their relevance in the contemporary business landscape has increased. Based on Philip Kotler and Nancy Lee’s (2011) book *Corporate Social Responsibility: doing the Most Good for your company and your cause*, this chapter delves into the types of corporate social initiatives, providing examples for how each one was implemented. Corporate social marketing specifically serves as the framework for the case study of Victoria’s Secret rebranding.

The second chapter explores the origins and meaning of the term "plus-size", tracing its evolution within the broader cultural and historical context. It also addresses the rise of fat acceptance, which sets the foundation for the body positivity movement. This exploration lays the ground for understanding the complex relationship between society’s shifting perceptions of body image and the greater demand for size inclusivity in the fashion industry.

Chapter III provides the company background of Victoria's Secret, from its rise to popularity in the 1990s to its subsequent struggles in the 2010s. It examines how the brand's initial success was built on a specific image that resonated with consumers during the 1990s and early 2000s but eventually became outdated as societal attitudes towards body image changed, and body positivity emerged. The case study itself focuses on the brand's rebranding efforts, assessing its long-term viability and the strategies employed within the scope of corporate social marketing.

Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on the role of CSR in shaping brand identity, and the importance of adaptability and authenticity in the face of ever-changing consumer expectations, especially when a brand's history comes into conflict with contemporary values.

CHAPTER I – THE CONCEPT OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The following chapter will delve into the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility and provide examples of the initiatives taken under its scope. The focus will be placed on corporate social marketing, given that it is connected to the topic of this dissertation dealing with plus-size campaigns. To further understand the importance of this management concept today, the trends in consumer behaviour, and the framework of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion will also be explored.

1.1. What is Corporate Social Responsibility?

Sustainability, equity, and balanced development are among the biggest challenges faced by today's society. The business sector is an increasingly influential force when it comes to respecting natural systems and international norms that uphold fundamental environmental and social values – it is in their best interest to contribute to solving social issues (Hohnen, 2007, p. 7).

Howard R. Bowen brings forward one of the first approaches to the term Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in his book *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman* published in 1953. Bowen would define the social responsibilities of the businessperson as following lines of action that would help fulfil the objectives and values of our society (Bowen, 2013, p. 6). This concept would evolve through the decades, accommodating to its status as a management tool. Thus, UNIDO – United Nations Industrial Development Organisation – refers to CSR as a “management concept where companies integrate social and environmental concerns into their business operations and interactions with their stakeholders”. This definition is widely accepted when doing a quick search for this term, but UNIDO emphasises the distinction between CSR and charity initiatives: the latter can serve to enhance the reputation of a company, and can be incorporated into a CSR strategy, while CSR itself is a strategy that goes beyond direct financial assistance (UNIDO, 2023).

Other authors also point to CSR as an effort to improve community well-being, through responsible business practices and contributions of corporate resources. Phillip Kotler & Nancy Lee purposefully emphasising the voluntary character of adopting these practices, drawing the line between expected good practices (within the law and ethical nature) and going the extra mile (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 3).

Patrick Murphy (1978) argues that the evolution of CSR can be classified in four eras. Before the 1950s, companies donated to charities, therefore, this was a period known

as the “philanthropic” era. For example, during the 1940 and 1950s, giving was mostly prompted through requests by charitable organisations, which were sometimes “subject to executive whim” (Murphy, 1978). From 1953–67, in the “awareness” period, businesses grew more aware of their responsibility and involvement in the community. Similar to the 1950s, efforts of CSR still revolved mostly around philanthropy, however, CSR was starting to be addressed by scholars, in an attempt to formalize its meaning (Murphy, 1978).

The “awareness” era would evolve into the “issue” era, from 1968–73, when companies started to take a stance on social and environmental issues. As evidenced by Archie B. Carroll and Matthias S. Fifka (2015), this consciousness emerged during the post-World War II period, particularly reaching its peak during the 1960s, through moments like the civil rights, women's rights, and consumer rights movements, as well as environmental activism (Idowu et al., 2015, p. 6-19). Lastly, the “responsiveness” era started in 1974 and is still ongoing. During this period, corporations started to make changes to their structure and organisation, to accommodate CSR (Murphy, 1978). The 1980s were a period when more issues were embraced by CSR, like for example, the deterioration of urban life, questionable practices of multinational corporations, and employee discrimination, health, and safety. Furthermore, scholars were also focusing on finding links between CSR and profitability. In the early 2000s, there was a shift from theoretical discussions on CSR to empirical research. This empirical research would connect CSR to variables such as family-friendly policies, diversity characteristics, and employer attractiveness. For example, Kristin B. Backhaus, Brett A. Stone, and Karl Heiner (2002) studied the correlation between corporate social performance – an extension of the concept of CSR that focuses on the results of its implementation (Backhaus et al., 2002, p. 293) – and employer attractiveness. They concluded that job seekers value when firms have a good image and play an active role in fields such as environment, community relations and diversity (Backhaus et al., 2002, p. 293-299). During this period, interest in CSR “best practices” also grew, outlined in a book by Philip Kotler and Nancy Lee – whose work serves as the main reference for the following subchapter (apud Carroll, 2008, p. 24-26).

Fifka (2015) emphasises that contemporary businesses should go beyond profit-making and legal compliance - ethics and philanthropy are integral to meeting socially responsible expectations for organisations aiming to sustain themselves in a competitive,

ever evolving, global marketplace (Idowu et al., 2015, p. 18-19). Society, business, and politics are interdependent, highlighting that governments, especially in impoverished countries, cannot single-handedly address significant issues. In this sense, societies increasingly look to companies to actively contribute to resolving such challenges, due to their widespread influence. Effective regulation is crucial, however, not all problems can be resolved at a national level. Global issues such as climate change, pollution, resource scarcity, and income inequality require transnational solutions. A study conducted by marketing firm Edelman (2018) found that across 8 markets (Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, the UK and the US), 46% of those enquired believed that companies could provide better solutions to address a country's problems than the government; and 53% believed that brands do more to solve social issues than the government (Edelman, 2018, p. 14).

In this context, CSR emerges as a management concept that provides competitive advantages to companies, by aligning initiatives with the core business strategy, consequently enabling the development of differentiation strategies to attract new customers and enter new markets (Idowu et al, 2015, p. 18-19).

1.2. Corporate Social Initiatives

Authors Kotler & Lee (2011) bring forward the concept of corporate social initiatives, to describe significant endeavours undertaken by corporations to fulfil their commitment to CSR. These initiatives often focus on causes such as community health, education, employment, environmental conservation, community and economic development and basic human needs and desires (for example, hunger or discrimination) (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 3).

Corporate support for these initiatives may assume various forms, including cash contributions (these can come directly from the company or through a foundation created for this purpose), grants, paid advertising, publicity, promotional sponsorships, technical expertise, donations of products or services, employee volunteers, and access to distribution channels (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 3).

Kotler & Lee (2011, p. 22-24) identify six major types of corporate social initiatives, as described in the following paragraphs:

- Cause Promotions

- Cause-Related Marketing
- Corporate Social Marketing
- Corporate Philanthropy
- Community Volunteering
- Socially Responsible Business Practices

Through **cause promotions**, companies can give money, in-kind contributions, or other resources to increase awareness about a specific social cause or to fuel fundraising, involvement, and volunteer recruitment. The major distinguishing element of this type of initiative is its emphasis on promotion, by using persuasive communication techniques, that build awareness within the target audience (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 79). Adidas' "Move For The Planet" global initiative can be interpreted as an example of this type of initiative. From the 1st to the 12th of June 2023, the company urged people to be physically active by pledging to donate €1 to Common Goal for every 10 minutes of activity logged across 34 sports in the Adidas Running app. Common Goal directed these contributions to projects focused on developing sustainability through sport – in particular, renewing football pitches using recycled materials. In this case, the company employed its influence over the global sporting community (the users of the app), as well as urging employees to also participate (Adidas, 2023). An action like this can translate into increased brand preference and contribute to the strengthening of the brand position (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 79).

On another note, **cause-related marketing** is a commitment to donate a percentage of the revenue of the sales of one or more products to a specific cause. Companies can directly donate their profits to charitable projects or partner up with non-profit organizations. To illustrate, clothing brand PaliRoots directly donates a portion of their sales to humanitarian aid campaigns for Palestine (PaliRoots, 2024). Starbucks, on the other hand, works with (RED) every year to create a line of products, where a portion of the proceeds goes to the Global Fund to fight AIDS (Starbucks Corporation, 2018). As expressed by Kotler & Lee (2011, p. 84), larger companies often turn to causes related to major health issues, giving them more visibility. The benefits of this initiative are mostly linked to marketing – attracting new customers and appealing to a niche market are examples of what can be achieved. For example, the Palestinian cause has gained a lot of

traction on social media in the last year – PaliRoots has the possibility to attract a new customer base that are looking to support the cause (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 84).

Within the context of **corporate social marketing**, businesses actively pursue the implementation of a behavioural change campaign, intended to improve community well-being. Behaviour change is the key concept here – it is the goal behind the strategic marketing approach, carefully curated by the company. The choice of issue to focus on is often connected to its core business, to have an easier pull on the target audiences, as well as considering how the business can benefit from the behavioural change (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 114). Dove, a personal care brand, has been involved in various campaigns promoting self-esteem and body positivity, making it their self-proclaimed mission to bring a positive experience of beauty accessible to all women.

But Dove care goes beyond our products. We care about all women, female-identifying and non-binary people. We want to redefine beauty standards and help everyone experience beauty and body image positively. We care about the future generation: helping girls build positive self-esteem through the Dove Self-Esteem Project, ensuring the world they enter is removed of toxic beauty standards (Unilever, n.d. a).

The above statement stresses a clear intent to change people’s perspectives when it comes to beauty standards. The brand launched the Dove Self-Esteem Project (DSEP) in 2004, aiming to educate young people about self-esteem through activities in schools, workshops for youth groups, and online resources for parents, such as The Confidence Kits (Unilever, n.d. a). The target audience is a major factor to take into account, in the case of Dove, “female-identifying and non-binary people” are identified as the ones who will benefit more from this change in behaviour – change in perception of beauty and women empowerment. It is crucial that the audience can be easily reached by the available distribution channels (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 114).

As another example, Unilever's detergent brand, Persil, launched the "Dirt is Good" (DIG) campaign to encourage outdoor play for children in 2004. The campaign emphasises the importance of spending time outside for child development – the campaign pertains to achieve this goal by providing online resources for parents and teachers as well as collaborating with Outdoor Classroom Day (Unilever, n.d.b).

Partnering up with organisations or public sector agencies adds credibility to the campaign in question. One of the advantages from adopting corporate social marketing is perfectly evidenced by this campaign: DIG's good-natured mission arises feelings and an overall positive impression within its target audience – parents and teachers – that manifests itself in increasing brand positioning and preference (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 119-121). By 2022, Unilever's DIG sales surpassed the €4 billion mark, becoming the leading contributor to the brand's overall sales growth, and it keeps gaining momentum (Unilever, 2023).

However, some concerns are associated with this type of initiative. In present day context, there are numerous examples of brands that have faced backlash over a social message that is perceived as unauthentic (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 143). In 2019, Gillette faced criticism, and even boycotts, after releasing an advertisement as a part of their new campaign, "The Best Men Can Be". This advertisement depicted men pushing back against other men's bad behaviour to tackle negative masculine stereotypes. The unlikely pairing and message delivery seemed to alienate a portion of its male-centric audience, who perceived it as a disingenuous way to make a profit – Gillette launched this campaign during the height of the #MeToo movement. As pointed out by Alan Abitbol (2019), Gillette's approach was particularly unsuccessful due to its aggressiveness, which does not fare well with audiences:

But people don't like to be told what to do; for this same reason, ads rarely insist outright that people buy their product. Instead, they'll show how a product can be a part of people's lives, and might even improve them (...) But viewers might be questioning the company's motives because the ad doesn't directly tie the cause to what the brand is known for: shaving and grooming (Abitbol, 2019).

Another example of a campaign gone wrong may be found in Bud Light's partnership with transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney. This collaboration sparked controversy among the American company's predominantly male, conservative target audience, resulting in widespread criticism across social media as well as eliciting responses from Republican politicians and public figures. Comparatively, the situation sparked a more drastic response than Gillette, likely due to the odd fit between a beer brand and transgender activism – it highlights that even though there has been a rise in

LGBTQ representation, it does not mean that the brand is the adequate vehicle to convey this message (Caruso, 2023).

According to Kotler & Lee (2011, p. 144-145), **corporate philanthropy** is the most traditional type of corporate social initiative, however, throughout the decades, companies have been pressured to go further, and instead incorporate philanthropic activities to their business goals and strategies. Corporate philanthropy is a direct contribution, in the form of cash grants or donations (of resources or goods), to a cause or charity. This effort involves, more often than not, the choice of a cause that reflects a priority mission for the corporation and that can be tied to their objectives. The authors also distinguish this type of initiative from cause promotion, since the latter has a larger emphasis on communication and awareness of a particular issue (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 145). The Coca-Cola Company supports a variety of causes through the Coca-Cola Foundation. In 2021, the corporation reported that it would grant \$35 million to nonprofit organisations fighting for the prevention of COVID-19, and environmental and community organisations based in the United States and Canada (The Coca-Cola Company, 2021).

Through **community volunteering**, a business is supporting and encouraging employees, retail partners, and franchise members to partake in local community volunteering initiatives. Johnson & Johnson exemplifies this commitment to social responsibility through its Volunteer Support Program. The program establishes partnerships with nonprofit organisations and coordinates volunteer days for Johnson & Johnson entities, groups, and individuals. Giving back is part of the company's culture, fostered by ethos like the "Talent for Good" initiative, launched in 2017 and the Matching Gifts Program (Johnson & Johnson Services Inc, n.d.). Multiple benefits can stem from this type of corporate social initiative: companies can build a strong relationship with the community they are inserted in and employees are also encouraged to participate in something they care about. Furthermore, the care a company demonstrates for local community well-being also influences employee satisfaction and motivation. Perhaps more evident is the fact that generous actions by employees generate overall positive feelings among the cause partners and those in need, which leads to developing a strong reputation for the company (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 178-188).

Lastly, **socially responsible business practices** emerge as the sixth corporate social initiative. A company pledges to adopt business practices that go beyond established legislation, to promote community well-being and safeguard the environment. Over the last decade, these practices have become largely expected from corporations as a result of regulation, customer complaints and pressure from interest groups. According to Kotler & Lee (2011, p. 208), there is an increasing amount of evidence that shows that socially responsible business practices can lead to an increase in revenues and customer loyalty. In other words, the bar for transparency and morality has been raised, and consumers now expect to be able to be informed about these practices (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 208-209).

Initiatives within socially responsible practices can range from internal procedures to disclosing the materials used for a company's products. Cosmetics brand Lush has an environmental policy that describes in detail the materials used for their packaging, their product ingredients and recycled content. The excerpt below is an example of how the brand showcases its transparency on its website (Lush Retail Ltd, n.d.).

Pots and bottles are made with 100% post-consumer recycled (PCR) plastic, saving about 65 tons of Carbon Dioxide and 90 tonnes of virgin plastic, or 800 barrels of oil, each year. Carrier bags are made with 100% post-consumer recycled paper, saving 100 tonnes of Carbon Dioxide each year. Gifts are lovingly wrapped with recycled paper and protected using Eco pops; which are made from potato starch and 100% biodegradable. (Lush Retail Ltd, n.d.).

Besides this, transparency with data collection and retention and use of consumer information has become a larger concern. Several corporations look to gain customer trust by making their privacy policies clear. Such is the case of Facebook, which recently announced it will be removing its facial recognition technology, and consequently delete all data gathered by it (Pesenti, 2021).

Although corporate social initiatives can be easily set apart, they share common advantages with varying degrees of strength. For instance, cause promotions, cause-related marketing and corporate social marketing are particularly useful when it comes to increasing awareness for the supported cause and complementing the marketing objectives of the corporation; corporate social marketing is the go-to strategy to induce a

positive behavioural change, as mentioned before; meanwhile, all types of CSR initiatives can build a strong relationship with the local community and a strong reputation, as well as retaining a motivated range of employees (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 242-244).

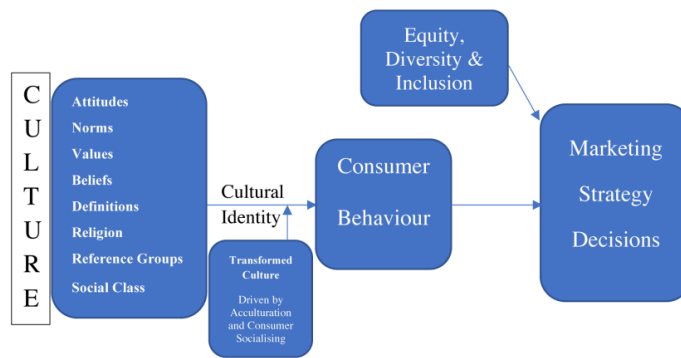
Similarly, social initiatives are also associated with concerns and challenges. Companies need to navigate and minimize the potential outcome of these concerns. As previously addressed when discussing corporate social marketing, a brand can face scepticism and criticism from consumers when choosing to embrace a cause. Audiences will look for actions that back up the promises made, if the campaign or product in question will make a real impact or if the action taken aligns with the overall message of the company (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 221-222). Additionally, cause promotions, cause-related marketing and corporate social marketing will intrinsically deal with the concern of significant promotional expenses (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 258-259).

1.3. CSR and consumer behaviour

From Abdullah P. Opute, Caroline Jawad and Xi Jiang's (2022, p. 62-68) perspectives, psychological research points to consumers' purchasing choices being conditioned by their cultural surroundings, forming their cultural identity. For the purposes of this subsection, the term culture refers to habits, behaviours, beliefs, norms, and values shared by a certain group of people, developed during early childhood, and influenced by family and society (Opute et al., 2022, p. 63); cultural identity stems from an individual's interpretation of the aforementioned characteristics, after coming into contact with social groups and other external factors (Opute et al., 2022, p. 65). In the contemporary marketplace, the process of forming a cultural identity is sped up by digital resources, which allow consumers to interact with each other, simultaneously enabling them to form judgements on a specific brand or product. Both processes lead the individual to create a set of values and expectations related to consumption (Opute et al., 2022, p. 69). Opute et al. (2022, p. 69) propose the below diagram, to better comprehend how consumer behaviour and the concept of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion - which I will explore in the following subchapter – shape the marketing decisions undertaken by a business.

Figure 1

Marketing Strategy Decisions

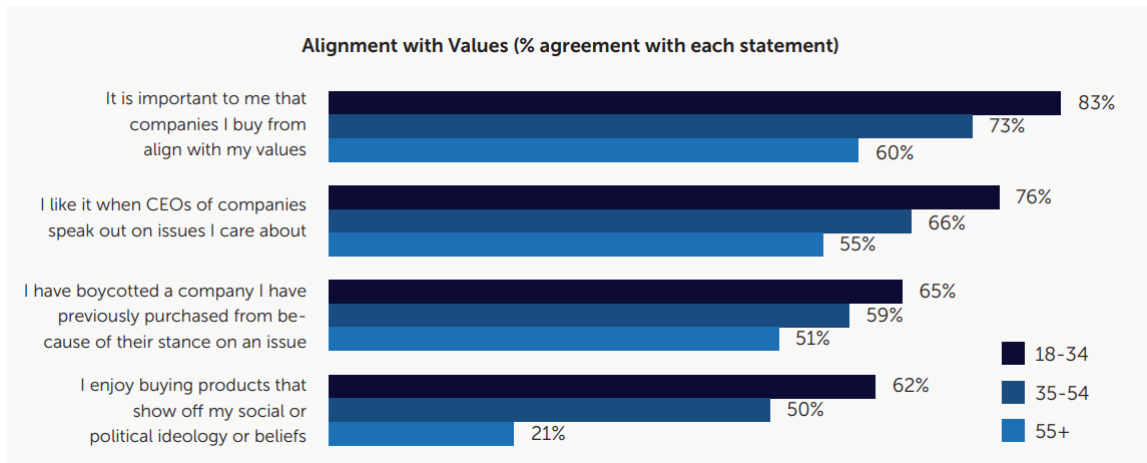


Source: Opute et al. (2022, p. 69)

Younger generations – Millennials (born between 1981 and 1995) and Generation Z (born between 1995 and the late 2000s) (Chaney et al., 2017, p. 182) – have grown up amidst the digital revolution and globalisation. This has inadvertently shaped them to be more socially conscious, ethical, connected and more comfortable with questioning their surroundings than older generations (Chatzopoulou & Kiewiet, 2020, p. 524; Opute et al, 2022, p. 61; Chaney et al., 2017, p. 182). Therefore, their purchasing choices are increasingly more based on the values a company holds. Millennials and Gen Z have set higher standards for the businesses they buy from: in fact, the Consumer Culture Report by 5W Public Relations (2020, p. 12-13) shows that 83% of millennials and Gen Z believe it is important for the businesses they buy from to align with their values. Additionally, 65% of millennials and Gen Z have boycotted a company due to their stance on a social or political issue. Most recently, Starbucks has been on the receiving end of a consumer boycott and protests (Figure 3), amid alleged support of Israel after the conflict breakout on October 7, 2023. The movement gained a lot of traction on social media, assuming a global proportion and even prompting Starbucks CEO Laxman Narasimhan to speak out on the matter (Meyersohn, 2023). This action also demonstrates how companies are aware of their audience’s expectations: as shown in Figure 2 below, 76% of consumers value when CEOs directly speak out on an issue (5W Public Relations, 2020, p. 12).

Figure 2

Consumers and their beliefs



Source: 5W Public Relations (2020, p. 12)

Figure 3

Protests outside a New York City Starbucks



Source: CNN (2023)

According to a McKinsey & Company (2020) article, consumer behaviour has been changing rapidly, and companies need to anticipate these changes. The article highlights that after the COVID-19 pandemic, consumer spending patterns and purchasing behaviours have shifted: for example, consumers tend to look for smaller businesses, closer to home, and reduce on-the-go consumption; and preference for trusted and sustainable brands (Fabius et al., 2020). From this situation, it is possible to derive that global crises and issues – such as social justice, climate change, or health crises - are a factor that influences behavioural change in audiences (Alldredge & Grimmelt, 2021).

Pamela Brown, Tiffany Burns, Tyler Harris, Charlotte Lucas, and Israe Zizaoui (2022) further explain this type of customer as the “inclusive customer” – they tend to be younger, female, racially diverse and with varying degrees of income levels.

In the years ahead, millions more consumers will likely join the ranks of inclusive consumers, rewarding businesses that pursue inclusion and avoiding those that don't. Businesses that meet the needs of inclusive consumers will likely do more than raise revenues and loyalty—they may also earn dividends in other areas of the business, including attracting and retaining talent (Brown et al., 2022).

Overall, due to the shift in consumer behaviour in the last decades – to a more pondered buying process, where company values matter – the management concept of CSR becomes essential for companies to develop strategies to keep up with the ever-evolving inclusive customer. In the following subchapter, I will explore the concept of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and how it can be connected to CSR.

1.4. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

As argued by Opute et al. (2022), multiculturalism is a core aspect of today's market landscape and, in that sense, inclusive marketing strategies are in demand. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) go hand in hand with CSR, translating itself into initiatives, strategies, and policies, often adopted by educational institutions, government agencies and businesses (Opute et al., 2022, p. 69-70). Companies look to embody these values and are better able to meet the needs of both their employees and customer base (McKinsey & Company, 2022). As addressed in the previous subchapter, customer behaviour is influenced by their relationship to their cultural group, therefore, it is increasingly more important for companies to appeal to a broader audience, in order to accommodate individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Opute et al., 2022, p. 62).

AACSB International (2021) defines diversity as culturally ingrained identities, constructed, and conditioned by historical and cultural background, legal frameworks, socioeconomic context, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, age and physical ability. Equity refers to treating all individuals fairly, by providing access to the same opportunities, regardless of their different backgrounds. Inclusion can be interpreted as the environment created for individuals of distinct backgrounds to participate (AACSB, 2021, p. 3).

On one hand, DEI is being implemented globally in the workforce – ensuring the company has a diverse employee population – and workplace – through an employee network, and trainings on unconscious bias, cultural diversity, and other resources. As outlined before, the advantages of incorporating DEI into a company’s strategy are similar to those associated with CSR: collaborative, motivated employees, and strong company values (McKinsey & Company, 2022; Brodzik et al., 2021).

On the other hand, DEI is spilling over into marketing efforts. An effective way to build trust with a customer base in our day and age is to reflect on their ways of living and preferences through marketing and advertising (Brodzik et al., 2021). By following the principle of DEI in their advertising, brands can successfully attract a broader demographic of clients: “If consumers see themselves in the brand, they will engage” (Forbes Communications Council, 2022). To exemplify, Mattel has purposefully changed its image over the last few years by adopting a more inclusive approach. From 2011 to 2015 Barbie sales declined by a third - the brand was being criticised for promoting an unrealistic “body type” for women. As pointed out by Rebecca Hains, (2021), Mattel executives believed the brand was not appealing to millennial mothers, who tend to be more oriented to social justice and feminist values (Hains, 2021, p. 271-272). As a response, Mattel chose to shift its products and marketing into a more realistic approach, by making their dolls more diverse in appearance. In 2015, the first dolls of this new wave were introduced with four body types and seven skin tones, which later evolved into the Barbie Fashionistas line (Figure 4) (Smith, 2021). During the period after this change in product, the company’s Barbie brand sales increased, as seen in Figure 5. Even though it is difficult to discern just how much the introduction of the Barbie Fashionista Line contributed to this increase in sales, leadership at Mattel credits this upward shift to some changes introduced via this doll line (Hains, 2021, p. 277).

To further demonstrate the brand’s commitment to DEI, in 2023, it announced its first-ever doll representing a person with Down syndrome. As proclaimed by the company, the goal of these inclusive dolls is to “counter social stigma through play” (Kavilanz, 2023). This can be interpreted as an attempt to change the perspective and behaviour around people with Down Syndrome, as well as other disabilities, through corporate social marketing. The company also reinforced the credibility of their commitment by working together with the US National Down Syndrome Society (NDSS) to carefully develop all the characteristics of the doll (Dempsey, 2023).

Figure 4

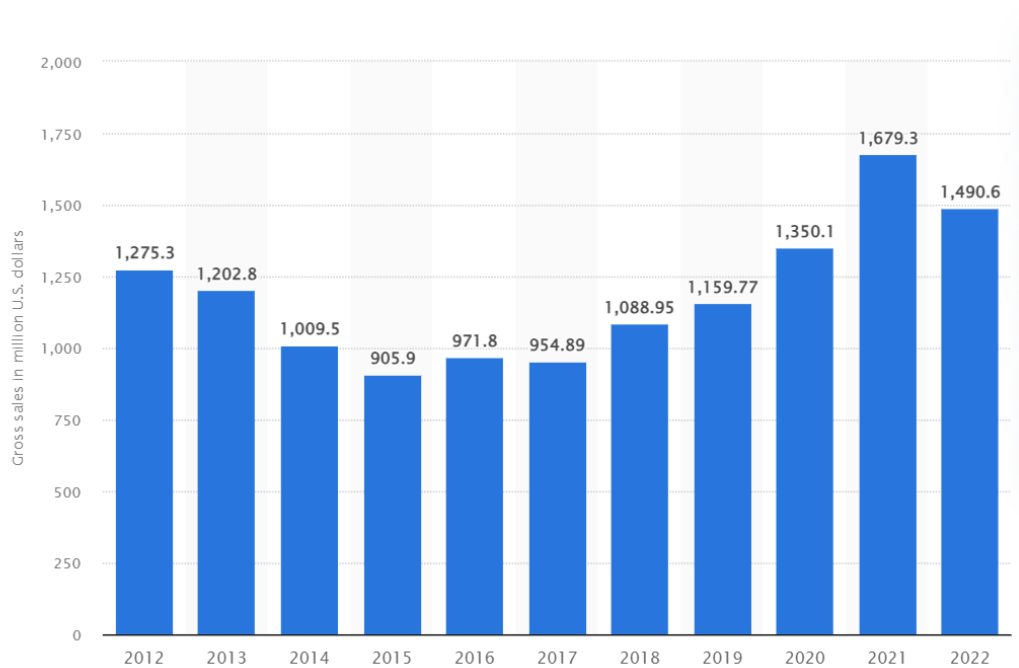
Barbie Fashionistas line



Source: CNN (2019)

Figure 5

Gross sales of Mattel's Barbie brand worldwide from 2012 to 2022



Source: Tighe (2023)

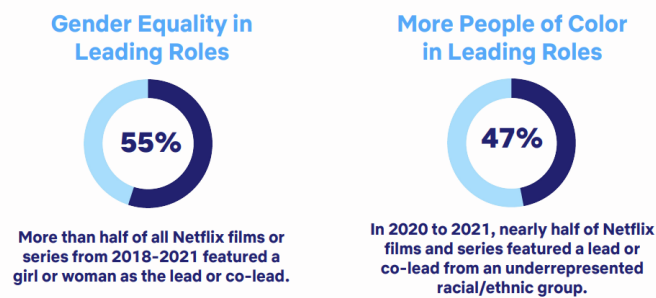
From another perspective, the streaming service Netflix has also prioritized diversity and inclusion in its business strategy. The company follows a transnational expansion in an attempt to appeal to a broader audience. Their content employs widespread values such as liberalism, democracy, and diversity – which encompass ideals shared among most cultures, and individuals – to resonate with a global audience (Asmar et al., 2022, p. 26). In this sense, Netflix uses diversity to reach into different markets and

distinguish itself from the competition: the service emphasises the representation of marginalised ethnic communities, gender diversity, sexual identity, and linguistic diversity, off and on-screen (Asmar et al., 2022, p. 29-30). Namely, the company commits to increasing representation in the workplace and has also created the Netflix Fund for Creative Equity, an organisation that pledges to give a voice to underrepresented talent (Myers, 2023).

On screen, Netflix has focused on featuring diverse characters in their films and series in recent years. As shown in Figure 6, an excerpt of the company’s Environmental Social Governance Report from 2022, from 2018 to 2021, more than half of the content on the streaming service featured a female lead or co-lead character.

Figure 6

Representation in Leading Roles



Source: Netflix (2023, p. 44)

But were these efforts effective? The endeavour into diversity and inclusion did not come without criticism and controversy. In 2022, Netflix laid off employees, most of which were “social media teams, writers and editors who aimed to elevate diverse content and talent”. As one laid-off employee points out, the hiring and subsequent letting go of contractors who worked within this scope comes off as “performative” (Lee & Hernandez, 2022). Furthermore, their commitment to diversity is also at risk of being perceived as non-genuine by the marginalised communities in question. As an example, in 2021, Netflix launched a comedy special with comedian Dave Chappelle, which included what some considered offensive remarks towards the LGBTQ+ community (Ward, 2021).

In an internal emailed response to the controversy, Netflix's co-CEO Ted Sarandos defended "The Closer," citing the company's commitment to creative freedom. He wrote, "We do not believe this content is harmful to the transgender

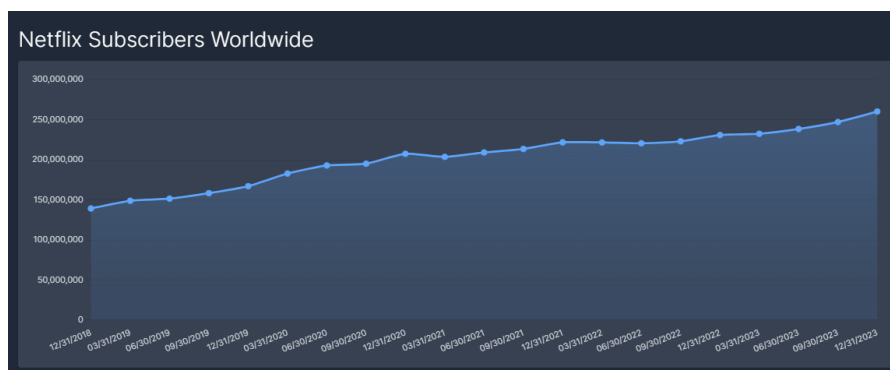
community." Dozens of Netflix employees and a handful of top talent, including "Queer Eye's" Jonathan Van Ness, staged a virtual and in-person walkout in response in October. The controversy is once again in the news as Netflix announced Monday Chappelle will headline the company's comedy festival next year (Ward, 2021).

Since Netflix positions themselves as an example for representation, the statements of co-CEO Ted Sarandos seemed to be at odds with the company's overall message and might make the public question its authenticity. On the other hand, the inclusion of minority characters can also be perceived as "forced" diversity. In other words, the shows and films produced are made to appeal to superficial characteristics of a person – like their skin colour or sexuality – instead of their experiences and personality. In an opinion piece, Samuel Sey (2021) expresses his concerns towards the diversity in TV shows today and recounts his experience growing up with shows "didn't attempt to appeal to my skin colour—they appealed to my humanity" (Sey, 2021).

Regardless of the criticism, numbers show that the transnational approach has guaranteed a steady rise in subscribers and the lead in the streaming service market. As of the last quarter of 2023, the streaming service has a total of 260.28 million subscribers worldwide, of which about 31% are from the US and Canada; 34% are from Europe, Africa, and the Middle East; 18% from Latin America and 17% from the Asia-Pacific region (Durrani, 2024).

Figure 7

Netflix subscribers worldwide



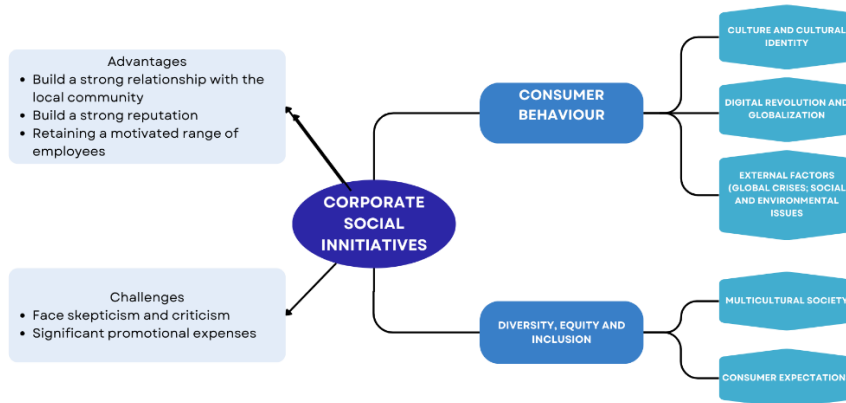
Source: FlixPatrol (n.d.)

To wrap up the ideas presented in this chapter, CSR is a complex management concept that gained increasing importance since the 1950s. In recent years, it has become

a part of corporation’s business strategies due to the changes in the consumer market and the increasing importance of DEI. These changes in consumer behaviour were brought about by globalization, digital growth, and global crises – such as the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 8

Diagram of Chapter Conclusions



Source: the author

Consumers are becoming more diverse and aware of the world that surrounds them, resulting in an increasing concern for contributing to solving global issues. As a large part of consumers believe companies have a role to play in making a real difference, expectations are high. If companies want to go beyond and earn the trust of this new “inclusive customer” and build a good reputation, they must consider incorporating CSR initiatives into their core business strategy. As highlighted in subchapter 1.2, an effective initiative matches the company’s overall message and lessens the potential concerns associated.

CHAPTER II – PLUS-SIZE, FAT STIGMA, AND BODY POSITIVITY

The following chapter explores the evolution of the plus-size fashion industry and the body positivity movement over the past century. It traces the origins of the term "plus-size" and how perceptions of fatness have formed in Western society. It also examines the commercialisation of the body positivity movement in recent years, as well as the debates and criticisms it sparked.

2.1. The meaning and origin of plus-size

During the last decade, the terms “plus-size” and “body positivity” have become part of mainstream language when it comes to fashion, social media, and online shopping. The sector has witnessed an expansion of over 6% annually (Peters, 2021); the global plus-size market was valued at approximately 288 billion US dollars in 2023; as of 2023, there were over 12,000 plus-size clothing stores in the US (Smith, 2023). In addition, major retailers like ASOS, H&M and Nike now offer a range of larger sizes; online retailers that have gained a lot of popularity via social media in the mid to late 2010s, like SHEIN and Fashion Nova, have capitalised on the growing demand for plus-size fashion (Vara, 2022). As illustrated in Figure 9, there was a notable spike in the search for the term plus-size on Google, from 2015 onwards.

Figure 9

Interest on the term “plus-size”



Source: Google Trends (n.d.)

There has been a shift in the fashion and retail industries towards inclusion and diversity. This transformation is particularly exemplified by the emergence of plus-size models, such as Ashley Graham, Paloma Elsesser and Precious Lee, signifying a commitment to embracing size diversity. To put matters into perspective, 67% of women

in the United States are considered plus-size – with such a significant demographic, brands are catching on to this market opportunity (Rogers, 2023).

Nevertheless, deciding on what plus-size means and encompasses is a challenging task, due to its interpretive nature. The Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defines the term as referring to something that is designed for someone larger than average or to describe a person, considered to be larger than average. Lauren Downing Peters (2015, p. 46), highlights the inherent difficulty in providing a universal definition, seeing as perceptions of plus-size and fatness have evolved and are also influenced by one's personal and social experiences. For example, Marilyn Monroe was considered a US size 14, which is significantly smaller than a size 14 today (Rogers, 2023).

Brands resort to different sizing systems to describe their clothing. For instance, in the US, some retailers consider anything above a size 14 a plus-size, while others start at a 16/18 (Sizecharter, n.d.); in the UK, retailer Evans offers sizes from 16 to 32 (Figure 11), equivalent to a 44 to 60 in other European countries (Evans, n.d); some brands also turn to “X sizes” – ranging from 1X to 4X (Figure 12) – which are often used for items with a more relaxed and stretchy fit (Sizecharter, n.d.). Measurements also vary from brand to brand: most brands determine their size charts, with measurements based on their hired models (Rogers, 2023). As exemplified by the plus-size charts in Figures 12 and 13, a 1X ranges from 111-120 cm at the hips for Adidas and 123-126 cm for Forever 21.

Figure 10

Lane Bryant size chart

Size:	Equivalent Size	Bust	Natural Waist	Hip
10/12	M/L	38-40	32-34	40.5-42.5
14/16	1X	42-44	36-38	44.5-46.5
18/20	2x	46-48	40-42	48.5-50.5
22/24	3x	50-52	44-46	52.5-54.5
26/28	4x	54-56	48-50	56.5-58.5
30/32	5x	58-60	52-54	60.5-62.5
34/36	6x	62-64	56-58	64.5-66.5
38/40	7x	66-68	60-62	68.5-70.5

Source: Lane Bryant (n.d.)

Figure 11

Evans Size chart

VIEW IN: **CM** INCHES

UK Size	16	18	20	22	24	26	28	30	32
Chest	102	107	113	119	125	131	137	143	149
Waist	87	92	98	104	110	116	122	128	134
Hips	111	116	122	128	134	140	146	152	158

Source: Evans (n.d.)

Figure 12

Adidas size chart

Product label	1X (20-22)	2X (24-26)	3X (28-30)	4X (32-34)
Bust	104 - 113cm	114 - 123cm	124 - 133cm	134 - 143cm
Waist	89 - 98cm	99 - 108cm	109 - 118cm	119 - 128cm
Hip	111 - 120cm	121 - 130cm	131 - 140cm	141 - 150cm

Source: Adidas (n.d.)

Figure 13

Forever 21 size chart

IN	CM	INTERNATIONAL		
Size	Bust	Waist	Hips	Thigh
0X	107 - 109	92 - 94	118 - 121	69
1X	112 - 114	97 - 99	123 - 126	71
2X	117 - 120	102 - 104	128 - 131	74
3X	122 - 127	107 - 112	133 - 138	77
4X	130 - 135	114 - 119	141 - 146	81

Source: Forever 21 (n.d.)

The emergence of plus-size fashion can be traced back to the early 20th century, with Lane Bryant being recognised as one of the pioneering brands in this space and credited for popularizing the term itself. An advertisement from 1922 features the title “Misses Plus Sizes”, as seen in Figure 14 (Lubitz, 2016; Yazolino, 2021).

Figure 14

"Misses Plus Sizes"



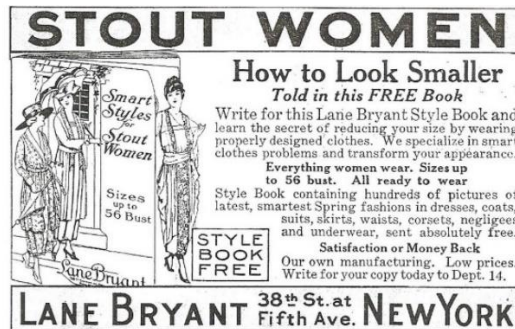
Lane Bryant advertisement from 1922 (Lubitz, 2016)

In the 1920s, the brand launched a collection specifically designed for "stout-figured" women – as seen in Figure 15 and Figure 16, Lane Bryant advertisements from

1923. The term “stout” referred to women with a larger bust, back and hip curves, and with measurements ranging from a 39-51 inch bust (99,06 to 129,54 cm). Bryant was able to design her garments successfully by measuring 4,500 of her customers (Keist, 2017, p. 100-102).

Figure 15

Early 1920s Lane Bryant advertisement



Source: Keist (2018)

Figure 16

Early 1920s Lane Bryant advertisement



Source: Keist, 2018

Simultaneously, in the UK, Evans Outsize played a crucial role in bringing plus-size clothing to the high street during the 1930s. Founded by Jack Green, Evans Outsize was a mass retailer that focused on creating clothing for plus-size women (figure 17). The retailer has since dropped the “Outsize” (Quirk, 2021; Yazolino, 2021).

Figure 17

Evans Outsize advertisement

Evans
THE OUTSIZE SHOP

**The FAMOUS HOUSE FOR
OUTSIZES**

HIPS 44-60

The Modern Shops that cater
ONLY for the Fuller Figure!

London

MARBLE ARCH, 325 Oxford Street, W.1
Bayswater: 107 Westbourne Grove
Clapham Common: 10 The Pavement
Lewisham: 53 High Street
Soho: Newington: 195 High Street

Branches throughout United Kingdom at:

Manchester: 414 Oldham Street	Cardiff: 46 Queen Street
London: 21 23 Upper Street	Southampton: 74 East Street
Brighton: 41 London Road	Reading: 44 46 Market Place
Spenshi: 45 Westgate Street	Gloucester: 341 Southgate Street
Cardiff: 46 Queen Street	

* If you cannot visit us, write for your free copy of our
LATEST OUTSIZE CATALOGUE of W.K. OF 8 205 FASHIONS & UNDERWEAR
to **EVANS - The Outsize Shop (Dept. E.M.), 325 Oxford Street, London W.1**

Source: Insyze (2018)

The need for separate departments and unique boutiques grew parallel to the development of stoutwear. Business owners started to formulate judgements on plus-size customers: with some acknowledging the financial benefits of including a plus-size section in their stores. Shoppers would be able to choose from a line catered to their body type, resulting in an increase in sales and an overall desire to come back (Keist, 2017, p. 106). Furthermore, they also recognised the necessity of having a separate department for larger sizes, as well as plus-size saleswomen. This would make it easier for the shopper to find their size and get advice from someone who would be more sympathetic to their needs (Keist, 2017, p. 106).

Before the 1920s and 1930s, the terms “stout” and “plus-size” mostly referred to an “aesthetic challenge” (Peters, n.d). The emphasis was placed on a slender figure – as exemplified by Figures 18, 19 and 20, taken from a Lane Bryant Style Book – with the ideal silhouette of the 1920s being “tubular, flat and boyish” (Keist & Marcketti, 2013, p. 266). Publications and advertisements urged women to fit into this ideal, even if their bodies would not cooperate. Plus-size women were also encouraged to seek more plain, discrete designs, and to not follow popular fashions, as advised by Vogue (Fangman et al., 2004, p. 231).

Figure 18

“Slendering Fashions”



Lane Bryant Style Book from 1934 (Internet Archive, 1934, p. 1)

Figure 19

Footnote on Lane Bryant Style Book from the 1930s

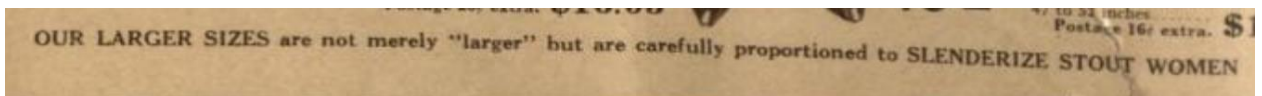
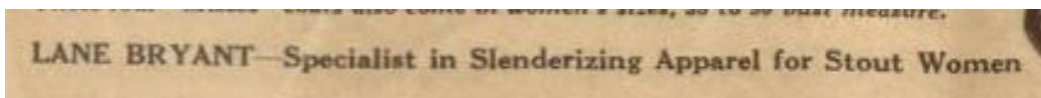


Figure 20

Footnote on Lane Bryant Style Book from the 1930s



Source: Internet Archive (1934, p. 14-15)

The troubled history of plus-size fashion has fueled the divide around the use of the term. Some scholars perceive it as a problematic term, due to the negative discourses

built around it throughout the years. While some consumers see it as a reminder that wearing larger sizes is unfashionable, or something to be ashamed of (Peters, 2015, p. 48-49; Quirk, 2021).

The idealized woman of fashion—with her girlish frame and size-zero waist—is not the plus-size woman, and as such, the plus-size woman has found herself underrepresented on the runways, in magazines, and in the women’s clothing department (Peters, 2014, p. 49).

The following section delves into the perception of fatness in the Western world in the early 20th Century, in an attempt to understand the marginalisation of fat bodies, and as a direct consequence, of plus-size fashion.

2.2. The perception of fatness in the Western world in the early and mid-20th Century

As previously addressed, the body ideal for women in the 1920s was slender, to fit the “flapper“ style. The popularity of the thin ideal is believed to have been inflicted by the media, illustrations, and women’s gradual shift from the domestic to the public sphere. To be more specific, women were attending high school and college, competing for job opportunities, and were therefore expected to present themselves in a “put-together, well-groomed, and stylish manner”. These expectations clashed with the limited offer of clothing available for larger women (Fangman et al., 2004, p. 219).

On the other hand, the perception of fatness during this era was also largely influenced by political discourses. During World War II, US citizens were urged to ration food supplies, and consequently, larger-sized individuals were seen as “hoarders” or even considered unpatriotic for using resources that could have gone to the war effort (Keist & Marcketti, 2013, p. 261). In Britain, excess weight was seen as a threat to national security, especially for men. Physical fitness was crucial to maintaining the military power of the nation and making the individual a productive member of society (Atayurt, 2010, p. 45).

Obesity was starting to be perceived as a health issue, contributing to the rise in popularity of bathroom scales and diet books (Keist & Marcketti, 2013, p. 261). The first diet book, *Diet and Health, With Key to the Calories*, written by Lulu Hunt Peters in 1918, was a bestseller in the US in 1924 and 1925. In the book, Peters suggested that limiting food intake was a patriotic and humane act (apud Fangman et al., 2004, p. 220).

Additionally, the developments in the medical industry urged doctors to start tracking patient's weight and warning them about the concerns of being overweight (Fangman et al., 2004, p. 220). From the post-war period onwards, the weight loss process also became more individualised – not just a nationalistic achievement – to improve one's life. Fitness and slimness were largely associated with “energy, drive, and vitality”. (Atayurt, 2010, p. 46). As seen in Figures 21, 22 and 23, LIFE magazine published an article titled “The Plague of Overweight” in 1954, focusing on the weight loss journey of Dorothy Bradley, an overweight woman who had struggled with her body image and aspired to become a nurse. The article ends on a somewhat “happy ending”, with Bradley losing the excess weight, while also securing a nursing job at a hospital (LIFE, 1954).

Figure 21

LIFE magazine article from 1954



Dorothy Bradley visits a nutritionist, photo from a LIFE magazine article from 1954 (LIFE, 1954)

With the hostile beliefs perpetuated by early and mid-20th Century Western society, it comes as no surprise that fat women were not only overlooked and marginalised by the fashion industry but by society as well. However, as the 1960s and 1970s grew near, the Fat Liberation Movement would develop amidst other social movements. This movement challenged the negative attitudes towards fatness and sought to redefine cultural perceptions of body image (Rensenbrink, 2010, p. 213-214).

2.3. The Fat Liberation Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s

The Fat Liberation Movement surfaced within the context of the Women's Liberation Movement in the early 1970s. Fat feminists were able to substantiate their beliefs based on feminist literature, shared in feminist circles, like women's bookstores, centers, health clinics and specifically, journals, newsletters, and newspapers. Most notably, Fat Underground was founded in Los Angeles, after Judy Freespirit and Vivian Mayer, who met at a Women's Center in 1972. The group recognised fatphobia as part of patriarchal oppression, seeing as it dictated that women conform to certain beauty standards to maintain their social status. For Fat Underground, these concerns with body image also distracted women from the fight against oppression (Rensenbrink, 2010, p. 217-218).

There was evil genius at work in the pervasiveness of fatphobia. Not just fat women but all women were consumed by obsessions with food, body size, and dieting. These obsessions distracted women from recognizing the realities of their oppression, thereby preventing social activism and social change (Rensenbrink, 2010, p. 218).

Their criticism was mainly directed at the weight-loss industry, popular media, and medical professionals, in particular, the derogatory images of fat women in the media, as well as the "false promises" made by the weight-loss industry (Freespirit & Aldebaran, 1973).

Despite their efforts, Fat Underground faced resistance from the broader feminist movement, which was largely silent on fat issues during the early 1970s. It was not until the late 1970s that the movement started expanding nationally. Fat Underground leaflets were widely shared in women's communities and bookstores across the country (Rensenbrink, 2010, p. 219). It is also worth noting that NAAFA (previously National Association to Aid Fat Americans, today known as the National Association to Advance

Fat Acceptance), a non-profit, all-volunteer, fat rights organisation, was founded in 1969. Some fat feminists, however, did not find their messaging radical or feminist enough (Rensenbrink, 2010, p. 217; NAAFA, n.d.).

During this period, the San Francisco Bay Area also emerged as a center for fat feminist politics, mostly focused on self-acceptance and a critique of fatphobic culture. The feminist scene in San Francisco was diverse: women's support, service and activist groups tied the community together and allowed women to build their lives around these networks (Rensenbrink, 2010, p. 218). These institutions provided the backdrop for fat activists to develop their activities and identity politics. At first, fat women's support groups focused on their personal journey, but Fat Underground influenced them to become more political. Some of their activism translated into creating a "positive and celebratory culture and community for fat women" that would work towards a more accepting society. On the other hand, they also focused on easing the daily struggles – for example, women hosted clothing swaps, created, and sold their own clothing; they created swimming classes for fat women, so they could feel more comfortable in swimwear. Fat cultural and political organisations were a significant outcome during this period, such as the Fat Lip Readers' Theater (1981) and the Life in the Fat Lane (1982), a political action group that paved the way to more formal organising (Rensenbrink, 2010, p. 221-222).

While feminism remained the core of fat women's politics, some within the community felt that the broader feminist movement was not entirely receptive to fat liberation. Many feminists recognised the oppression faced by fat women, and its connection to sexism, but health was also one of the major concerns of the broader feminist movement at the time – the Women's Health Movement was an important aspect of feminist activism in the 1970s. Fat feminists sought to challenge the perception that fat bodies were inherently unhealthy or a result of a lack of self-control. They built their arguments on the insights shared by the feminist and Gay Rights movement to show that fat bodies were natural, and society would have to accept them (Rensenbrink, 2010, p. 223-224). Feminist health activists fought against the medical community's tendency to see women's bodies as inherently flawed compared to the male norm; gay and lesbian activists defended the idea that their identities were natural and valid – both focused on rejecting the notion of "biological deviance, degeneracy, and immorality". Similarly, fat feminists argued that their bodies were also natural, and by default, healthy. From their

perspective, being fat was not a choice, and any illness associated with fat bodies must have other causes (Rensenbrink, 2010, p. 223-224).

This argument was, however, difficult to sustain. Some fat feminists argued that fat bodies were shaped by their cultural factors and surroundings – in particular, the medical mistreatment of fat patients and the extreme diets women were subjected to, which often led to long-term weight gain. Furthermore, the connection of fatness with illnesses like diabetes was becoming increasingly complicated to deny: the assumption that excess weight led individuals to be more vulnerable to diabetes challenged the argument built by fat activists, by acknowledging there was “something ‘wrong’ with being fat” (Rensenbrink, 2010, p. 226-227). As a result, the fat lesbian community in San Francisco started to embrace self-care, as well as responsible health care; the activists from *Life in the Fat Lane* and *Fat Lip* advocated for an active lifestyle (Rensenbrink, 2010, p. 228).

Even though fat feminists failed to prove that fat is a “biologically determined identity”, they raised an important point: not all women were meant to be thin. Fat was not a moral failing, but a complex result of various factors. Their actions also contributed to women’s ability to think more critically of assumptions about fatness, and to find ways to accept and feel more comfortable in their bodies (Rensenbrink, 2010, p. 228); the movement would set the stage for the emergence of body positivity in the 2010s, which will be explored further in section 2.5.

2.4. The late 1970s and 1980s: a shift in the plus-size industry

In the 1980s, the plus-size fashion industry underwent a significant transformation. As addressed in the previous sections of this chapter, plus-size clothing was often unfashionable, lacking the style and design elements found in mainstream fashion. Nonetheless, during this decade, major retailers began carrying plus-size fashion lines that were “well-cut, colourful, embellished, and rarely floral.” (Peters, 2016, p. 182). This change was partially driven by the rise of designer-led and high-end plus-size lines, such as *Givenchy en Plus*, *Emanuel by Emanuel* Ungaro and *Marina Rinaldi* by Max Mara. These lines were the product of licensing agreements, as European fashion houses sought to diversify their brands (Peters, 2016, p. 183; Max Mara Fashion Group, n.d.).

Plus-size fashion visibility on the fashion press also played a key role in this shift. Notably, *Vogue* magazine ran advertorials in a “Fashion Plus” section on their March and

Similarly, Carole Shaw believed that fat women could wield their purchasing power to influence the fashion industry, so she created the magazine *Big Beautiful Woman* (BBW), showcasing both plus-size advertisements and political discourse. Still, it should be noted that BBW can also be seen as an example of an endeavour that illustrates the challenges and contradictions inherent to fat activism in the 1980s. The publication first started out sharing revolutionary messaging, as an outlet to air out the frustrations with the fashion industry, but as it expanded into a licensed brand of plus-size apparel and shapewear, the publication's radical fat liberation message became increasingly influenced by the very systems it criticized (Peters, 2022, p. 6-8). As Peters (2022) points out:

Indeed, the fact that Shaw sold bras and foundations under the BBW label underscores this point given that these products are essentially designed to reshape the female body in the image of the prevailing beauty ideal (Peters, 2022, p. 8).

For example, the incorporation of body-shaping products into the brand suggests a contradiction between the magazine's initial goal of challenging normative beauty standards and the reality of commercialisation and commodification. In this context, commodification refers to the process of transforming the initial fat feminist message into a more commercial, depoliticised approach (Peters, 2022, p. 8; Levesque, 2015). The decade also saw the founding of the first model agency specialised in plus-size and petite models - Big Beauties/Little Women - by Mary Duffy, a feminist fashion expert and plus-size model herself (Pauley, 1984).

Ultimately, the late 1970s and 1980s increased the visibility of fat bodies in fashion publications and clothing lines and laid the groundwork for the evolution of the plus-size industry in the decades to come. The story of *Big Beautiful Woman* highlights the relevant and ongoing struggle to reconcile the empowerment and representation of fat women with consumer culture and commodification – this issue is especially relevant today, with the development of the body positivity movement on social media platforms.

2.5. The Body Positivity Movement of the 2010s

Body positivity is believed to be a convergence of different movements – namely the fat acceptance movements from the 1960s. It has developed over the last decade, and is in part, a response to the promotion of unrealistic and unattainable beauty standards in

mainstream media. For the purposes of this dissertation, the term *body positivity* refers to the movement that aims to challenge societal beauty standards and promotes acceptance of all body shapes, sizes, skin tones, gender, and physical abilities (Cohen et al, 2020, p. 2-3; Palumbo, 2022; West, 2022).

The movement first became popular on social media platforms like Instagram, where body-positive content typically features diverse body types that are often underrepresented in mainstream media. These posts also feature aspects of the body that do not fit into the societal beauty standard, like stretch marks and cellulite (Cohen et al., 2020, p. 2-3; Peters, 2022, p. 1). In fact, as of 2024, the hashtag #bodypositivity counts with almost 13 million posts on Instagram. Tess Holiday, a US size 22 plus-size model, is often quoted as the face of this online movement (Salam, 2017). Her posts feature a variety of outfits, personal stories – related to body image and mental health – and content advocating for social issues, as seen in Figures 26 and 27.

Figure 26

Tess Holiday on Instagram



Tess Holiday’s Instagram feed (Holiday, n.d.)

Figure 27

Tess Holiday post on Instagram



Source: Holiday, 2023

Despite the positive messaging, the movement has faced its fair share of criticism. As Cohen et al. (2020, p. 3) suggest, the movement might create pressure for people to "love" their bodies, while maintaining the ongoing focus on physical appearance. Several body-positive social media posts feature individuals in revealing clothing or objectifying content (focusing on a specific body part, or sexually suggestive poses). This contributes to the argument that the movement may simply be shifting, rather than dismantling, the societal preoccupation with the physical body (Cohen et al., 2020, p. 3-4).

Moreover, critics view body positivity as a commercial self-esteem movement. Peters (2022), argues that it has emerged as a form of "commodity activism," where misrepresented individuals and their communities have used consumer culture to challenge societal beauty standards and power dynamics. As the fashion industry has increasingly embraced plus-size consumers, some scholars believe that this has contributed to creating a watered-down, corporate version of fat acceptance, which in turn, excludes some of the individuals who helped create it in the first place (Peters, 2022, p.11; Griffin et al., 2022; Kneeland, 2023).

As observed by Griffin et al. (2022), some individuals have used the body positivity tag on social media to promote body transformations, supplement sales, and other products and services aimed at helping people achieve a certain physique. This suggests the movement has been shaped by capitalist interests seeking to profit from

consumers' desires for self-improvement and empowerment. Additionally, most of the content is shared by “lean, white, cis-gendered individuals”, which points to another issue: the movement does not seem to align with its goals of inclusivity and representation of all body shapes, sizes, and skin tones, and might not be contributing to disrupting the beauty ideal (Griffin et al., 2022).

At the same time, personal stories help emphasise the subjectivity and broadness of what is body positive. A notable example is Cassey Ho, an American fitness entrepreneur with a popular YouTube channel. Ho has been vocal about the toxicity of body shaming and actively promotes body acceptance. In 2015, she addressed the rising number of negative comments about her body by creating a YouTube video that quickly went viral. In the video titled "The Perfect Body", Ho is subjected to a barrage of critical comments about her appearance on social media (Ho, 2015). She then "photoshops" her body, but when she looks in the mirror, the surreal outcome unsettles her, highlighting the conflict between cultural expectations and her own sense of acceptance. The video received coverage from mainstream media and was widely praised (Lee, 2015). However, in 2019, Ho became the subject of controversy after announcing her 90-day fitness journey. The blog post received mixed reactions, with some supporting her goal, while others claimed that it undermined her body positive message. “What is body negative about getting healthier, increasing your confidence, feeling happier, and getting stronger? Hmm. Nothing.” wrote the fitness instructor (Casey Ho, as cited in Daly, 2019).

Given Ho’s promotion of body acceptance, some followers perceived this as inauthentic, or contradictory. Some also associated it with diet culture – which body positivity actively challenges. From a scholarly perspective, Tracy Tylka and Nichole Wood-Barcalow (2015) highlight that body acceptance is “expressing love for and comfort with the body, even if not completely satisfied with all aspects of the body” (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015, p. 5). Body positivity also translates into prioritising self-care behaviours, “such as intuitive eating and physical activity” (Cohen et al, 2020, p. 3). Through this lens, Casey Ho's actions can be considered body-positive, as they align with the principles of self-acceptance and self-care.

Weight loss is a sensitive topic when it comes to body positivity. Critics claim that the movement ignores some of the health concerns associated with excess weight and obesity, like high blood pressure, heart problems, and diabetes, among other diseases (West, 2022; WHO, 2024). A Daily Mail article profiles four social media influencers

who promoted the idea that obesity is “healthy”, only to die at a young age. Brittany Sauer – one of the featured content creators – had even expressed in her last video concerns towards her body, and how she hoped it wouldn’t be “too late to save herself” (Macfarlane, 2023).

In this framework, the concept of **body neutrality** has emerged. Whereas body positivity emphasizes appearance, body neutrality focuses on the body’s function. It aims to promote a neutral and achievable attitude towards one’s body, acknowledging one’s strong feelings about it, whether positive or negative (Horn, 2021; Clark, 2022; West, 2022; Kneeland, 2023). To illustrate, Lizzo, often considered a “poster girl” for the body positivity movement, told the New York Times in 2024, "I'm not going to lie and say I love my body every day (...) The bottom line is, the way you feel about your body changes every single day" (Ferla, 2024).

Regardless of the criticism, it is undeniable the movement has given marginalised groups the ability to exercise their consumer power and demand representation, which can be seen by some as a form of resistance, even through the lens of a capitalist system (Peters, 2022, p. 11). Plus-size model Ashley Graham has campaigned for body positivity for many years and is one of the faces most usually associated with it. Her work in the fashion industry has challenged the idea that only thin bodies can be featured on the runway or fashion magazine covers – in 2016, she became the first plus-size woman to appear on the cover of Sports Illustrated; in the same year, she also walked Paris Fashion Week (Okwodu, 2016). While being an advocate for body positivity, Graham is open about the importance of self-care and exercising, often sharing her workout routines on social media (Evans, 2023).

Jasmine Fardouly, Amy Slater, Jade Parnell and Phillippa C. Diedrichs (2022) find that social media is a powerful tool to disseminate impactful messages and connect with like-minded people. This can lead to establishing a supportive community, where some women might feel inspired to partake in their activism regarding body image and weight stigma – signing petitions, attending protests or workshops, for example (Fardouly et al., 2022, p. 137-138).

The movement has also prompted companies to make more responsible decisions when it comes to their marketing efforts. In 2014, lingerie brand Aerie responded to backlash over their use of Photoshop by creating a campaign called “Real”, featuring

unretouched photos of models (Figure 28). The brand has since made it an integral part of its strategy (Beer, 2014).

Figure 28

Aerie “Real” campaign



Source. Beer (2014)

These efforts tie in with the corporate social initiatives explored in Chapter I. By offering plus-sizes and featuring plus-size women in their advertisements, brands are challenging strict beauty standards and fostering a culture of inclusivity – in other words, through corporate social marketing, companies could use body-positive messages to evoke a behavioural change in society. As previously mentioned, Dove caught on to this opportunity and was one of the first brands to show diverse body types in their marketing – regardless of commercial success, these advertisements contributed to broader conversations around self-acceptance and body image.

People have grown disillusioned with overly photoshopped, seemingly “perfect” models and the unrealistic beauty standards this type of marketing imprints on society, especially the negative effects these ideals have on children. Now “real bodies” are portrayed everywhere from children’s dolls to major fashion houses (Kleyman, 2023).

“Real Beauty” predates the popularity of the body positivity movement, which shows the company has had a real commitment to fostering a positive attitude towards one’s body image. However, this is not the case for other brands, which made a sudden shift towards inclusivity when the movement took off on social media. It subsequently

raises concerns about the authenticity of their efforts. With fat women becoming a larger demographic, it is the perfect timing for companies to expand their market. Plus-size consumers often face limited choices, and inclusive brands can build loyalty by offering them diverse products. Despite the potential to broaden their reach, some companies may only engage in these practices superficially, using body positivity as a marketing tool without a genuine commitment to change. When the campaign does not align with the overall message and reputation of the brand, the effort for inclusivity might be perceived as disingenuous.

One such case is that of US lingerie brand Victoria's Secret (VS), which tried a rebrand in 2018 amid claims that it wasn't inclusive enough. Despite the praise it received online, this rebrand did not translate into an increase in sales revenue (Absalom, 2023). In contrast, Savage X Fenty by Rihanna came onto the lingerie scene during the height of the body positivity movement and was met with success when incorporating diverse designs and models: in 2020 its sales grew 200%, despite the pandemic (Brooke, 2021). Chapter III will delve deeper into the case of VS, exploring the company's background and reputation, to understand what might be behind the underperformance of its plus-size messaging.

In conclusion, the shifting perceptions of fatness in Western society over the 20th Century have led to an overall negative stereotype of fat women, contributing to their marginalisation and limited representation in the fashion industry. The emergence of the Fat Liberation Movement in the 1960s and 1970s challenged these attitudes, laying the ground for increased visibility and commercialisation of the plus-size industry in the following decades. The rise of the body positivity movement in the 2010s took inspiration from fat liberation, but it gained greater momentum due to social media. It can be argued that the movement has amplified the need for greater inclusivity and representation, however, it has also faced criticism for its commodification of bodies and its lack of intersectionality. In response, concepts like body neutrality emerged as a less controversial, more realistic alternative.

CHAPTER III – THE CASE OF VICTORIA’S SECRET REBRAND

As explored in Chapter I, corporate social responsibility is a company's commitment to do social good by using ethical practices. For retailers, including larger sizes, it aligns with CSR goals by fostering a culture of inclusion and acceptance. It is important, however, to point out that these efforts can be perceived as opportunistic or disingenuous, due to the increase in popularity of the body positivity movement, and the increase in overweight and obesity rates, (WHO, 2024). The following paragraphs will analyse the case of Victoria's Secret, a lingerie retailer which incorporated plus-sizes into its rebranding attempt during the heyday of body positivity. The objective of this analysis is to understand the reasons that might be behind the brand's shortcomings.

3.1. Company Background

Victoria's Secret was founded in 1977 by Roy Raymond, who was inspired to create a lingerie store where men would feel comfortable shopping. Raymond was motivated by his discomfort when trying to purchase lingerie for his wife at a department store. The first Victoria's Secret stores were designed to have a private atmosphere inspired by Victorian England – “dark fabrics, moody lighting, velvet textures”, as seen in Figure 29 (Grabinski, 2022).

Figure 29

Victoria's Secret Catalogue from 1980-1981



Source: Thingery Previews Postviews & Music (2009)

Raymond sold the company in 1982 to Les Wexner, owner of Limited Brands - now Bath & Body Works - which at the time also included other retailers like Abercrombie and Fitch and Lane Bryant. Under new ownership, the brand would undergo some changes in product and marketing, and by the early 1990s, it had amassed great popularity (Zhang, 2020; O'Brien, 2021). Wexner focused on studying European lingerie

boutiques, which approached these garments as an everyday essential, as well as filling the market gap between luxury and mainstream brands – creating “an attainable fantasy of glamour and luxury” (Barr, 2013).

The first annual fashion show happened in 1995, introducing the "Angels" – models who walked down the runway in lingerie and large wings. It became a pop-culture sensation, managing to attract millions of viewers since its first broadcast. Over the years, it featured supermodels like Heidi Klum, Tyra Banks, and Gisele Bündchen, until it last aired, in 2019 (Grabinski, 2022).

3.2. Brand image

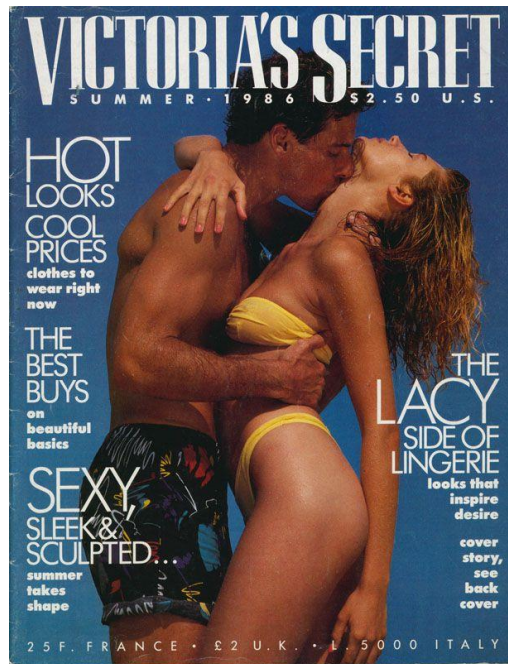
The brand first catered to men looking for a comfortable shopping experience – the stores were “detailed” and “inviting” for male customers. This however changed when Les Wexner took over the company: female customers became the primary target, resulting in a reinvention of the catalogue and diversification of its products (Smith, 2002, p. 39). As Smith (2002) expresses:

An image change was what was needed—new colours, patterns and styles that promised sexiness packaged in a tasteful, glamorous way and with the snob appeal of European luxury. Catalogues listed VS's headquarters as London, even though it was really Ohio (Smith, 2002, p. 40).

For the following decades, Victoria's Secret would seal its reputation as an influential brand in the lingerie industry, known for its glamorous and highly sexualised image. The poses and looks of the models were often bold, mysterious, pensive, or secretive (Figure 31)– maintaining their association with Victorian sexuality (Smith, 2002, p. 42; Workman, 1996, p. 62). During the 1980s, catalogues even featured male models to attract more female customers (Figure 30).

Figure 30

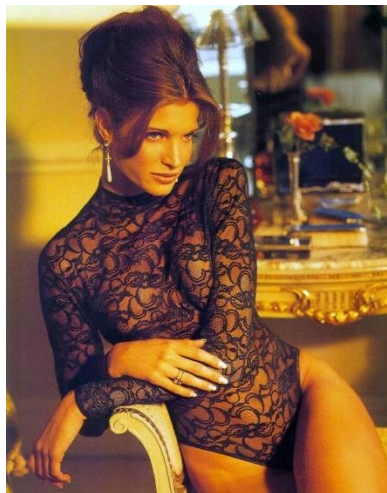
Victoria's Secret catalogue from the 1980s



Source: Lewis (2016)

Figure 31

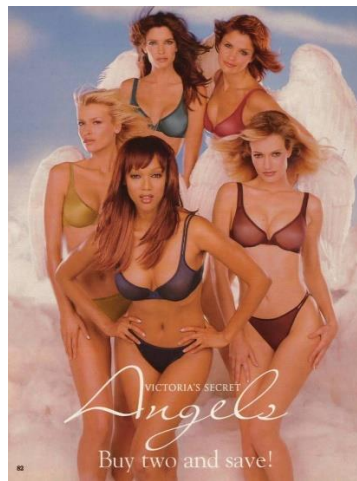
Victoria's Secret Ad from the 1990s



Source: Lewis (2016)

Figure 32

Victoria's Secret Ad from the 1990s

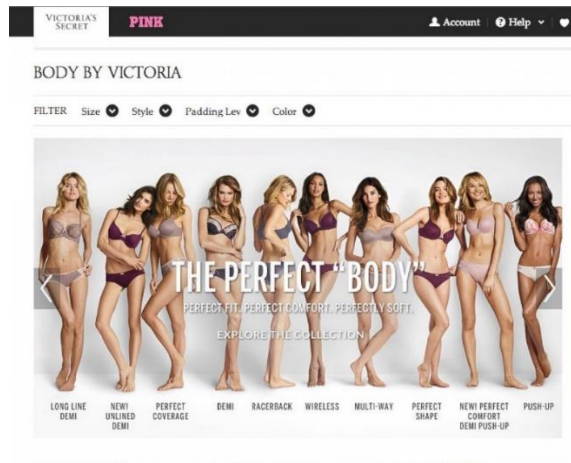


Source: Lewis (2016)

The brand's identity was built around the "Victoria's Secret Angels", supermodels who epitomised a specific standard of beauty—tall, slim, and conventionally attractive, as seen in Figure 32 (Grabinski, 2022; Zinchenko, 2022). As argued by Smith (2002), VS advertisements catered to the “male gaze” – the representation of women as visual objects, for the pleasure of a male viewer. This strategy conveys to women that their self-image is determined by what a man finds attractive. In the early 2000s, “A Body for Your Body” was used as the brand's sales pitch; in 2014, a campaign was launched with the tagline “Perfect Body” (Figure 33). These slogans suggested VS aimed to sell a specific standard of beauty, which can be “remodelled” into any woman’s figure (Smith, 2002, p. 41-42; Brown, 2014).

Figure 33

“The Perfect Body”



Source: Brown (2014)

CMO Ed Razek’s comments in a Vogue interview from 2018 reinforce how VS aimed to sell this specific image:

I think we address the way the market is shifting on a constant basis. If you’re asking if we’ve considered putting a transgender model in the show or looked at putting a plus-size model in the show, we have. We invented the plus-size model show in what was our sister division, Lane Bryant. Lane Bryant still sells plus-size lingerie, but it sells a specific range, just like every speciality retailer in the world sells a range of clothing. As do we. We market to who we sell to, and we don’t market to the whole world (Ed Razek, as cited in Phelps, 2018).

The brand was not meant to fit everyone: a fantasy vision of womanhood was at the core of its marketing. Wham asked about the annual fashion show, and the expectations from the “Instagram generation”, Razek emphasised:

So it’s like, why don’t you do 50? Why don’t you do 60? Why don’t you do 24? It’s like, why doesn’t your show do this? Shouldn’t you have transsexuals in the show? No. No, I don’t think we should. Well, why not? Because the show is a fantasy. It’s a 42-minute entertainment special (Ed Razek, as cited in Phelps, 2018).

These statements would have probably flown under the radar before the 2010s, but in the age of inclusivity, body acceptance, social media, and the #MeToo movement, they were negatively interpreted and sparked their fair share of controversy. This marketing strategy VS had been relying on for decades was now difficult to justify, and

the unattainable beauty standards showcased on their fashion shows and campaigns were increasingly scrutinised and outdated (Phelps, 2018; Grabinski, 2022). For example, in 2012, the brand was criticised for its obvious use of Photoshop in a picture of model Lais Ribeiro, as seen in Figure 34 (Torgerson, 2016).

Figure 34

Victoria's Secret Ad from 2012



Source: Torgerson (2016)

The previously mentioned rise of the “inclusive customer”, whose shopping choices are shaped by their social values, also contributed to the brand's drop in sales and popularity. The criticism towards the photoshopped images and the “Perfect Body” campaign in 2014 – featuring models that perfectly represented the VS standard of beauty – is an example of the first waves of trouble for the company. The backlash on social media even prompted VS to rename it “A Body for Every Body”, as seen in Figure 35 (Brown, 2014).

Figure 35

“A Body for Every Body”



Source: Brown (2014)

On the other hand, the company’s reputation was further tainted by then CEO Leslie Wexner’s ties to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, as well as workplace sexual harassment allegations (Zhang, 2020; Fry, 2022). These scandals were explored in a documentary launched in 2022, titled *Victoria's Secret: Angels and Demons*, which called even more negative attention to the company (Krentcil, 2023).

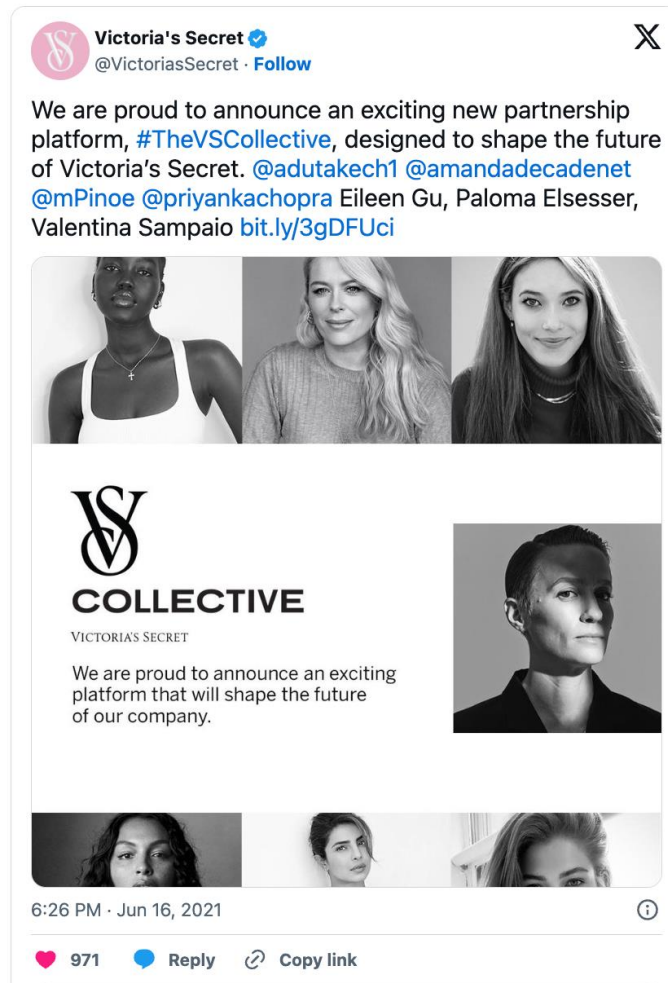
3.3. Victoria’s Secret rebrand

Victoria’s Secret has since attempted to rebrand itself to better align with these cultural shifts. Efforts have included expanding their range of sizes, featuring more diverse models in their campaigns, and changing its executive team, to include more women (Ell, 2022; Hawley, 2023).

The “VS Collective” (Figure 36) – a group of women with diverse backgrounds – was introduced in 2021. It included LGBTQ+ activist and football player Megan Rapinoe, actor Priyanka Chopra, plus-size model Paloma Elsesser, and trans model Valentina Sampaio (Fry, 2022; Hawley, 2023). In 2022, Pink (a VS sub-brand mainly targeted at teenagers and young women) introduced Remi Bader, a plus-size model, as their latest brand ambassador and “size consultant”; in the same year, the brand hired Sofía Jirau, a model with Down Syndrome as part of its Love Cloud collection (Ell, 2022).

Figure 36

“VS Collective”



VS announcing “VS Collective” on Twitter (Hawley, 2023)

The company also released in 2023 a film titled “The Tour ‘23”– part documentary, part fashion show – which was a drastic contrast to the previous fashion shows. The film focused on the creative process of artists and designers from around the world, based in Lagos, Bogotá, London, and Tokyo. These collections were then presented by a more diverse cast of models, as shown in Figure 37 (Palumbo, 2023).

Figure 37

Models in VS “The Tour ‘23”



Source: Palumbo (2023)

To further show their “commitment to welcoming and celebrating all women”, VS funded projects such as The Tour Impact Fund, destined to give women entrepreneurs and artists the tools and resources to succeed in the market and art industry. For instance, the Impact Fund’s partnerships included the Japan Institute for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship and the Africa Women Innovation and Entrepreneurship Forum (Ell, 2022; Palumbo, 2023; Victoria’s Secret & Co, 2023).

These changes fall under corporate social responsibility strategies – **corporate social marketing** in particular. Corporate social marketing focuses on inciting a behavioural change, that would benefit society. Implementing these strategies – like funding gender equality-related projects – helps create brand preference, build engagement, and increase community involvement and sales. However, one of the larger concerns often associated with this CSR initiative is the lack of authenticity, which is one of the criticisms commonly aimed at Victoria’s Secret’s rebrand (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 114 - 143).

3.4. The VS rebrand: a Lesson in Authenticity

Victoria's Secret rebrand attempted to keep up with the climate fostered by the #MeToo and body positivity era – although it came too late (Ellen, 2023). The new marketing strategy did not translate into an overall better performance in sales. As seen in Figure 38 below, the total revenue of the company decreased from 2021 to 2023, the

period when the effects of the rebrand would first be visible. Since 2020, sales have dropped around 1 billion (Hawley, 2023; Victoria’s Secret & Co, n.d..b).

Figure 38

Victoria’s Secret Revenue

	Year Ending Feb 2024 (Update)	Year Ending Jan 2023 (Update)	Year Ending Jan 2022 (Update)	Year Ending Jan 2021 (Update)
Net Sales	6,182.00	6,344.00	6,785.00	5,413.00
Revenue	6,182.00	6,344.00	6,785.00	5,413.00
Total Revenue	6,182.00	6,344.00	6,785.00	5,413.00

Source: Victoria’s Secret & Co. (n.d.b)

These shortcomings can be attributed to a variety of factors. Firstly, the changes were perceived as reactive, due to their lateness, rather than a genuine commitment to body positivity. Brands like Aerie and Savage X Fenty were already making strides in this field, long before VS. As pointed out by Hawley (2023), instead of evolving with the cultural trends over time, this rebrand was sudden and drastic, contributing to the dissonance surrounding it. Arguably, if the brand had made smaller changes over time, or added new, smaller elements to the core aesthetic, the customer base would have grown sustainably, instead of feeling alienated (Hawley, 2023).

Secondly, by the time Victoria’s Secret introduced the “VS Collective” in 2021, its competitors had already established market leadership. Aerie introduced "Aerie Real" in 2014 (as addressed in Chapter II, section 2.5); the founder of lingerie brand ThirdLove was inspired by VS’s flaws, so it prioritised fit and comfort, offering a wide range of sizes (Singh-Kurtz, 2018); and Savage X Fenty is credited with revolutionising the lingerie market, with its bold campaigns, fashion shows and early adoption of inclusive practices. For instance, it included a size range from XS to 3XL, since the beginning (Brooke, 2021; Yotka, 2022).

Thirdly, the drastic changes also jeopardised the brand identity. Victoria's Secret was known for its glamorous and provocative, feminine image, which pushed a specific, unattainable standard of beauty. The shift towards a more inclusive and less sexualised branding alienated some loyal customers. This was not an issue for Savage X Fenty or ThirdLove because body positivity and diversity were embedded in their brand ethos

(Chami, 2023). The following statement can be read in Savage X Fenty's "About Us" section:

She (Rihanna) aimed to create a line embracing all body types, shapes and sizes across the gender style spectrum. Fueled by Rihanna's vision and personal experiences, Savage X Fenty challenges traditions and celebrates fearlessness, confidence and inclusivity (...) Our goal is making sure people of all identities, shapes and skin tones feel empowered when they walk into a room (Savage X Fenty, n.d.).

As enhanced by Razek's comments in 2018, Victoria's Secret had built its identity around exclusivity. This is a common tactic used by the clothing industry to define a customer base and directly target its products to them. It helps build brand loyalty and brings repeat customers, who feel like they belong to a select group. Owning such items can also foster a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment (Alicyn, 2023). Julianna Zinchenko (2022) expresses in her opinion piece "VS made you feel like you could be this powerful, unstoppable, boss woman (...) I'd pass by silk robes and imagine in my head the type of woman who buys them (...) I was creating the woman I wanted to become? Maybe that was what Victoria was always supposed to be. The highest versions of ourselves." (Zinchenko, 2022). These comments highlight, once again, how VS had a following in the 1990s and 2000s, based on how it made women feel when they wore their products. It built a loyal customer base, that would not just buy the lingerie, but also into the fantasy. It can be argued that by making the brand for everyone, this sense of "feeling special" was taken away from the previous loyal customers.

On the one hand, Aya Chami (2023) argues that this practice of exclusivity does not inherently mean discriminating against other groups, based on race, sexuality, or gender. Others, on the other hand, see it as harmful, or a way to propel the idea that some groups do not deserve to be represented (Chami, 2023).

Such inclusive companies have realized continued success; they centred their brands around including all consumers, so their audience sticks around. Victoria's Secret, however, failed to cater to what their specific audience wanted, which attracted negative attention online. Straying away from their previous practices is starting to confuse and repel customers (Chami, 2023).

On a final note, marketers take note of the societal influences – economic, political, and others – and the environment created by the company, customers, and

competition before they try to sell anything to their audience (Grewal et al., 2020, p. 4); companies often look to implement a behavioural change when there is a growing trend (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 116). It is no surprise that Victoria's Secret tried to catch up with its competitors and the cultural climate. On the surface, the brand followed the corporate social marketing guidelines. It aligned its campaigns with the new marketing strategy by hiring a more diverse cast of models; it had management support after changing its executive board; and it also partnered with nonprofit and industry organisations (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 143).

Even so, the results of implementing this type of CSR initiative are influenced by a “natural connection to a corporation's core business” (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 116). For many years, VS cemented its exclusivity, turning to inclusivity just when it was convenient. Its narrow perception of sex appeal and the controversies that followed in the 2010s make the statement on its website “We strive to provide the best products to help women express their confidence, sexiness and power and use our platform to create connection and community while celebrating the extraordinary diversity of women’s experiences.” difficult to uphold, given its history (Victoria's Secret & Co, n.d.a). VS states that empowering women is one of their main goals. But as Barbara Ellen (2024) describes, it seems inauthentic to be “schooled” in inclusivity and feminism by a brand with connections with Epstein, and workplace sexual misconduct allegations, that will not be easily discarded in today’s accountability and #MeToo culture (Ellen, 2024).

At first glance, VS’s implementation of corporate social marketing seems unsuccessful – considering that it has not yet achieved the most significant positive outcomes of implementing this type of initiative, which is an increase in profitability and making a real social impact (Kotler & Lee, 2011, p. 143). Both outcomes are influenced by the aforementioned factors, but time is also important in this analysis. To draw a substantial conclusion on the success of the rebranding, one might have to look years into the future. As Kotler & Lee (2011) point out, corporate social marketing is a long-term effort, so its results are not visible overnight. If these changes are kept – which seems to be the case, judging by the following statement on their 2023 annual report – consumers will determine whether this commitment is just performative.

Our brand marketing and advertising efforts are focused on highlighting our products’ fashion, innovative design and quality while also accentuating our brands’ positioning in the broader market and changing landscape. We have

shifted the focus of our global message across platforms towards promoting inclusivity and highlighting our products through an empowering, relatable, fresh brand voice to align with our customers' values. Our marketing strategies are designed to drive brand awareness and create continued loyalty between our customers and our brands. We also find it important to cater messaging towards different geographic and cultural preferences and customs in order to better connect with our customers (Victoria's Secret & Co, 2024, p. 6).

The negative reputation and brand history are fresh in the general public's minds, which contributes to a trust deficit. If VS maintains the commitment to inclusivity, it stands the chance to rebuild this trust over time. On the other hand, a real social impact is more difficult to measure and analyse, due to its highly subjective nature. In this case, the social impact would translate into women having higher self-esteem or a more positive perception of their body image – it is too early to tell whether VS Collective or the inclusion of plus-sizes have improved female consumers' body acceptance. There is, however, evidence that points to clothing choices and advertisements influencing self-perception and confidence. Fashion can communicate individual passions and cultural meanings, becoming an extension of the self. It plays a crucial role in how individuals view themselves and their bodies, highlighting the potential impact of inclusive and diverse clothing lines on body image and identity formation (Peters, 2014). As addressed in Chapter II, fat women are often underrepresented in the fashion industry, but the inclusion of diverse sizes can help validate their body type and encourage them to feel more comfortable. The exposure to plus-size bodies may also contribute to their normalization and reduce the negative associations (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004, p. 106-108). Nevertheless, reducing the negative associations to fatness may be too ambitious for now.

Victoria's Secret rebranding serves as a case study in the concerns of adopting a corporate social initiative and adapting to shifting cultural dynamics. Despite the brand's attempts to align with contemporary values of body positivity and inclusivity, it faces challenges due to its delay and perceived lack of authenticity. The company's past and focus on exclusivity also make it difficult for consumers to buy into this rebranding effort. Looking ahead, the potential success of the rebrand lies in its consistency. It depends on whether the brand can convincingly integrate the changes into its core identity over time. Time will reveal whether VS will manage to transform its reputation and emerge as a

brand that convincingly promotes diversity and empowerment, in an ever-evolving market.

3.5. The future of body positivity

As addressed in the previous paragraphs, it is arguable that body positivity can help destigmatise fatness in the long term. The reaction to French DJ and activist Barbara Butch's appearance in the 2024 Olympic opening ceremony is an example of how fat people are perceived by the public. After the performance, Butch was the target of hate comments and online harassment, prompting her to file a legal complaint (Porter & Stradic, 2024).

The tide seems to be slowly changing in 2024: body positivity has lost momentum, and weight loss trends and drugs (such as Ozempic and Mounjaro) are becoming increasingly popular. Plus-size influencers and models have embarked on weight loss journeys, some even sharing their experience with Ozempic, like Gabriella Athena Halikas (Mukhopadhyay, 2024; Baker, 2024); this has also extended into other fields such as film and music. Actress Rebel Wilson has been very open about her health journey and drastic weight loss; singer Lizzo shared her diet changes and progress on social media, adopting a neutral perspective on body image (Miller, 2024a; Miller, 2024b; Ferla, 2024).

Some brands have even scaled back on their plus-size offerings, like Old Navy, M.M. LaFleur and Loft (Waldow, 2023; Stretten, 2024). As highlighted by Waldow (2023), this can derive from supply chain mismanagement and a lack of commitment and engagement from the brands. The rise of diet culture may also spur the neglect of plus-size fashion in upcoming years (Hamedy, 2024).

Some brands pulling back from plus justify their decision by pointing to a lack of sales or inventory. But the real issue, sources say, is that brands aren't putting enough work into building trust with consumers or using the correct economic models to gauge interest. Ultimately, while some clothing retailers are becoming more inclusive, these efforts remain scattershot (Waldow, 2023).

This shift will influence brands' marketing and product offering choices. If this trend continues evolving, it will determine whether companies will keep their commitment to body positivity. As mentioned in the previous section, Victoria's Secret

expressed its intentions to keep its commitment to diversity, illustrated by the launch of “The Tour ‘23” film, after dropping the classic fashion shows. However, most recently, the brand has announced the shows will return, following the previous format, but also reflecting the changes undertaken during the rebranding.

The Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show is BACK and will reflect who we are today, plus everything you know and love—the glamour, runway, wings, musical entertainment, and more! Stay tuned...it only gets more iconic from here (Hamedy, 2024).

As Hamedy (2024) points out, this announcement coincides with the loss of popularity of the body positivity movement. It is possible that VS might be already identifying these emerging trends, tied to diet culture (Hamedy, 2024). Only time will tell if this new, revamped fashion show will deliver what customers are expecting, and whether it will benefit from the more recent body image trends.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation explores the complex relationship between CSR, brand identity, and cultural trends, specifically, the body positivity movement, through the case of Victoria's Secret. During the 2010s, body positivity gained popularity on social media, and brands caught on with this trend, prompting the rejection of narrow beauty standouts, previously the norm in the fashion industry. For some brands, this was a smoother process, either due to body positivity aligning with their core values or for being recently established, like Savage X Fenty. This was however not the case for VS, which was tainted by past controversies and had a reputation for perpetuating a limited beauty ideal.

Corporate social initiatives, a tool for risk management and brand differentiation, have become a central element of business strategy in the last decades. As addressed in Chapter I, younger consumers expect companies to act ethically and to keep up with modern values. Body positivity is an example of a societal trend, whose increasing popularity prompted brands to incorporate it into their values and business. VS's rebranding effort demonstrates how corporate social initiatives are implemented when there is a market niche to cater to – the customers looking for plus sizes. Its success is mainly based on how early these market trends are identified and taken advantage of. It is important to note that brands usually follow trends but do not create them. In an increasingly global and digital business environment, trends appear and disappear rapidly, which puts more pressure on companies. Essentially, VS's inclusive messaging was a reaction to the cultural shift, which came too late and, as a result, appeared disingenuous.

The curriculum of this master's degree helped identify the relevance of cultural phenomena in the business landscape. Cultural trends, such as body positivity, stem from larger, global social movements, like feminism and Fat Liberation, as addressed in Chapter II. Social movements and cultural trends shape the cultural environment, consequently influencing consumers' choices. Today's consumers' cultural identity is also shaped by society's shifting demographics – the US, for example, is becoming more racially diverse – and the use of social media, which contributes to a more rapid exchange of ideas and values. Body positivity thrived within this context. Individuals started to demand more representation for all types of bodies, regardless of size, ability, or skin colour, to reflect today's diverse society. These demands also extend to the products they consume, therefore, fashion brands had to adjust their marketing strategies and product lines, to cater to the new “inclusive customer”, explored in Chapter I.

This case study intends to analyse the outcome of adopting a body-positive message, within the context of corporate social initiatives and new consumer expectations. It also highlights the benefits and risks of aligning brand strategies with modern social values.

While this study offers these insights, it is also necessary to acknowledge its limitations. The research primarily focused on a single case study, which does not fully capture the diversity of experiences across the fashion industry. Future research should aim for a comparative analysis of brands that have successfully navigated the body positivity movement – such as Savage X Fenty and Aerie – against those that have struggled to implement it. Additionally, incorporating quantitative methods such as surveys could enhance understanding of consumer perceptions and the effectiveness of CSR initiatives across different demographics and cultural contexts.

On the other hand, the relatively recent emergence of the body positivity movement means that long-term data on its impact is still limited, which could affect the generalisability of the findings. This concern also applies to the effects of VS's rebranding and how it's too early to account for its long-term results. Moving forward, future studies should delve into the effects of this rebranding on consumer perceptions and brand loyalty.

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