Sweetness and Strength: Codes of Femininity and Body Image in Branded Social-Networking Messages and Consumer Responses

Anne M. Holcomb

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SWEETNESS AND STRENGTH: CODES OF FEMININITY AND BODY IMAGE IN BRANDED SOCIAL-NETWORKING MESSAGES AND CONSUMER RESPONSES

by

Anne M. Holcomb

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of The Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts School of Communication Advisor: Jennifer Machiorlatti, Ph.D.

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SWEETNESS AND STRENGTH: CODES OF FEMININITY AND BODY IMAGE IN BRANDED SOCIAL-NETWORKING MESSAGES AND CONSUMER RESPONSES

Anne M. Holcomb, M.A.
Western Michigan University, 2012

This study critically analyzes visual and text updates posted by two clothing brands to the social-networking site Facebook.com, including consumers' interaction with these marketing messages. A semiological textual analysis was conducted using Facebook updates by the Victoria’s Secret PINK and Nike Women apparel brands, and the responses of fans who subscribed to these updates. Advertising aimed at women in print media has previously been analyzed in this way, revealing patterns of sexualization and objectification that can be harmful to women and men alike. My analysis builds on this tradition. Social-networking sites such as Facebook allow individual users unprecedented access to respond to corporate marketing messages. This analysis reveals several semiotic codes of femininity marketed to Facebook users by the two brands: “cheekiness,” “sweetness,” and “spirit” were the three main sign systems found in PINK Facebook posts. “Role-model athleticism,” “globalism” and “discipline” were the three main semiotic codes found in Nike Women content. Additional semiotic codes appeared consistently in audience responses as fans accepted, negotiated with, or rejected the signs and codes used by the two brands to portray femininity and the female body.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Currently, American children, adolescents and young adults find themselves immersed in a vast network of communication technologies alive with communicative behaviors, activities, and forms that are constantly growing, multiplying, and evolving. For students who entered college in Fall 2011, a generation mostly born in 1993, the Internet has always existed (Beloit College, 2011), and college students and young adults have already maintained social-networking profiles for years. According to a social media report conducted by the Nielsen Media Research agency in fall 2011, the average user of the social-networking site Facebook.com is female, age 18-34, and has obtained at least a bachelor’s degree (“Social Media Report”, p. 3). Female visitors account for 62% of all page views on Facebook. Altogether, Facebook users accrued more than 53 billion minutes on the site in May 2011 (p. 5). Additionally, social-networking apps (applications) designed for mobile phones and devices now allow users to view and post updates to their favorite sites even when they are not near a desktop or laptop computer (p. 6).

Corporations, celebrities, and local nonprofit and educational institutions can also post similar updates to be shared with those who subscribe to them, further extending their “brand” identity into the virtual world. These hyper-connected communication habits carry with them various social, cultural, and political implications. Unprecedented access and sharing via social-networking technologies appears to erase the boundaries between producer and consumer, between message generation and message reception.
Professionals in business, technology, and the media are constantly assessing this new communication landscape in scholarly and professional literature. However, there remains a minimal amount of analysis from a critical/cultural studies perspective regarding power and influence in social-networking media messages. This study will analyze the text and photos in branded social media messages posted to Facebook.com by two retail clothing brands, and the reception, negotiation, and feedback messages posted in response by youthful consumers, including "tweens" aged eight-12 (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008) teens aged 12-17, and young adults aged 18-34 (Nielsen Wire, 2011).

The Millennial Generation in America

Young people in 2011 live in the midst of many economic and demographic changes as well as technological advances. Settersten & Ray (2010) examine the far-reaching changes experienced by young people in the early 21st Century in their book *Not Quite Adults*, which reports the results of a study commissioned by the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy. Through a detailed analysis of data sets combined with nearly 500 in-depth interviews with young people between ages 18 and 34, the Network study uncovered many ways in which life has changed for young people in the last few decades (p. xix).

As a result of their research, Settersten & Ray divide American young people into two distinct economic and lifestyle groups: "swimmers" and "treaders." "Swimmers" are those we often hear about in the mass media: they are young people who fill their high school evenings with extracurricular activities; compete to be accepted to prestigious colleges; look for meaningful careers in which they can thrive; delay marriage and children; and depend on large social networks of friends. Less-publicized are the
“treaders”: these are young people from more conservative, religious, economically depressed, rural, or disadvantaged family backgrounds. Often, these youths are making decisions in the reverse order: marrying early and having children to create a sense of stability; delaying college costs because of an unwillingness to accrue debt or diving into college without proper preparation or parental support; staying put in their hometowns, and taking service-industry jobs that provide insufficient wages and health insurance to support their new families (p. xxii).

These two different lifestyles lead to a “divided family market” (Nielsen, Digital American Family, p. 48) for advertisers. Those who are delaying marriage and children to focus on their education and income represent a lucrative demographic target to retail advertisers. Just as young people under age 35 are becoming more selective about potential spouses, living arrangements, and work/life balance, so it may follow that they are exacting in consumption choices as well and may have a high degree of brand loyalty. Marketers can also use social media to allow aspirational “treaders” to consume branded images and affiliate with brands through “liking” (clicking a button to show they enjoyed a post) or sharing information: in this way, individuals without disposable income to spend can still “consume” the brand virtually. This analysis will examine two brands marketed to female Facebook users, Victoria’s Secret PINK and Nike Women, and the messages they share about femininity in the 21st Century.
The Current Status of Young-Adult Women’s Rights

During the time period in which these demographic and lifestyle changes have been observed, the sociocultural status of women remains in flux. Second-wave feminism, which worked in the late 1960s and 1970s toward securing reproductive rights, domestic and workplace equality for women, achieved successes that have assisted many women who are currently young adults. Women are becoming the majority of college students and college graduates; 33% of women in the United States hold a bachelor’s degree or more (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007), and 55% of college students entering in Fall 2010 were women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Decades after the passage of Title IX by the federal government in the United States—which granted equal access to college sports for both sexes—and the painstaking implementation of this law (Grow, 2008), women of all ages are increasingly accepted and portrayed as competitive and fierce athletes. (However, many female fans are still waiting for an economically viable model for professional women’s sports). For many female teens and young adults today, it can be challenging not to take previous generations’ progress for granted, or to even be conscious of this progress: we are surrounded by choices in employment opportunities, domestic arrangements, and reproductive options and encouraged—by family, friends, and the media—to tailor our lives just the way we want.

However, instead of finding empowerment through mastering certain life skills or achieving goals, young women are surrounded by a media culture in which “empowerment” is often expressed through the way our bodies look, what we can do with them, and how we adorn and decorate them for different occasions and situations, so
that how we *appear* often takes precedence over what we can *do* (Kilbourne, 2010). The prevalence of “fast,” disposable fashion—typically manufactured outside the United States—allows us to change our looks on a daily basis and to advertise membership in social, cultural and economic groups through our choices of clothing, accessories or shoes. In an August 2011 post on the *New York Times* website, online news blogger Lisa Belkin opined about the disparity between behavior in classrooms and at parties on college campuses across America. While young women seem to feel free to speak their minds and challenge their classmates during the day, they spend much more time than men do on their looks at night, and they are dressing to compete for the sexual attention of men: “Why has the pendulum swung back to a feeling that sexualization of women is fun and funny rather than insulting and uncomfortable? Why are so many women O.K. with that?” (Belkin, 2011).

Many theorists suggest that American culture exists in an era of “postfeminism” or “pseudofeminism” in which the concept of empowerment has become conflated with the maintenance of a particular, uniform “type” of feminine appearance: usually slim, toned, youthful, and Caucasian (Durham, 2003; Riordan, 2001). As television, Internet technologies, and social media have spread to a global reach, the effects of this ideal can also be seen in other countries across the world, as consumers from diverse cultural backgrounds begin to view this very white, American vision of femininity as a “universal” ideal of beauty. The spread of American advertising and consumer products is accompanied by the spread of physical and psychological problems associated with the consumption of those messages and products: anorexia, obesity, addictions, and diseases (Kilbourne, 2010). The constant stream of news and advertising updates produced on
social-networking sites such as Facebook, and accessible via mobile devices, also surrounds young women with these images and messages at a faster rate than ever before. The purpose of this thesis is to build on prior analysis of sexualization in the media by studying advertising messages and consumer responses in the medium of the social-networking website.

**Social Media Offer an Opportunity to Share Discourse**

At the same time these cultural changes are taking place, the social networking technologies young women use can offer them an unprecedented opportunity to make their voices heard both as consumers and as citizens: not just in the United States and Canada, but around the world. Many surveys of social media use have found that women in particular spend more time online, particularly for social-networking purposes. A June 2010 comScore survey (Abraham, Morn & Vollman) found that women represent the majority of Internet users in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Russia (p. 5). Women age 15 and over spent 8% more time online than males in 2010 (p. 6), and they were 5% more likely to devote online time to social networking than men were (p. 7). In April 2010, nine out of every 10 female Internet users visited a social networking site (p. 10).

These observations are not limited to American women, either. The comScore survey found that American women’s preference for social networking was mirrored across the world on different social sites for various countries and regions (p. 11). Women also shop and buy from websites more than men do. 85% of female Internet users in North America visited a retail website in April 2010 (p. 18). As Facebook has increased its international presence in the years since 2009, more users across the globe
have added Facebook accounts to their web browsing. From 2009 to 2010, Facebook’s translation capabilities to over 100 languages from English prompted international membership to increase from 95 million to over 400 million (Inside Facebook, 2010). Facebook first gained users outside the United States in Canada, Norway, the United Kingdom, and Russia; recent gains in Facebook membership have been observed most in Mexico, Brazil, India, and Indonesia (Inside Facebook, 2011). The corporation maintains offices outside the U.S. in Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, India, Ireland, Italy, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Spain, and Sweden (facebook.com/careers).

Facebook also partnered with Microsoft search service Bing in October 2011 to offer an inline translation tool for English-speaking users. The tool provides a link under users’ comments posted in languages other than English and allows an instant translation to appear when a user clicks the link. As of February 2012, this translation feature was in place as an option for Facebook Page administrators, but was not yet available on user profiles (White, 2011). However, it is important to note that the translator tool does not understand slang or idiomatic expressions from languages other than English—at times making for unintentionally hilarious results (Butler, 2012).

Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter allow individual citizens to feel some agency in “confronting” companies online regarding anything from environmental and labor practices to the way they portray women in advertisements, to feedback about customer service. Corporations, on the other hand, must carefully monitor their social media presences to prevent the transmission of inappropriate posts or “viral” consumer protests. As much as marketing gurus tout the power of social media, it remains to be
seen whether competing online discourses really make a substantive difference in the inequities of the offline world (Andrejevic, 2011; Hands, 2011). The aim of this study is to analyze the dialogue between brands and individual citizens on Facebook.com, specifically regarding portrayals of femininity and female body image.

**Focusing on Brands for Women**

This study focuses on the signs, symbols and semiotic codes produced by two lifestyle sub-brands that sell products for women: Victoria’s Secret PINK (a sub-brand of Victoria’s Secret Stores, L.L.C. and Limited Brands, Inc.), and Nike Women (a sub-brand of Nike, Inc). Victoria’s Secret, founded in 1977, is the second-largest seller of intimate apparel and lingerie in the United States (Business & Company Resource Center, 2007). According to the store’s website (www.victoriassecret.com), this chain operates over 900 locations across the United States and over 20 locations in Canada. Victoria’s Secret is a private subsidiary of Limited Brands, which also owns such stores as Bath & Body Works. In addition to sales made through its retail stores, Victoria's Secret also sells directly to consumers through the company's Web site and direct mail catalogues. In July 2011, comScore measured Limited Brands as having 6.4 million unique visitors (PR Newswire, 2011), and the media analysis firm found that from October to November 2011, Limited Brands’ total unique visitors to their websites increased 49% from 6,837,000 to 10,215,000. The corporation is ranked 159th in unique visitors to branded shopping websites (Flosi, 2011).

The Victoria’s Secret PINK sub-brand was introduced in 2004 and gained popularity after recording artist and television star Jessica Simpson appeared on television in early 2005 wearing the brand's signature sweatpants. The label also blazed
new trails in real-time marketing by hosting branded events such as "Pinkapalooza," held in Santa Monica, CA in July 2008. In a BrandWeek article, PINK marketing staff described the brand as “aspirational,” targeting an age demographic “as thin as a lingerie strap” (Cummings, 2008). Retail analyst Marshal Cohen described the PINK Marketing strategy this way: “It's a very smart strategy...because every 16-year-old wants to be a 19-year-old and every 24-year-old still wants to live like a 19-year-old” (Cummings, p. 28).

The PINK Facebook Page reflects the success of this idea with 10,859,810 fans following their updates as of January 2012. The brand statement on the PINK Page stresses the youthfulness and uniqueness of the ideal PINK consumer:

\[
\text{Victoria’s Secret effortlessly cool younger sister PINK dreams big to dress you in comfy yet chic wear. PINK is for the independent spirit on campus—true of heart, intelligent, and empowered! Whether lounging or living, you will always feel absolutely unique in PINK.}
\]

Nike Women is a lifestyle brand with a slightly different mission and scope: it is a sub-brand of Nike, Inc., the largest manufacturer of athletic footwear, apparel, equipment, and accessories in the world. Incorporated in 1968 in Oregon, Nike has become an internationally-known brand, operating 346 Nike retail stores in the United States and 343 retail stores in other countries, additionally selling Nike products through licensees and distributors and online (Gale/Cengage Learning, 2010). The Nike Women sub-brand was launched in 1990 with the goal of increasing market share among women, which was somewhat visionary for its time: women’s professional sports barely existed in 1990 and Title IX, which granted equal access to both men and women in college sports, had been passed but was poorly implemented (Grow, p. 313). Initial advertising for the
brand followed this revolutionary tone by undermining some of the masculine messages of the parent brand (p. 319). Today, Nike Women advertises its inclusivity and accessibility to customers and fans via social networking. According to the Nike Women Facebook Page,

_all women can be Nike Women. If you have a body, you are an athlete ...we constantly strive to be responsive to you, so please let us know what you'd like to see more of from us!_

The Nike Women brand Page on Facebook, as of January 2012, had 1,099,504 “likes,” about 1/10th as many as the PINK Facebook Page. Even though Nike is a larger company overall, Limited Brands companies are more popular with online shoppers and Facebook fans: While Nike received 4.8 million unique visitors to its online shopping site in July 2011, Limited Brands received almost 2 million more. Other competitors in this field include Zappos.com (an online shoe retailer selling many brands), with 8.4 million visitors in July 2011, Nordstrom.com with 4.9 million, OldNavy.com with 4.8 million, Forever 21 with 3.6 million, Abercrombie & Fitch with 3.4 million, American Eagle Outfitters with 3.1 million, and Gap with 2.6 million (comScore, 2011).

Both brands sell a range of apparel for women from the very basic (bras, tank tops, sweatpants) to more ornate, high-end versions of these same items (limited-edition, embellished, or high-fashion designer tie-in apparel, shoes, or accessories). Both brands target young, affluent and independent women with their advertisements. Additionally, both brands also maintain relationships with college and professional sports organizations in order to sell apparel and accessories decorated with team insignia and university logos. Nike outfits many high school, college and professional athletic teams, and the Victoria’s
Secret PINK brand has licensing agreements with many NCAA member universities, Major League Baseball, and the National Football League to manufacture and sell items with university logos and team insignia.

There are also some notable differences between the two brands. Slogans and graphic images printed on the products themselves present women with two different sets of building blocks in constructing consumer identity. Sets of images and text “status updates” produced by both companies can be shared by consumers who are in the process of enhancing their online identities (See Appendix for more information on how consumers can interact with companies via Facebook tools).

This study examines the “virtual” brand identities communicated online by Nike Women and Victoria’s Secret PINK and analyzes the different types of visual images and textual themes utilized by the two brands on Facebook to capture the attention of their two unique audiences. Does the heightened level of media access and interactivity that we enjoy today provide new opportunities for changing the portrayal of women’s bodies in advertising and mass media texts? In this study, a semiological analysis informed by feminist theory provided an opportunity to discover the major discursive codes underlying the symbols of femininity and the female body transmitted through the text and images posted by Nike Women and Victoria’s Secret PINK. Additionally, I analyze consumer responses to the textual and visual information posted by the brands.

This analysis of responses is informed by reception theory, in the tradition of the critical theory of Cultural Studies, specifically Stuart Hall’s (1973) work on the reception of popular media messages, subsequent research on television audiences by John Fiske (1978) and Sut Jhally (1987), and the work of feminist reception theorists such as Angela
McRobbie (1991) and Joke Hermes (1995), who both studied the reception of messages in women's magazines.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review of literature will first focus on the perspective of the “brand,” providing a history of brands and lifestyle advertising for women. Scholarship from the field of consumer research was consulted as background for this section, along with recent social-media marketing titles from popular publishers.

The second section of this review will focus on identity: how identity is created, and how it is shaped by our activities as consumers and as online citizens in the virtual world. This section draws from classic and current research in communication studies on the formation of identity, scholarly research from the field of marketing on consumer identity, and scholarly work from several different disciplines in the emerging field of online identity.

The third section will examine women’s consumption of media messages and branded products through the research of feminist theorists and media critics. Literature consulted for this section provides a timeline of feminist thought, critiques of female body images typically portrayed in media, and feminist studies of audience reception.

Part 1: Understanding Brand and Advertising Messages

History of Advertising and Brands—Appealing to Issues of Aging and Body Image

The relationship between advertising texts and their audiences has always been one of evolution, diversification, and increasing penetration into different aspects of everyday life. Brands that began as functional solutions to practical problems now strive to become synonymous with abstract concepts and emotions in the consumer’s mind.
(Klein, 2002). Subdividing the consumer market into ever-narrowing age demographics—which have vastly different likes, dislikes, hopes and fears—is one effective tactic many brands use to get their message into the hands of the appropriate consumer (Gobe, 2001). Branded advertising is not a new phenomenon, but changes in population, culture, and technology over the last two centuries have led the industry to evolve into something quite different than its original incarnation.

The first trademarked brand was created for Bass Ale in 1875 in England (Moffitt & Dover, 2011). Advertising in the United States began in the early 20th Century when regional newspapers connected with manufacturers desiring to promote their products, and agencies were founded to facilitate this relationship. The growth of advertising has slowly evolved from simply informing consumers about products to building relationships around and through the idea of a brand: "a word in the mind" (Moffitt & Dover, p. ix).

For the purposes of this study, prior research on the history of women’s magazine advertising in the 20th Century provides the most relevant background to a current analysis of lifestyle brand messages on Facebook. Both include similar combinations of text and images to promote a product, integrated into a medium consulted frequently by young people, especially women. Both are designed for periodic, brief, and casual use throughout the day (Hermes, 1995). Featherstone (1991) discusses the rise of health and beauty advertising in the 1920s and the advertising industry’s ties to Hollywood star culture. Advertisers specifically targeted women with product marketing messages beginning in the 1920s (Stern, 1992): the wife was dubbed the “director of consumer activities” in the household in the business literature of that time period (p. 10).
Research by Belk and Pollay (1985) traced the rise of images of “the good life” in magazine advertising throughout the mid-20th Century in a longitudinal content analysis examining popular U.S. magazine advertisements between 1900 and 1980. Belk found that health and beauty aids were most heavily advertised in the 1930s, perhaps because economic uncertainty created an atmosphere of self-doubt, and advertising appealed to the consumer’s desire for “a more positive sense of self” (p. 891). Stern notes that advertising to wives intensified in the 1950s, as many women in that era married while they were still young, impressionable teens. In particular, wives who married out of high school and had never held a job were seen as one of the demographic groups most susceptible to advertising messages (p. 16). Research by Bristor and Fischer (1993) suggests that the concept of “femininity” became crystallized at the same time that consumer culture evolved during the twentieth century (p. 529). These authors also expose the patriarchal structures that underlay a common and recurring trope in twentieth-century marketing and business literature—that of the aggressive, warlike (male) marketer preying upon a passive and receptive (female) audience (p. 529).

Featherstone discusses the economic developments that occurred throughout the 20th Century that shifted American jobs from manufacturing to service institutions—spas, gyms, and health care being just a few—businesses that encouraged consumers to spend their money and their free time on bodily maintenance (p. 182). Even public health advertisements sponsored by nonprofit or governmental entities tended to emphasize the outward appearance-related benefits of a healthy lifestyle beginning in the mid-twentieth century (p. 183). Kimmel (2004) describes how the “ideal” gendered body images have been influenced by economic factors: in times of economic hardship (such as the 1930s),
when both men and women struggle to make ends meet, the ideal female body image is slim, with small breasts. Conversely, in times of plenty (such as the 1950s), a curvier silhouette for women comes back into vogue (p. 231).

From the 1950s onward, the consumer's relationship with branded products changed as well. The brand had transformed from simply being a mark of ownership or a mark of quality—denoting something that the customer needed or wanted—and evolved into the arena of abstract concepts and symbols. Advertisers were pushing consumers to see why the brand being promoted was superior to all others in an increasingly-crowded marketplace, and ultimately, to become the stand-in for a more complex idea or emotion in the consumer's mind (Moffitt & Dover, p. 8).

In the last decade of the 20th Century, the advertising industry initiated a drastic change, moving increasingly beyond the confines of print, television and radio to saturate the activities of customers' everyday "offline" lives. Jhally (1987) describes audience market-segmentation techniques developed in the 1970s by the advertising industry which shifted marketing messages further away from product-based advertising to more abstract approaches. Marketers began to target audiences based on values and lifestyle in addition to, or rather than, traditional age and gender demographics. This led to a rise in user-centered rather than product-focused campaigns (p. 127), and the messages of advertising texts moved from an emphasis on social conformity to "self-fulfilment, escape, and private fantasy" (p. 128).

Levin & Kilbourne (2008) point to the deregulation of television by the Reagan administration in the mid-1980s as a time when television exploded with branded marketing, in the form of both commercials and cartoon shows, directed at young
children, ‘tweens and teens (p. 36). At this time, marketers began to classify children as a separate demographic consumer group and to use different strategies to attract them. Most American children born during and after this time, then, have always been familiar with gender-divided Saturday morning cartoons, their associated toy lines, and the brand preferences associated with them (p. 37).

Klein (2002) traces the phenomenon of branding from the latter decades of the 20th century to the present, and explores the resulting effects on consumer consciousness. She demonstrates how, in the 1990s, corporations began to move beyond traditional print and television advertising venues to promote their brands in every aspect of public and private life (p. 9), so that branding has now become part of the a priori fabric of an everyday citizen’s life—we can no longer tell when or where advertising stops and ‘real life’ begins. Companies may even host specific themed events during a period of time for consumers to participate in (p. 10). Gobe (2001), an expert on “emotional branding,” exhorts marketers to bring brands to life for the consumer through sensuous experiences, as part of real-life, tangible events: “events are a great way to showcase brands in a festive, emotionally charged atmosphere” (p. 26). This era also marked the first time brands and their fans promoted each other on a mass scale.

During the late 1990s and the 2000s, advertisers promoted the "love mark": inspirational brand values, stories and design that they hoped would become akin to celebrities or movie stars, accumulating a passionate and devoted “fan” following, as Apple products did during this time (Moffitt & Dover, p. 8). As Andrejevic (2008) notes, producers taking notice of “fan culture” can help consumers feel as if they are making a difference by catering to them and offering them an ‘insider’ look at new products and
developments, helping the ardent fan feel more special and informed than a mere casual consumer (p. 40).

Ries & Ries (2005) document the massive diversification of brands throughout the 20th Century and into the 21st. They use the metaphor of evolution to show how a single brand diversifies into many sub-brands in order to survive in a competitive marketplace. Both the PINK and Nike Women brands studied in this thesis project are sub-brands of larger companies, Victoria's Secret and Nike. According to these authors, successful sub-brands thrive because they are able to create and increase demand for their products in a niche marketplace category, creating a "need" for the product where none existed before. Sometimes brand names even become shorthand for their category, such as "coke" and "kleenex" (p. 12).

As marketers identify new niche audiences based on demographic information, they also generate new brands and messages to appeal specifically to these audiences segmented into ever-narrowing age demographics. Gobe's Emotional Branding spends a good deal of time instructing marketers on the different motivations of the Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Generation Y age groups. Of the youngest, Gen Y (those born from the early 1980s through the 1990s), Gobe states that intellectual maturity has come earlier to them than to any other generation: "These latchkey kids have grown up with an unparalleled access to information coupled with an absence of omnipresent supervision .... brands that respect the mature identity of these youngsters and supplement that identity are the most successful" (p. 22). Boden (2006) studied the impact of marketing messages directed toward children in the "tween" age group (ages 7 – 11), finding that children choose or reject the brands worn by well-known celebrities in the fields of sports
and pop music—basing their choices on the media messages they receive about the public image of a particular celebrity—subsequently repurposing and combining those brands to convey messages about their own identities.

At the same time, as Featherstone (1991) observed, marketers and brands also attempt to stretch youth and adolescence in the other direction as well, appealing to older adults as they attempt to hold on to an idealized youth far into middle age. Featherstone examines the metaphor of old age as a “mask” that seems to separate the consciousness from the body, causing individuals to feel alienated from the physical changes they face (p. 379). Gobe stresses the importance of marketing to the Baby Boomer generation with the theme of maintaining the spirit of youth: brands must appeal to the continuing “vitality” of this generation and a “Peter Pan”-like “never grow up” mentality (p. 5).

Many authors with a critical/cultural approach, including Featherstone (p. 187) and Hearn (p. 201) see the branded self as an increasingly narcissistic, maintained, “performing self.” However, authors in the popular business press such as Mainwaring (2011) believe that the postmodern consumer, as a social media user and a potential activist, has a better chance than ever to influence corporate accountability and social change. Mainwaring promotes both the use of social media by brands to increase philanthropic giving and community consciousness among digital media audiences (p. 140-143), and by consumers to encourage responsible and sustainable corporate practices from the businesses they patronize (p. 156-158).

Moffitt & Dover claim that social media technologies actually take the management of the brand out of the hands of the corporation and into the hands of consumers, forcing companies and advertisers to focus their priorities on customer
engagement and brand collaboration. This trend leads to advertising techniques that incorporate consumer contributions and feedback—brands are no longer abstract concepts in the mind, or even a "star" with devoted "fans." Instead, the "brand" becomes a process: a living, two-way conversation that is always changing (p. 5). Verdino (2010) claims that we have already moved beyond "the era of centralized, top-down, command-and-control mass communications" (p. 9), to an "infinite microchannel playground" in which consumers produce, tear apart and remix endless pieces of "microcontent" (p. 14) and "every person is a media mogul" (p. 18). Verdino's book and many others in this field offer aspiring digital marketers advice on how to maintain and grow their brands in a world where the multitude of consumer voices—once engaged—may have the power to ring louder than a unified, hegemonic corporate voice. At present, the most coveted marketing interaction is the "pass-along" sharing of a branded message or link from one consumer to a friend or family member: what used to be a "word-of-mouth" interaction, now crystallized in digital form.

Similarly, Miller (2011) compares online communities—specifically on Facebook—to the type of small-town or village communities that existed before the advent of mass culture: "the less time we give to [community] in practice, the more we seem to fetishize community as some kind of paradise lost … Facebook is hugely helpful in pushing us back to a more balanced and realistic understanding of the meaning and experience of close-knit community" (p. 184). Miller goes on to state that Facebook not only exemplifies the good features of small communities that we have lost over the last two centuries, but also the bad features: normativity, conformity and surveillance by close family and kin groups (p. 186). Settersten & Ray (2010) found that young families
with limited educational and economic resources can also benefit from online social networks such as Facebook (p. 114). By re-connecting them with more successful peers from their schools and hometowns, Facebook exposes these young people to different cultural perspectives and new ideas on careers and the future, possibly offering this subset of users a chance to overcome some of the many inequalities they face (p. 115).

The research described here may have interesting ramifications, specifically regarding the activities of corporations on Facebook. The following section will review literature in more detail regarding the formation of individual and group identity through communication, consumption, and online activities.

**Part 2: Identity Formation, Consumer Identity, Online Identity**

**Identity Formation**

From birth, individuals grow to understand themselves as individuals, as members of sociocultural groups, and as members of societies (Lustig & Koester, 2010). The process of building these three types of identity is also a communicative process: Hall (2005) defines identities as “sets of social expectations related to ourselves and others,” and these expectations are “connected to verbal and nonverbal communication patterns” (p. 102). Children are taught early on in life to fit their communication patterns to the expectations associated with membership in their families and cultural groups—the “ingroup”—and to avoid communicative patterns and behaviors that do not fit with their upbringing, those of the “outgroup” (Lustig & Koester, p. 152). Since identity is a process, our self-definitions and salient cultural affiliations change many times as we mature: the choices we make and the surrounding contexts are constantly changing our perspectives (Hall, p.115). Often, as we try to make sense of others’ communication
behaviors, our own identities interfere: “It is quite common for people to draw on their personal experiences to understand and evaluate the motivations of others” (Lustig & Koester, p. 149). We also learn to classify others into groups based on their communication patterns and behaviors: this mental shorthand is known as the stereotyping process (Lustig & Koester, p. 153).

Two facets of individual and group identities are expressed through consumption behaviors, and online communicative behaviors. Often individuals use the products they consume as communicative tools to demonstrate affiliation with one group while rejecting others, and they may also use brand affiliations to express themselves, especially in social-networking venues. A survey of 535 individuals with an average age of 27 found that 63% of the participants used social media websites to connect with their favorite brands (Galloway, 2010). Considering these factors, reviewing scholarly research on consumer identity from an advertising and branding perspective provides important background for my analysis. This background will assist in understanding the meanings and motivations behind the messages that brands are posting online.

Consumer Identity

For the purposes of this study, the most relevant artifacts of consumer identity are the symbols that individuals select to represent themselves to others online and the messages they share online related to their favorite consumer brands. Goffman (1959) was one of the first theorists to study identity as a performative process: an outward face or role that we present to others which differs from our interior life (p. 22). According to Goffman, the imagery of brand-emblazoned clothing, pictures, and icons that represent the brand online would comprise part of an individual or corporate “front”: that is, the
costume or outer face we adopt when we perform our role in social, educational, or work spheres. Our appearance, including dress, along with our nonverbal mannerisms, inform others about what roles we will play before they even talk to us (p. 24).

Since consumer identity research is a vast field, only scholarship relevant to this study will be covered. According to Arnould & Thompson (2005), consumer identity is one of four theoretical foci in the larger field of “consumer culture theory” (p. 869). Consumer culture theory focuses specifically on the contexts in which consumers make their choices: CCT research draws from an interdisciplinary body of theory to develop novel analytic theoretical frameworks that can illuminate the sociocultural dynamics that drive the consumption cycle (Arnould & Thompson, p. 870).

Consumer culture theory also investigates the ‘productive’ aspects of consumption—the many ways that people encounter, communicate about, mythologize, and remix the symbols found in advertisements, brands, retail spaces, or material objects. Even individuals who cannot afford to consume brands or products can construct “narratives of consumer identity” through “working with marketer-generated materials” (p. 871); which, in this study, are the branded messages on Facebook. Ritson & Elliott’s (1999) ethnography of teen students at six different English schools uncovered several ways that advertising texts are used in communicative exchanges among peer and family groups. Rather than focusing on the advertising message as a top-down interaction between marketer and an individual audience member—with the end result being purchase of a product—Ritson & Elliott’s findings suggested that the short, catchy texts of advertisements take on whole new lives in a variety of social interactions, such as marking social group boundaries, creating ritual, and helping adolescents deal with
unfamiliar and uncomfortable situations are just a few of the uses their participants employed (p. 265-270).

Two points in the consumption cycle are most salient for the purposes of this study: the desire to consume new products and the importance of symbols of social membership. In Belk, Ger, & Askegaard's 2003 research on consumer desire, they focus on the need, or lack, that arises as part of consumer identity, causing the individual to pursue and acquire more objects. Ever-evolving, it can never fully be satisfied. It is a passion torn between an individual's personal fantasies of consumption and the desire to place oneself in a specific social context either allied with, or opposed to, others (Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, p. 327; Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Jantzen, Ostergaard, & Sucena Vieira, 2006). The visual and verbal cues in different types of branded messages, then, attract those individuals who want to feel and look a certain way or be members of a particular group through the symbols that they consume and display.

Although most research in consumer identity focuses on the process of acquisition and possession, some researchers such as Cherrier & Murray (2007) examine the role of dispossession (getting rid of one's possessions) in creating "personal myths" (p. 5) that emphasize values such as environmental awareness, living simply, and getting back to nature (p. 3). In this case, consumer identity is defined through a resistance to acquiring more objects or the decision not to consume a certain type of object.

Many consumer-culture theorists have also followed in the footsteps of Stern (1992) in applying poststructuralist critical theory, deconstruction, and feminist theory both to advertising texts and to consumer identity practices. These researchers offer a more nuanced and ambivalent view of the role of consumption messages in a cultural
context. Bristor & Fischer (1993) discuss areas of research being neglected by the lack of a feminist perspective. They look at potential research questions that might be raised through liberal feminist, difference feminist, and poststructuralist feminist approaches (p. 526), and theoretical areas remaining to be created or contested by research using these approaches (p. 527). Holt (1997) provided an overview of patterns in the postmodern consumer landscape; Thompson & Hirschman (1995) apply a poststructural analysis to the socialized body of the consumer. Hearn (2008) takes a neo-Marxist approach to the concepts of consumption and self-branding through production, and Riordan (2001) specifically focuses on consumption of products advertised with feminist or pseudo-/postfeminist messages. Knorr Cetina (1997) and Zwick & Dholakia (2006) examine the postmodern consumer's relationship with objects.

In an article especially relevant to this study, Jantzen, Ostergaard, & Sucena Vieira (2006) looked at women's consumption of lingerie products and identity formation. Their research found that women used the lingerie as a tool in identity construction to balance out aspects of their lifestyles, dress, and personalities, or to emphasize other aspects—"sexy" or "sensual" silk or lace underwear represents an escape from the practical world of work and chores, especially when worn during special occasions such as holidays and anniversaries, whereas "flirty" cotton underwear styles worn under work outfits can bring a sense of fun to the everyday. The interviewees dismissed wearing sexy lingerie in an everyday context as impractical and "not me"; whereas wearing plain cotton underwear every day was seen as the mark of a boring "housewife" (p. 190). This research again emphasizes the narrow set of acceptable paths available to women in the postfeminist world.
Women’s Consumption of Fashion

Fashion has been used as a network of signs to relay messages about identity for centuries. Both Barnard (1996) and Rubinstein (2001) trace the history of clothing as a sign of social status and age through the 19th Century. With the rise of globalization in the late 20th Century, however, the available “vocabulary” of messages that could be communicated through clothing and accessories grew exponentially. As clothing manufacturers moved overseas and utilized cheap sweatshop labor, cheaply mass-produced, disposable “trendy” clothing overtook the market. Because this clothing was so easily consumed and replaced, fashions could now change every few months, and styles recycled every few years. Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, clothing could be changed to reflect the whims of cultural fads, the changing tie-symbols shared by subcultural groups, or the wearer’s changing self-consciousness as she passed through adolescence to adulthood (Rubinstein, p. 271). Rubinstein observes different clothing trends among high school and college cliques and even different types of outfits favored by college students majoring in different subjects. The diversification of different clothing “tie-symbols,” or badges of identity shared within cultural or subcultural social groups, became an increasing phenomenon in fashion trends of the late 1990s and persists through the present day (p. 282). The reliance on fashion to symbolize alliance with one group while distancing the wearer from another social group is one method of communicating one’s group affiliation: an important step in the formation of identity, as noted earlier in this review by Ludwig & Koester (p. 152).

One resource deals specifically with the creation of a brand analyzed in this study, and the specific meanings given to it by its producers: Grow (2008) discusses how the
Nike Women brand was formed and provides an overview of the early marketing of the brand and the creative team of women in advertising behind the campaign. In interviews with the creative team, she found that the women constructed the initial set of advertising campaigns as a feminist counter-narrative to the male-dominated narratives used by the main Nike brand: “The team uses storytelling to reflect and shape a collective female memory. Their audience is fragmented, separated from the parent brand” (p. 338).

However, Grow observed that in the time since her initial study, subsequent advertising became “quieter” and “less gendered,” dovetailing more with the hegemonic messages of the parent brand (p. 339).

Arnold (2001) also examines how some fashion trends, initially meant to be empowering for women, were eventually overcome by hegemonic reactions to uncertain cultural moments. Haute couture and street fashion trends in the 1990s were either inspired by larger social and cultural trends in America at the time, or worked as symbols of protest against these trends. Arnold describes the 1990s-era trend of “underwear as outerwear” as a playful and postmodern response to social anxieties about sexually transmitted disease, changing sexual norms for women, and the fear of aggressive and/or explicit female sexuality (p. 66). Arnold reveals how this cultural moment evolved from attitudes toward nudity, fabrics that evoked nudity, and the meanings of partially clothed and nude bodies through the decades of the twentieth century (p. 68).

Currently, fashion choices for adolescent girls reflect the socially-constructed tension between “sassiness” (being seen as “sexy” but not too sexy, “flirty,” and of a higher economic class), and “sluttiness” (showing too much skin, appearing too ready to “service” boys, and appearing lower-class) (Ringrose, 2011). While teen girls are
interested in expressing themselves as sexual beings, as Ringrose states, “particular
discursive frames constrain the limits of experimentation to often highly regulatory and
narrow formations of gendered/sexual subjectivity” (p. 104). Baldwin (2006) describes
how adolescent women develop self-schemas based on the interpretation of signs of
power and sexuality as shown in advertising images (p. 19). Ringrose describes girls’ use
of branded icons and images, such as the Playboy bunny logo, to gain different types of
sexual status and/or currency (p. 108). The sexy/slutty dichotomy extends beyond teen
culture, as well, into the young-adult—and specifically, the college—lifestyle. Pitcher
(2006) in a content analysis of the Girls Gone Wild series of soft-core pornographic
videos, describes how the college-age women participating in the videos are urged on by
the “carnival”-like atmosphere of spring break. These usually “good” (i.e., middle-class,
white, thin, attractive) girls-next-door are willing to take their clothes off only because
the “party” atmosphere releases them temporarily from bourgeois social norms (p. 203).

Jackson & Vares (2011) examined ‘tween girls’ perspectives on female
celebrities, such as the Pussycat Dolls and Miley Cyrus, and found that the girls quickly
evoked the sassy/slutty discourse in discussing these celebrities and the very high and
narrow standards of femininity they are held to. Women in the postfeminist world have
only a very narrow discursive frame in which they can continue to be successful. This is
especially true for young female celebrities in the public eye. Any ‘excessive’ body
exposure or unusual behavior, in this discursive frame, leads to the starlet’s ‘downfall’ or
‘shame spiral’ (p. 144).

Kimmel (2004) calls this unspoken rule “the cultural standard of sexual
minimalism” that limits all women to “few partners, fewer positions, less pleasure, less
sex without emotional commitment. Such an ideology keeps a woman waiting for her Prince Charming to liberate her” (p. 240). The cultural fascination with this dichotomy for women can also be observed in the popularity of television shows such as Mad Men, and its imitators, The Playboy Club and Pan Am, which premiered in 2011. All of these shows take place in the era between the mid-1960s and the 1970s. Female characters in these programs occupied a space between the “naughty” sexual revolutions of second-wave feminism and the restrictive norms of the 1950s, so that they appear both coolly ultra-feminine and also sexualized; a “retro” image from the past that is easy for contemporary viewers to idealize.

Online Identity

The study of online identity—how individuals, audiences and fan groups find expression through digital media—is a broad and interdisciplinary exercise, combining elements of computer science, sociology, psychology, communication, and gender theory. Online identity research examines how individuals construct their identities in the virtual realm and also how they construct and respond to issues of consumer identity virtually.

The study of online identity first gained attention with the mid-1990s work of Turkle and Haraway in their examinations of multiple digital selves (Turkle) and cyborg selves (Haraway). (Fisher, 2010). Early theorists of online identity were optimistic about a virtual world where the traditionally marginalized could be free to play, constructing new identities and cyborg selves free of physical gender constraints. Many scholars and popular business writers today remain hopeful about how users of networked technologies have been able to subvert or overthrow long-standing power structures: an
entire subfield of consumer-identity literature focuses on the role of the Internet in
"prosumption:” the blurring of lines between media message producers and consumers
online. The passive consumer is no more, and message producers—marketing staff—use
consumer-produced media as feedback and to produce new, “crowdsourced” messages
(Andrejevic, 2002; Andrejevic, 2008; Beer & Burrows, 2010; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010;
Miller, 2011).

In the introduction to a special issue of The Journal of Consumer Culture devoted
to prosumption, Beer & Burrows (2010) define prosumption as “activity, productive
involvement and playfulness that consumers might bring to acts of consumption”,
associating the prosumer, who wants corporations to “craft” products that appeal very
specifically to certain small groups or individuals, with a sort of postmodern ‘free spirit’
(pgs. 4-5). In an article in the same issue, Ritzer & Jurgenson (2010) claim that
prosumption moves producer/consumer relationships beyond traditional conceptions of
capitalism because of the lack of control that corporations can exert over prosumers, and
because of the love that most prosumers have for the brands associated with their online
activities (p. 22).

Mainstream business writers such as Mainwaring (2011) and Moffitt & Dover
(2011) are even more glowing in their portrayal of the producer/consumer relationship,
claiming that the new prosumer society allows customers and online content creators to
hold corporations more accountable for their actions than ever before, to catch the
attention of corporate leadership in an effort to direct policies, and even to potentially
become policy liaisons between corporations and governmental entities (Mainwaring, p.
157). Deuze (2007) emphasizes the drastic changes in work duties for media producers as
they are expected to consume and process much greater amounts of information from
other media outlets, and to listen to consumers, as part of their jobs now, as well (p. 251).
The amount of dialogue coming from the producers' end has expanded as well. Individual
job positions and even entire departments have been created for social media liaisons or
content creators in the corporate, nonprofit, governmental, and education sectors.

Unfortunately, many of the most restrictive offline prejudices and power
structures seem to have replicated themselves or evolved in the virtual world. In recent
years, scholars in several fields, all working from a neo-Marxist perspective, have
critiqued the 'dark side' of participatory Web culture. While consumers enjoy creating
content and participating in brand-centric online communities, their (sometimes quite
intensive) work is unpaid, so that they end up offering corporations their newest and
trendiest marketing ideas without having to pay tens of thousands of dollars in consulting
fees to a traditional advertising agency. Andrejevic (2002) claims that the consumer's
submission to online tracking and surveillance tools is itself a form of value-generating
work that is unacknowledged by corporations, and should ideally be compensated (p.
231). Andrejevic shares the fascinating idea that the idea of personal privacy is not itself
suffering because of increased online surveillance; rather, the injustices come with
differential access to tools of surveillance, user education about those tools, and the terms
and conditions under which users allow themselves to be watched (p. 232). In order to
participate in the "free" online culture that is so rich and fascinating, individual users are
subsumed under the hegemonic rules of groups, both private and public. Just as
workplace monitoring rationalized production in the 20th Century, says Andrejevic, so
online surveillance tools are rationalizing consumption in the 21st (p. 232). This
production arises out of consumer activities as part of a process that “feels” empowering on its surface: “an incitement to self-disclosure as a form of self-expression and individuation” (p. 237). Fiske (1978) observed a similar division between virtual and real equality in his research on television portrayals of class: “the mass medium is paradoxically classless—in the sense that most of its content derives from the experience of and is directed towards the members of what we can now see is the class to which the vast majority of us belong: the subordinate class in itself” (p. 106).

In Andrejevic’s more recent work (2011), he attempts to develop a theory of exploitation for the era of commercial social networking (p. 83). The terms-of-use statements users must agree to in order to post content to social-networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace often allow the companies to reuse posted information, images, and videos in other ways. This causes a “separation” of social activities and customs from areas of life where they were formerly located. “Crucial resources for sociability are no longer in our own hands (at least to the extent that they once were), but are separated from us and stored in servers.... imagine how much of the data upon which current social interactions rely … would be lost if Facebook were to disappear” (p. 88). In this way, the power conferred by a strong social network of friends, family and colleagues is no longer directly held by an individual person, but rather in a technological repository controlled by a corporation.

Andrejevic foresees a dim future for those who choose not to participate in social networks: he predicts that tools such as Facebook will become as indispensible in the workplace as email (p. 96) and cites many instances where potential employers examine the size and breadth of an applicant’s social networks and the content they post on the
sites (p. 96). In the ultra-competitive job market of 2011, it is only too easy to see how one’s level of social-networking savvy could be a major decision-making factor in hiring. Andrejevic concludes with the idea that it is now completely unnatural for us in American culture to think of the Internet as a non-commercial entity—which it indeed was, in its origin. We are now accustomed to thinking that the Internet is necessarily subject to the same market forces ruling the offline world of production and consumption (p. 99).

Hands (2011) highlights some of the more technical aspects of control through social-networking technologies. She states that although mass media discourse portrays networked technologies most often as a neutral tool (p. 81), the massive move in the late 1990s and early 2000s away from Internet technologies (computers communicating on a peer-to-peer networked basis via IP address, bulletin boards, and user groups/forums) to the World Wide Web (http:// protocols; “Web 2.0”), represents a move away from equality and toward hierarchy. The result is that social-networking and Web 2.0 activities—which, to users, appear as democratic peer-to-peer exchanges—are actually ruled hierarchically by the protocols, traffic, advertising, and ultimately the profits, of the “parent” site (p. 86).

Fisher (2010) suggests that these drastic changes in production and consumption also mean the creation of a different type of human. Fisher outlines discursive strategies that are used to conflate human traits and characteristics of technologies: for example, it’s incredibly common to imagine the brain portrayed as “hardware” and the mind or consciousness as “software” (p. 159); the increasingly specific and intimate scans of brain activity made by computerized machines in the fields of medicine and law
enforcement (p. 160); and finally, the comparison of individual humans in a social
network of relationships as analogous to the arrangement of computers and mobile
devices in a global network (p. 163).

The prior sections in this literature review examined the social and technological
context in which brands' messages are being promoted to audiences. The following
section will describe some of the theoretical tools I will be using to examine branded
messages and audience responses in this study.

**Part 3: Theoretical Considerations: Feminism, Reception Theory, Semiology**

A brief overview of the different eras and epistemologies of feminism is important
in understanding the current cultural atmosphere surrounding the brand-audience
interactions on Facebook, and as background for an analysis that focuses on gender
identity. The two brands, Nike Women in particular, often employ messages reminiscent
of both third-wave feminism and postfeminism to promote their products and to create a
sense of community among consumers of the products—as many corporations and brands
have been doing for years in an attempt to connect with female audiences. Kilbourne
(1999) collected advertisements throughout the 1990s that suggested women could
change their lives and change the world through “empowerment,” “attitude” and
“rebellion”—which would be accomplished through purchase of the right nail polish,
nylons, or body lotion (p. 153). As Riordan (2001) states, much of the “pro-girl” rhetoric
of these messages is meant to encourage individual consumption habits, rather than
promoting any actual social change (Riordan, p. 280).
A study by Baldwin (2006) demonstrated how audiences easily associate sexualized advertising images with power and economic class. She conducted interviews with 20 young women centering on their perceptions of sexualized magazine images. The majority of interviewees associated the most sexualized images with the highest degrees of personal empowerment, the highest social class, and the highest level of career achievement (pp. 105, 109)—however, these images were ranked lower on the scale of “social positivity,” which the author defines with such descriptors as “nice, happy, social, outgoing, has friends” (p. 103). Baldwin describes how interviewees’ perceptions of “empowerment” are associated with class and sexuality:

In examining the interconnected web of victimization and sexualized empowerment, we can see the extent to which a global culture steeped in capitalism’s ideology has arisen, and we assert that it demands a critique focusing on the interaction of capital power and media ideology (p. 124). In cases such as these, media sexualization of women has nothing to do with arousing sexual desire. Instead this technique is a ploy by corporations to give consumers the illusion of gaining power through buying, when it is the corporations who continue to hold the real power on a global scale.

**Feminism(s) and the Media**

While the first wave of feminism, from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1920s, advocated for women’s equality in basic legal, democratic, and human rights arenas (voting equality, legal representation, etc.), the second wave in the 1960s and 1970s concentrated on issues such as women joining the workforce, wage equality, reproductive rights, and the institution of marriage. Both of these women’s social movements
supported cultural, economic and political changes, working toward the goal of women's complete equality with men. In contrast, the feminism of the 1990s and onward emphasizes difference—the celebration of individual women's life choices—over a general ideal of equality (Riordan, 2001, p. 280).

Tong (2009) traces the rise of postmodern feminism in this time period, which is specifically informed by Foucault's work on discipline of the body and discourse surrounding the female body and sexuality; one of the goals of postmodern feminism is to expose discursive practices about the body and to create new ways of seeing and talking about bodies and sex (p. 278). Postmodern and third-wave feminism also seek to escape racially and economically privileged narratives, embracing and publicizing the experiences of women that would have been marginalized by the largely white and middle-class second wave. Additionally, these forms of feminism strive to recover the agency of women who would have been traditionally seen as exploited victims of patriarchy—strippers and sex workers—and also to include transgendered women (p. 288). While third-wave and postmodern feminist thought have achieved a great success in bringing diversity to a movement once reserved for only "certain" women, they have their disadvantages as well: in focusing so intently on the individual's unique story and her choices, there is no collective goal or unifying message for all women to rally behind.

The fragmented nature of these discourses has allowed many mass-media voices to declare that the goals of feminism have been reached and that North American society has entered into a postfeminist age, in which just about every choice a woman can make can potentially be deemed "empowering." Riordan states that although third-wave feminism and postfeminism share some similarities, many postfeminist ideals go against
third-wave values, and it can be dangerous to conflate the two (p. 280). Both Riordan and Durham (2003) write of the massive commercialization of postfeminist “empowerment” in the late 1990s through such cultural icons as the Spice Girls (Riordan, p. 290), and Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Durham, p. 24). However, these “girl power” icons promoted a brand of “kick-ass,” sexy femininity that is overwhelmingly white, blonde, slim, small, and young (Durham, p. 26).

**Feminist Critiques of Body Representation in Media**

The pervasiveness of a socially-constructed feminine body ideal in mass media is of the most pernicious and difficult issues to be addressed by feminism in the 20th and 21st centuries. Despite all the advances in women’s status in private life, the workplace, and in government, the body still remains a site that is highly policed and disciplined by social ideals. Women still seem to spend a great deal of time modifying and adorning their bodies for a “panoptical male connoisseur” (Bartky, 1988, p. 72).

Many of the works consulted for this analysis focused on the increasing attention to youthful bodies and slender bodies in American culture through the 19th and 20th Centuries. For example, Baldwin (2006) includes a review of literature that traces the mass-culture sexualization of American women’s bodies back to the Gold Rush era and the women who traveled West to work as actresses, in brothels, and as saloon girls. In the wake of this era, images of these women were circulated throughout Victorian media sources that sensationalized their contrast to the “respectable,” sedate wife and mother of the time (p. 33). Eventually, the work of these women evolved into the popular art form of burlesque (p. 37), in which decorative costumes, poses and dance routines were designed to show off women’s legs and cleavage.
Rubinstein (2001) traces the cultural origin of the slender, active, youthful female ideal to the rise of the “flapper” lifestyle in the 1920s. Young women in the 1920s took unprecedented steps toward sexual and social equality. They celebrated this by giving up long skirts, long hair and corsets in favor of short bobs and slim, low-cut dresses (p. 121). Featherstone (1991) also describes how the rise of an ‘ideal’ body type for both men and women coincided with the rise of national magazine advertising and distribution in the 1920s (p. 180).

Researcher and media educator Jean Kilbourne (1999, 2010) has been collecting advertisements portraying women’s bodies since the 1960s. What began as a collage of magazine pages on her refrigerator door evolved into a slideshow and lecture, and later into the Killing Us Softly film series. Kilbourne has identified several themes in her collection that persist from the 1960s through the present: the women in the advertisements are typically shown in submissive poses, covering their mouths or faces; they are portrayed as very thin and almost shrinking into nothingness; and the female body is often portrayed as “dissected” – either headless, or only the woman’s breasts or legs are shown in the ads. Parts of the woman’s body are also typically portrayed as, or combined with, the actual product being sold (Killing Us Softly 4).

Rubinstein observes a resurgence of the focus on the slim body in the 1980s, with a new emphasis on exercise and firm female bodies with a toned but subtle musculature. Bordo (1993) also focuses on the “toned” body ideal in her feminist analysis of American cultural messages about the female body in the 1980s. Bordo’s analysis of “slim and toned” body discourse is tied to her explanation of the rise in eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia, during this same time period. Bordo’s hypothesis is that
cultural ideals about femininity are pathologized in contemporary female “ailments” of that time, and that women’s bodies become culturally contested sites in times of war, national instability or economic crisis (p. 50). In another article, Bordo (1988) describes female anorexics’ striving toward a “boyish” ideal as an attraction toward the “freedom and independence” suggested by that slim and athletic body. However, Bordo reveals the ultimate folly of this goal: “each hour, each minute that is spent in anxious pursuit of that ideal … is in fact time and energy diverted from inner development and social achievement” (p. 105).

Bordo also offers an evocative description of the ways in which late 20th Century advertising echoed the flapper ideal of the 1920s: “The images suggest amused detachment, casual playfulness, flirtatiousness without demand, and lightness of touch … a delightfully unconscious relationship to her body” (p. 108). Jhally (1987) notes that while these gendered and sexualized advertisements are not “false,” they are “hyper-ritualisations” that over-emphasize some gender qualities and de-emphasize others: so, for example, many women are genetically predisposed to a thin and boyish body type, but this type is over-represented in advertising and is also portrayed as the ideal for all women. Kimmel (2004) points out that, just as the economic gap grows between rich and poor, there is also a growing gap between body types in America for both men and women:

If a measure of successful femininity is being thin, and a measure of masculinity is appearing strong and powerful, then anorexics and obsessive bodybuilders are not psychological misfits or deviants; they are overconformists to gender norms … Just as there has been an increase in
the gap between rich and poor...so too has there been an increased bifurcation between the embodied ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’. Americans are both increasingly thin and increasingly overweight (p. 235).

Many critics have observed an increasing focus on ever-younger cover models in current images from fashion and beauty advertising, so much so that photos of 10-year-old child model Thylane Blondeau, who was posed in adult clothing—and in what could be called “suggestive” postures—for the French edition of *VOGUE* magazine, went “viral” on the Internet, creating an online controversy in August 2011 (Cardiff, 2011). A similar phenomenon of “age compression” causes younger audiences to consume media meant for older teens or adults. Wainwright’s 2007 research on teen magazine advertisements and readership describes the phenomenon of ‘tweens “watching up”’; that is, they begin consuming materials and brands marketed to teenagers in order to prepare themselves for the teen years (p. 3).

Levin & Kilbourne (2008) detail some of the results of this “age compression” in their book. Young children get the message that “sexiness” is privileged in our culture before being able to understand what sexuality is; children are now also engaging in “pre-teen rebellion” against parents long before they reach their teen years (p. 77). Walsh & Ward (2008) review several studies of the effects of gendered and sexualized media on adolescent consumers. While the images in advertising are not harmful in themselves, the authors state, they have negative effects when viewers perceive and internalize the discrepancy between the media image and their own bodies and behaviors, “an experience known as gender role conflict or stress” (p. 132).
Also, while children and teens may receive many different messages about gender roles from parents, friends, and educational and religious institutions, none of these messages are typically encountered with the same frequency and regularity as popular media messages (p. 151). Advertising can be physically harmful to children in some cases (Harrison, 2008). Food advertising targeted to teens focuses on processed, prepackaged snacks and fast food. And, while teens are shown enjoying the food, “few teen characters were overweight, and those who were, were all male .... girls associate themselves with fattening foods but avoid eating them and thus avoid becoming fat” (Harrison, p. 182).

Again, just as ‘tweens reach for the adolescent ideal from below, adults are striving to maintain it from above: As the Baby Boomer generation ages, there is an increased focus on idealizing the attributes of youth and maintaining many of these attributes into maturity. This has resulted in a “rebranding” of both middle age and retirement age by advertisers, to incorporate more imagery traditionally associated with youth (Featherstone, p. 383) and an increase in purchases by consumers, such as Harley-Davidson motorcycles, that evoke youthful rebellion and freedom (Gobe, p. 4).

Both Featherstone and Raisborough (2011) take notice of the moral weight attached to body maintenance. A woman with a slim and toned body is seen to be making the “right” decisions about health, exercise and food, whereas a woman with a fuller or overweight figure seems lazy or morally lax in her lifestyle choices. Featherstone notes that blatant display of signs of aging, or “letting oneself go,” also seem to show a lack of motivation on the part of an individual, male or female, of a “certain age” (p. 178). Raisborough analyzes the moralistic narrative arcs found in weight-loss game shows and
reality television focused on the body as cautionary tales: “The lessons here are often taught through narratives of disgust, humiliation, mockery, or pity ... It's the promise of an escape from a life of humiliation that helps sell self-help texts” (p. 18). All of these media messages combine to idealize the slim and virtuous body and to marginalize the fat body as something freakish and “monstrous,” “scaring” the consumer into a healthy lifestyle (Raisborough, p. 113). Kilbourne acknowledges the unfortunate juxtaposition of unhealthy media images of thinness with the obesity epidemic in the film lecture Killing Us Softly 4 (2010). Kilbourne states that both obesity and the obsession with thinness are symptoms of a larger cultural illness: rather than turning to each other to achieve feelings of connection and making relationships work, individuals turn instead to food or to consumer products to achieve an addictive feeling of connection.

The next section of this thesis describes the ways in which researchers have explored the issues of audience reception of, and interactivity with, media messages. Audiences can manipulate, reclaim, and change these messages through their participation in online communities.

Feminism and Reception Theory

One of the foundational works in reception theory emerged from the Birmingham School’s Critical Theory/Cultural Studies body of work. Stuart Hall was one of the creators of “cultural studies:” an interdisciplinary approach which involved “radically rethinking the articulation between the material and the cultural or symbolic factors in social analysis” (Henry, 2001, p. 168). Hall’s 1973 article “Encoding/Decoding” introduces the three ways a media message can be received by an individual. Audiences who come away from a media experience with the preferred or dominant reading have
"bought into" the message that the media creator was trying to convey. They see what the person that produced the message wanted them to see, a media message contained within a hegemonic system of culturally-defined codes. According to Hall, this message is one that usually supports the status quo (p. 56). An audience member who reacts with a negotiated meaning is one who either misunderstands or disagrees with some aspects of the media message, but, he or she may also understand or sympathize with other aspects. According to John Fiske (1978), who applied Hall's theories to television and other popular culture media, this is the perspective that most of us arrive from as audience members and consumers. We are each situated in a social world of our own making and understanding, and typically bring at least some elements of our education and history to the consumption of a media message: For Fiske, this is necessary in order for the act of decoding to occur at all (p. 105). Finally, Hall's third category of audience perspective, oppositional decoding, occurs when an audience member develops interpretations that deliberately undermine the message the marketers were attempting to spread.

The work of Hall and his cultural studies legacy are cited frequently by researchers studying media messages. Hall's work is especially useful in examining the reception of media messages online, as participants in online communities can participate in discourse so quickly and easily, making the medium much more interactive than television or cinema. Hall's cultural studies work, in general, also inspired many feminist theorists because of its attention to the individual's subject position, the centrality of gender and sexuality to issues of power, and the idea that the "personal is political" (Henry, p. 168).
A parallel branch of media studies began with the work of Laura Mulvey (Lane, 2000), who brought a feminist and psychoanalytic approach to the analysis of Hollywood cinema. Mulvey argued that the “male gaze” propagated through Hollywood movies leaves women viewers with no agency as active audience members and consumers. Instead, Mulvey advocated for a new form of avant-garde cinema that would better express a woman’s point of view. Subsequent researchers in this field reacted against many of Mulvey’s ideas: especially her claims that the experience of spectatorship is universal (Lane, p. 15), that the dominant “gaze” portrayed in Hollywood movies is always male (Storey, 2006), and that women cannot find any agency as spectators within the realm of popular culture (Storey, p. 106). However, Mulvey’s idea of studying audience reception by gender—that men and women can consume media in different ways—inspired many subsequent researchers.

Women’s consumption of media such as romance novels, movies, and magazines has been studied from the standpoint of reception theory throughout the 1980s and 1990s. While some researchers focused on the inequalities experienced by women and viewed their devoted consumption of romances, movies, and magazines as a form of escapism (Storey, p. 112), others such as Hermes (1995) see this perspective as creating too much distance between the feminist researcher and the media consumers—after all, we are all consumers of popular culture to some extent, and many of us are devoted fans. "It needs to be accepted that readers of all kinds (including we critics) enjoy texts in some contexts that we are critical of in other contexts....If, as feminists, we aim to bring about changes in the societies in which we live, we had better understand the investments we and others have in them first" (Hermes, p. 2).
Other researchers have explored women's media consumption from the perspective of pleasure: whether the media consumed is considered a "guilty pleasure," or whether the enjoyable experience of consuming pleasurable media such as soap operas is merely regarded as another dimension of everyday life (Storey, pp. 109, 115). Some of these researchers, such as Janice Winship, found the theoretical perspectives of third-wave and postfeminism to be friendlier to the study of pop culture from the perspective of a consumer or a fan (Storey, p. 121). Cameron (2000) studied the relationship between postfeminism and women's consumption of self-help literature, finding that both the self-help industry and the discourse of postfeminism adopted the concept of 'empowerment' from the jargon of psychotherapy and made it such a pervasive meme in Western culture.

The therapeutic way of talking about power ... is more conducive to the commodification of power than alternative ways of understanding it. It goes along with the idea that 'empowerment'—the process whereby power is acquired and possessed—can be an object of individual consumption .... One of the differences between now and then is, undoubtedly, the commodification of feminism itself, and of its principal goal" (Cameron, p. 215, 220).

Durham (2011) carries these participatory ideas of audience and identity into the world of online media consumption: the "selves" we create online are just parts of a more comprehensive, embodied self: there is a "joining" of parts of oneself to the online media and that part of the self joins in the "flux" of online discourse (p. 56).
The Virtual Body

Counter to Fisher’s (2010) view of merging and conflation between humans and machines and the subsequent erasing of the physical body, research has shown that participants in online activities and communities can carry their embodied prejudices with them into the virtual world, and that reactions to profile and/or avatar appearance in the virtual world may even influence related behavior in offline interactions. Separate studies by Yee & Bailenson (2009) and Yee, Bailenson & Ducheneaut (2009) tested the influence of online personas on offline self-perceptions and behaviors among users. In Yee & Bailenson, the authors found that identity cues in an embodied virtual-reality environment affected participants’ choices more than the identity cues on their own, by comparing participants’ behavior in an immersive virtual-reality environment to behavior when browsing profiles on a dating site (p. 206). In two additional studies, Yee, Bailenson & Ducheneaut found that an online avatar’s height and attractiveness in a game environment were found to be significant predictors of a player’s performance in the game (p. 294). The authors also found that the “Proteus effect” influenced the offline activities of the participants: those participants that received a taller avatar in the game environment negotiated more aggressively in conversational interactions outside the game (p. 305).

Walther et. al. (2008) studied the impressions that others take from friends’ postings on an individual’s Facebook profile: Facebook friends can “tag” individuals’ pictures without their specific permission, causing sometimes-unwanted pictures to show up on an individual’s profile page. Friends can also leave text updates on an individual’s profile page which would need to be deleted physically by the user. The authors of this
study found that the attractiveness of friends posting messages on an individual’s Facebook profile page raise the likelihood that a third party would find the individual (either a male or a female) attractive; interestingly, the study also found that third-party users who viewed positive comments posted by friends on a female user’s Facebook page were more likely to rate her attractive, whereas the reverse was true for male users: a male user’s Facebook page with negative comments posted by friends was rated by third-party users as raising his attractiveness level (p. 43).

Some of the socially-constructed gender traits ascribed to men and women in the offline world can follow them online as well. Some scholars claim that women participate in social networks such as Facebook to a greater degree than men because of these networks’ emphasis on sustaining nonlinear, creative conversation: Stern’s (1992) research found that female consumers seem to prefer advertising texts that are multifaceted, polysemic and that focus on possibilities and participation (p. 18) whereas male audiences prefer a more clear-cut and straightforward story. Also, these networks offer a liberating social outlet for some women, especially stay-at-home mothers who are raising very young children, those with physical disabilities and those who are dealing with shyness (Miller, 2011, p. 170). Further investigation into women’s and men’s styles of discourse with advertising via Facebook offers a rich opportunity to continue research in this area. Durham (2011) offers some future direction for feminist researchers in this field: she describes the individual subject as an experiential self and readings of online media as “simultaneously a response and a formation.” In this sense, an analysis of online media is relevant to everyone else who has experienced that media, because it has become a part of themselves (p. 57).
Semiotics: Denotative and Connotative Meanings

To this point, this literature review has covered the use of brand and advertising symbols that convey meanings to consumers in many formats: from newspaper and magazine advertisements to online conversations and user-generated content. The text and images transmitted provide us with certain social assumptions about gender roles, femininity, and the body. Semiotics is a field of study that examines the relationship between textual and visual “signs” and the social meanings behind them. Jhally (1987) notes that a semiological approach is useful for audience-reception studies, as it is audience understanding which “fills” a sign with meaning (p. 130). Eco (1976) defined how a sign can express two meanings: the denotative (the literal meaning of the sign) and the connotative (the socially-constructed system of meaning(s) in which the sign exists) (p. 55). Fiske (1978, 1987) used semiotics to describe audience reception of signs from television shows and other pop culture phenomena. Baudrillard (2005) described how connotation and denotation can apply to the objects we consume, not only to spoken or written language (p. 8). McRobbie (1991) used denotative and connotative meanings to organize her data from teen magazines; and Barnard (1996) used these two meanings to describe the significance of the colors pink and blue in gendered clothing products.

As readers of text or viewers of images, the denotative meaning represents what we read or see: a person wearing a pink or blue shirt; the words “pink shirt” or “blue shirt.” We see or imagine a specific blend of hues which combine to make the color pink or blue and that the shirt is used to cover the upper body. The connotative meanings of these images or words are part of the socio-cultural background that makes us think “the baby in the pink shirt is female” or “the woman in the pink clothing is supporting
research for breast cancer.” Each reader reflexively generates these connotative meanings from words or images from her unique perspective, and these perspectives, while they may feel “natural” or as if they have always existed, are, in reality, socially constructed (Barnard, p. 84). Jhally notes the importance for researchers to acknowledge that each individual advertising image or text exists within an ecosystem of meaning: all advertisements together constitute a “system of images” and it is the cumulative and institutional context of advertisements that forms the background to audience reception (p. 139).

Fiske divided connotative meanings into two types in his analyses of television programs: myth-making (the sign evokes another idea common to the audience member’s culture) and connotation (nonverbal signs of subjectivity present in elements such as camera angle, background, and lighting of the scene, meant to signify something to the audience) (p. 45). Fiske also describes a third, intertextual component to semiological analysis: the audience member’s subjective reaction to the sign (p. 46). This is the point at which his work on semiotics begins to build on Hall’s reception theory. Fiske additionally discusses the arrangement of signs into semiotic codes: a code is a set of signs that can be arranged by an accompanying set of conventional rules (p. 59).

The goal of my project is to propel this tradition of critical and cultural studies into the realm of social media: to examine which, if any, socially-constructed meanings are exchanged between brands and audiences on Facebook through the use of textual and visual signs:
RQ1: How do Victoria’s Secret PINK and Nike Women brand their company and products on Facebook.com to target audiences?

   RQ1a: What denotative and connotative signs are generated by the Victoria's Secret PINK and Nike Women Facebook Pages to portray femininity and female body image in text and photos?

   RQ1b: What are the major semiotic codes which can be identified in text and photo updates posted by the Victoria’s Secret PINK and Nike Women brands on Facebook.com?

RQ2: How do consumers respond to text and photo updates posted via the Victoria’s Secret PINK and Nike Women branded Facebook Pages?

   RQ2a: What denotative and connotative signs (specifically regarding femininity and female body image) are used by consumer “fans” of the Victoria's Secret PINK and Nike Women Facebook Pages in their text responses to Facebook posts by these two brands?

   RQ2b: What major semiotic codes can be identified in consumer fans’ text responses to Facebook posts by the Victoria’s Secret PINK and Nike Women Facebook Pages?
CHAPTER III

METHOD

This project consisted of 12 weeks of data collection of text and images produced by the two brands on their Facebook Pages and audience responses to the text and images, focusing on the connotative and denotative meanings present in both through close reading. This analysis is followed by a critical semiological interpretation of selected text and images, as informed by feminist theory, and audience responses, as informed by reception theory.

Data

Three types of data were collected during the 12-week observation period, from December 2011 through February 2012:

1. 272 Facebook status updates posted by the marketing staff of Victoria’s Secret and Nike to two branded Pages: the Victoria’s Secret PINK brand Page (www.facebook.com/vspink) and the Nike Women brand Page (www.facebook.com/nikewomen). These updates are typically posted anywhere from once every few days to 2 to 3 times per day, depending on the news that is to be shared by the marketing staff.

2. 147 screenshots of digital photograph thumbnails that often accompany text updates. Some of these photo thumbnails were supplemental to the update (a thumbnail preview of a larger photo on another Facebook Page, photo album, or
web address link) or the photo previews were the focus of the update (with the
text portion of the update functioning more as a caption).

3. Selections of between five and 50 readers’ typed responses posted to each
textual and photo update. Because of the technical limitations of the comment
field on Facebook at this time, reader responses consist only of text and links to
other Facebook or web addresses. Responses relevant to the topics of my thesis
were collected and saved in greater numbers.

In the data collection phase of this project, I employed qualitative research techniques
(Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) of observation and field notes in order to “study things in their
natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the
meanings people bring to them” (p. 3).

About the Researcher

In the process of collecting and analyzing data for this study, it was important that
I keep in mind the meanings that I personally attach to both the branded posts and
audience responses. As a middle-class, Midwestern, White woman in her early 30s with a
post-graduate degree, I closely resemble the average Facebook user as of May 2011
(Nielsen, 2011), and I am a daily user of the social-networking site. I also have had the
experience of creating and maintaining branded pages on Facebook for two different
employers. This experience gives me a unique perspective allowing me to effectively
decode both the messages intended by the brands’ social-media staffs who are posting the
text and images, as well as the different types of responses posted by fans and followers.
Additionally, as someone who works with social media websites and updates them for
personal enjoyment and professional reasons, I do consider my online identity to be an important and significant part of my overall identity.

I approached the material in the same manner as Hermes, Winship, and others who have studied the consumption of women's media from the standpoint of audience reception. I am not a detached observer looking down at the conversation from on high, but also a fan of the two brands and their products. I enjoy seeing the updates from these and other brands just as the other fans do, care about how the brands portray their products, and think it is important that both brands acknowledge different sizes, races, and types of women among their consumer bases. I had already been subscribed to these updates from both the Victoria's Secret PINK and the Nike Women brands by "liking" them on the social networking site (agreeing to subscribe to their posted updates) and read their content casually from the perspective of a consumer.

I devoted the 12-week observation period to carefully following the updates posted by both brands along with followers' responses in real time, checking all updates and responses on a weekly basis. My observations were recorded in weekly memos describing the denotative meanings and theorizing about the possible connotative meanings of that week's posts and readers' responses. Additionally, I archived any text, images, or reader responses that appeared to exemplify any salient connotative meanings. Means of collecting this data included copying and pasting text, capturing screenshots of image thumbnails accompanying the text posts on the two Pages, and capturing screenshots of "conversations" consisting of the branded posts and audience responses shown below posts. During and after the observation period I was able to review my
archived weekly memos as a collection of data from which I then drew out major recurring codes and themes.

**Semiological Analysis**

In the second phase of my research, a semiological analysis informed by feminist theory and reception theory was used to organize and distill the many connotative meanings collected during the observation phase. As described by McRobbie,

Semiological analysis proceeds by isolating sets of codes around which the message is constructed. These conventions operate at several levels, visual and narrative... these codes constitute the 'rules' by which different meanings are produced and it is the identification and consideration of these in detail that provides the basis to the analysis (p. 91).

In her study of teen girls' magazines from the 1960s to the 1980s, McRobbie identified four main codes under which the magazine content could be organized: the code of romance, the code of personal/domestic life, the code of fashion and beauty, and the code of pop music (p. 93). These codes were also subdivided into their visual and narrative forms, and example images and text are described to illustrate each code found during analysis (p. 94).

The semiotic codes identified in the branded messages, and the salient visual and textual signs that exemplify those codes, are described in the Results section of this paper, informed by the theoretical background discussed in the literature review. The
major semiotic codes identified in the audience responses are described as well, informed by reception theory.

**Limitations of the Method**

My observation and analysis of branded Facebook posts was necessarily limited by my own subject position as a researcher. However, my experience as a Facebook Page administrator for two organizations also limited me because I read the updates and audience responses from three different perspectives: as a consumer and fellow audience member, as a communication researcher, and as a professional involved in the world of social media marketing. My professional experience caused me to prefer some updates over others because of their well-crafted messages and the willingness of Page administrators to respond to consumer questions and complaints. My impression of how effectively the Page administrators were promoting or representing the brand shaded my own interpretations of the content of posts and audience responses.

Also, as stated previously, I do fall within the demographic for people who are frequent users of Facebook. I am a daily visitor to the site, so it is possible that I may have overlooked themes that a less-frequent user of the site would notice. I attempted to counteract this “desensitization” by taking very detailed, field-note style memos during the observation period.

Additionally, cultural/critical media analyses are often seen as biased and not generalizable (Baran & Davis, p. 15) from a post-positivist perspective. A quantitative content analysis of the Facebook posts and responses gathered during my observation period also would have had the capability to produce results. However, this method was
not chosen for the study because of the polysemic and ever-changing nature of online posts and discussions. Additionally, content analysis can be difficult to use in online social-networking contexts where many of the user responses to posts can be nonsensical, in languages other than English, not on topic, or contain advertisements for other websites. In a medium where users share and repurpose different sets of words and images daily, I felt that a critical analysis would allow me to analyze the content more effectively by drawing a broader perspective around selected, salient examples.

The 12-week observation period was also a potential limitation to this study. I chose this time period because I believed it would provide me with a representative amount of data (272 posts, 147 images and selected responses) in which to identify semiotic codes and to provide sufficient textual and visual examples to illustrate each code. However, since both the clothing retailers promote seasonal collections, the themes found were influenced by seasonal events such as the holiday shopping season surrounding Thanksgiving and Christmas, the New Year, college football bowl games, the Super Bowl, and Valentine’s Day.

Finally, the format of the Facebook commenting system presents some limitations to the study. I will only be observing the free News Feed posts shared by the two brands, not any advertising posts (which typically appear on the users’ right-hand sidebar) as these are paid advertisements which are posted through Facebook’s Ad Marketplace, which is a completely separate division of the site and of the company. Additionally, Facebook Page administrators for the brands can also take steps to discourage or eliminate user responses that they find to be counterproductive or offensive – obviously, I will never have the opportunity to see these unless I happen to view them before a Page
administrator deletes them. Page administrator activities are beyond the scope of this study, but administrators’ actions on Facebook Pages certainly offer an opportunity for future research.

Despite these limitations, the method of semiological analysis paired effectively with the polysemic nature of the posts and responses on Facebook. This method has been used effectively before with magazine advertisements and other aspects of consumer culture, and its application in this study provided informative results that can potentially further scholarship in this area.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview

The following sections of this analysis detail results gained from the 12-week observation period, organized by type of content analyzed, the guiding theoretical foundations of this project, and my research questions. First, the denotative and connotative signs expressed in textual and photo updates by administrators of the two Facebook Pages will be described. The second section contains an analysis of the semiotic codes generated by the accumulation of these textual and visual signs. The following sections will shift focus to fan responses to this content: the denotative and connotative meanings that fans express in their replies to the Page posts; the fans’ reception of the Page posts’ meanings; and finally, the semiotic codes expressed in fans’ text responses.

I have employed some formatting techniques throughout this section to aid readers: longer passages from branded Page updates and from user comment dialogues are indented and italicized. Commenters are referred to by their first names only, except in cases where Page administrators used their last name in an update. I have tried to preserve the original spelling and grammar variations employed by commenters to give a better sense of how the dialogues actually appeared, but in some cases I have placed correct spellings or explanations in brackets within, or following, the words in question. Finally I have included the number of “Likes” (other users’ thumbs-ups) in parentheses to the right of users’ comments as they appeared on Facebook when I viewed them.
Page Content: Denotative Meanings

This section describes the denotative signs found in content posted by the two Pages: the literal meanings of the Page post content (Eco, 1976). During the observation period, Victoria’s Secret PINK updated their brand Page with new posts anywhere from three times a week, to once a day when sales or events such as the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show are happening. The Nike Women staff typically update their Page three times a day. Both Pages commonly posted updates around noon and 6 p.m. Many Americans are checking Facebook at these times, during the lunch hour and after work – sharing peaks at noon at a bit after 7 p.m. (Zarrella, 2011). Overall, the Nike Women Page updates reflect a more responsive and attentive attitude to the portrayal of the brand on Facebook. Most questions asked by fans are answered by a Page administrator within 24 hours. In the time I was observing the posts on these Pages, I never saw a PINK Page administrator respond to a fan’s question with an answer. Additionally, the PINK Page administrators did not remove many offensive comments from among the responses to their updates.

Both companies’ Pages posted periodic updates to Facebook in order to communicate information about their product and links for purchasing products online. About a third of the total posts are these types of direct navigation to online commerce resources. Both companies display their products on female models, and sometimes show the products by themselves in single photos with these types of updates. Photos appear in the Facebook News Feed as thumbnail images, which can then be clicked on by a user to be enlarged and viewed in a gallery. The Victoria’s Secret PINK Page also frequently paired small photo galleries of three to five photos showing different looks that could be
achieved with the product (for more information on the process of posting photos to Facebook, see Appendix).

**Membership “Apps” Provide Enhanced Brand Experiences**

Both brands have special programs that engage high levels of fan participation. Victoria’s Secret PINK offers Pink Nation, a virtual “club” in which members can get previews of new products, receive coupons for special offers, and find out about exclusive sale offers. There are also Pink Nation “apps”, or specifically-targeted software applications, for smartphone devices such as iPhones and Android mobile phones. PINK Nation is described on the Victoria’s Secret web site in this way:

> When you join, you’ll enter a world filled with games, goodies, special offers and A-list access to PINK events. Members also get the chance to participate in exclusive contests and design challenges that will help inspire our brand.

Nike Women offers a similar club for its fans, along with a fitness app for users. Nike Training Club, a series of workout videos highlighting different exercise moves, is accessible through the Nike Women Channel on the video-sharing site YouTube.com. A Nike Training Club app for the iPhone also allows users to structure and time their workouts and follow along with the videos. The Nike Women website describes the app as “your own personal trainer, anytime, anywhere.” On Facebook, the Victoria’s Secret PINK Page promotes the Pink Nation club itself about once a month, and free offers for Pink Nation members about once a week. Nike Women promotes their NTC app and links to videos from the Nike Women Channel on YouTube two or three times a week.

The two Facebook Pages use these high-engagement consumer groups to add interest and interactivity to the concept of their brands. During the observation period,
Victoria’s Secret PINK offered their Pink Nation members a chance to choose a slogan and a graphic design for a promotional water bottle: a post from Tuesday, January 10 reads:

To the polls PINK fans! We want YOU to choose the graphic on our PINK Nation member-exclusive water bottle! See all six designs and vote for your fave once a day thru Feb 6.

1,466 fans “liked” this post, and 95 commented. Most commenters repeated the slogan that they voted for, and some fans, such as “Amberlyn,” commented on which slogan or design they felt best represented the brand:

I feel like drink pink does not show that you’re a member as much as kiss me I’m with Pink Nation. ♥ just saying :)  

The Nike Women Page also took advantage of the group dedicated to their NTC app by creating profiles of NTC “superusers”: amateur athletes who work out very frequently using the NTC app. A post from November 30, 2011 illustrates this theme:

Mary Kistler’s attitude towards NTC workouts is a fabulous one: “It’s tough- but I feel so good afterwards. ” We had a great time catching up to talk about her Make Yourself story, and her NTC experience. Check out what she said:

http://gonike.me/6031RcaW

Mary responds to her feature in the comments section:
Omg, that's too cool! Yay!!!! Thank you so much. Such an honor. :) Don't give up, just do it!

Through these techniques, both companies can maintain user interest in their branded apps and attract new fans who want to have an influence on the future of the brand: a back-and-forth exchange that exemplifies the concept of “prosumption”, as defined by Andrejevic (2008), Beer & Burrows (2010), and Ritzer & Jurgenson (2010).

Women’s Representation on Facebook Branded Pages

Both the Victoria’s Secret PINK Page and the Nike Women Page described and showed a series of women connected with their brand repeatedly throughout the observation period. On the PINK Page, the women featured were exclusively Victoria’s Secret models: Behati Prinsloo, Chanel Iman, Erin Heatherton, Lily Aldridge, and Lindsay Ellingson were the models representing PINK during winter 2011-2012 (vsallaccess.victoriassecret.com). The Nike Women Page showed seven female athletes repeatedly: Allyson Felix (an Olympic track and field medalist), Maria Sharapova (a tennis player), Sofia Boutella (a professional dancer), Li Na (a tennis player), Hope Solo (a professional soccer player), Perri Shakes-Drayton (a professional track and field runner), and Laura Enever (a professional surfer). Several different athletic trainers and other female athletes were also featured in Nike Women posts. The Nike Women Page featured what might be labeled as “everyday” women (non-professional athletes/non-celebrities) about once a week, in different types of posts: street style pictures taken around the world featuring people dressed in Nike gear, profiles of women who frequently use the Nike Training Club workout app, and links to women’s photo blogs on the social-media site Tumblr.
During the observation period, the Victoria's Secret Page only featured women who were not models twice: once in a photo gallery accompanied by a link to a college style blog (posted Monday, January 16 and shown here in Figure 2), and another time in a photo of a yoga class in session (posted Friday, January 27).

Both brands also conducted contests during the time I observed the two Facebook Pages. PINK conducted a contest that was held on the social media website Polyvore, which allows users to create different collages out of images of fashion products. The winner, who created a Polyvore collage that best fit the image of the PINK brand, received a custom-made light-up bra that was featured in the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show television broadcast.

Throughout December, the Nike Women Page held a contest titled “Get Gifted.” Each day’s giveaway included a different Nike product or a tie-in product from another company, such as an Apple iPod portable music player, that had a sports and fitness connection. The contest prizes were also typically connected in some way to the featured athletes on the Nike Women Page: either the athletes were shown wearing their “favorite” Nike Women product, or the prize was connected to the athlete in some way, such as a training session with the athlete or an autographed jersey from the athlete.
As Boden (2006) observed in a study of ‘tween consumers, and McRobbie (1991) observed in an analysis of girls’ popular magazines, lifestyle media often hold up a variety of celebrities such as movie stars, athletes, and pop musicians for young women to learn about. In the course of their own identity formation, ‘tweens, teens and young adults may choose to ally themselves with certain role models through their consumption choices, or to signal that they either wish to be included in, or differentiated from, specific groups. The “everyday” woman pictured on the Pages also can act as a role model to some degree: in the case of a Nike Training Club “superuser,” she is devoted to using the app for daily fitness; in the case of the college fashion blog, the students are modeling the PINK clothing usually shown on supermodels in a campus setting, typifying the common attire and social atmosphere of a middle-class young woman at a university. Both of these examples of “everyday” women contain messages for fans about how they might decide to dress and behave when wearing the brands’ clothing.

The Nike Women Page also offered some unique ways for users to interact with the brand’s Facebook account. Every week, the Nike Women Page hosts an “NTC Now” live-chat with one of the featured athletic trainers employed by Nike, or an accomplished female athlete. The Nike Women Page administrators schedule the featured guest to remain on Facebook for the selected hour (usually noon), and answer questions from fans in the comments section of the NTC Now post. Nike Women also featured music-themed posts, typically once a week, inviting users to share their favorite songs to listen to during different types of workouts, and location-based posts, with a scenic photo and a brief statement about the city profiled in the post. These posts also typically included a
solicitation to fans who lived in the featured city to comment about their favorite places to run and work out.

**Event and Holiday-Based Posts**

Some posts from each brand also featured connections to events sponsored by the brand. The Victoria’s Secret PINK Page promoted the annual Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show and provided regular updates during the live television broadcast of the event, which has been aired annually on the CBS network since 2001 (Blumenthal, 2011). The Nike Women Page promoted and followed up on the Nike Plus Women’s Virtual Half Marathon, which took place on January 15, 2012. This event, in its first year, allowed women to run together “virtually” during that day by logging the miles they ran with another Nike mobile app, Nike Plus. Participants paid a fee to benefit the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society and received a small gift from Nike when they uploaded their Nike Plus workouts to verify that they completed the half-marathon distance (13.1 miles).

Other sporting events were also discussed in the two brands’ status updates: PINK used the college football Bowl Championship Series games to promote its line of collegiate wear in late December, and the Super Bowl to promote its NFL-licensed line in late January. Nike Women kept fans up-to-date on the female athletes playing in the Australian Open Tennis Championships and the Winter X Games in January.

The American holiday shopping season (typically spanning the time between Thanksgiving and New Year’s Day) was also a major influence on the two brands’ content during the observation period. Nike’s Get Gifted contest used the theme of holiday gift exchanges during the month of December. Along with the rest of the Nike social media accounts, the Nike Women Page also launched a long sequence of
motivational and inspirational status updates and images beginning on New Year’s Day, to encourage fans who had made New Years’ resolutions related to physical fitness.

Since Victoria’s Secret has more physical retail stores than Nike does, a large amount of PINK status updates had to do with sales and special offers happening in the retail store locations and in the online store. Thus, the PINK Page promoted “Black Friday” (for American retail companies, the traditional day of large sales returns the day after Thanksgiving) and the shopping period between Thanksgiving and Christmas more than the Nike Page did. For example, on November 21st, 2011, the PINK Facebook Page created an “event” titled, I’ve Had My Turkey, Now I Want to SleepShop! The event date and time were scheduled for Thursday, November 24 at 10:00 a.m., even though the “Black Friday” sale didn’t actually start until the following day. This “event” listing coincided with a trend observed by media and consumers in the fall of 2011: “Christmas creep”: in which the actual holiday of Thanksgiving (traditionally meant to be celebrated inside the home with family) seemed to be subsumed by earlier and earlier “Black Friday” sales and offerings by physical stores in the face of increasing competition from online sales and “daily deal” coupon sites (Washington Post Business, 2011). Outside of this time period, PINK updates about sales, giveaways, and special offers usually were posted about once a week.
Page Content: Connotative Meanings

The following section describes the most common connotative meanings used in Facebook text and photo posts by the administrators of the Victoria's Secret PINK and Nike Women Pages, as observed from November 2011 – February 2012. According to Fiske (1978, 1987), audience members experience subjective reactions to signs that contain meanings from common cultural myths or nonverbal signs of subjectivity present in images. Jhally (1987) also describes the reader’s situation within an ecosystem of advertising images and cultural meanings that informs these subjective reactions (p. 139). The PINK and Nike Pages give preference to different connotative meanings in both text and photos to evoke certain reactions in their different fan groups. Both of the Pages feature textual status updates, often accompanied by thumbnail photos that highlight different ways to wear the brand’s clothing and accessories. General connotations of femininity—dominant or hegemonic interpretations of how to be a woman—can be observed in the many “style” posts and photos shared by both brands. The Nike Women Page shares style videos once per week, featuring a Nike stylist discussing how the clothes are designed and how best to put together an ideal workout outfit. The Victoria’s Secret PINK Page posted several photo galleries displaying different outfit combinations during the observation period.

Connotative Meanings on the PINK Page

The PINK Page updates frequently took advantage of connotative meanings that exist in American idiomatic speech to provoke a reaction from fans. Most of the words and phrases used in these types of posts had double meanings, usually “flirty” or sexual in nature. These types of posts mirrored the text and graphic slogans often printed on the
products themselves: The brand is typically known for the bold, block-letter brand names and sayings such as “Love PINK” inscribed on its products. Textual messages printed on some of the clothing items advertised took advantage of different idiomatic phrases with sexual connotations that exist in English language and North American culture. Many of these phrases were related to the different holidays that took place during the observation period, such as “eat your ♥ out” for Thanksgiving and “no peeking” or “unwrap me” for Christmas. Some fans found these connotative slogans amusing, while others were disturbed because of the young age of some PINK customers. A dialogue between commenters on the November 24 Thanksgiving post (featuring the panties reading “eat your ♥ out”) illustrates some of the issues with young women consuming the PINK brand, when the products display messages with multiple meanings:

Heather: lol so wrong. Esp[e]cially when all the 15 year old girls buy them. (16 likes).

Caitie: Really? On panties that 12 year olds buy!?

Fine, it's cute for adults but get it out of the Pink line!

I wonder how many of the people that say they love these panties would freak if they saw their daughters wearing them.. (2 likes).

Samantha: VS is not a kids brand lady, if a 12 y[ear]/o[ld] is wearing these, then she's most likely a slut in the making anyway. oh well. &these undies are up for interpretation.

Figure 3. A model wears red panties printed in silver ink with the slogan “Unwrap Me Love PINK” in this photo posted on the PINK Facebook Page at www.facebook.com/vspink.
Kalani: ^actually their cute and can be taken many different ways. And im 16 and my mom would probably just laugh and want a pair too

Alyshia: Its just underwear..... And I LOVVVVE them!!!!!!! Im definitely getting my 10 year old cousin some.

The fans’ debate in this comment thread illustrates one of Fiske’s points about connotative meanings: each fan is bringing her personal experience to her reading of the message on the product and conflict ensues when their readings-from-experience don’t match. As Fiske writes about his theory of reception,

It is productive to think ... of structures of preference in the text that seek to prefer some meanings and close others off ... it still sees the text as a structured polysemy, as a potential of unequal meanings, some of which are preferred over, or proffered more strongly than, others, and which can only be activated by socially situated viewers in a process of negotiation between the text and their social situation (p. 65).

This conversation demonstrates the intergenerational appeal of the PINK brand, and the phenomenon of “age compression” in the products that children consume.

**Color Connotations**

Lurie (1981), Barnard (1996), and Rubinstein (2001) all discussed color connotations in clothing in their research on fashion as communication and expression of identity. By using pink as both its brand name and its signature color, the Victoria’s Secret sub-brand already takes advantage of the color pink’s connotations in American culture of femininity, and youthful femininity in particular. Through the use of bright, vivid colors in images, and in the text of many posts, the PINK Page shared some of the
connotative meanings of youth, vibrance, and sexiness typically associated with certain colors. For example, in the final week of December leading up to New Year’s Eve, the PINK Page took advantage of connotative color meanings in clothing to create a series of “New Year’s Panty Fortunes”:

Fun fact! Did you know that the color panties you wear on New Year’s Eve will determine your fortune for the coming year? Every day this week we’ll reveal a new color and its meaning, so you can decide which panty to rock as we ring in 2012! First up – our fave hue! Hoping for a year full of love sweet love? Think pink for under that party dress!

According to many of the commenters, several cultures have a tradition that the colors worn by a reveler on New Year’s Eve predict how the following year will turn out for her. In the comments for the December 26, 2011 post cited above, two fans commented about different New Year’s traditions:

Anita: “In Italy they wear red for good luck” (1 like)

Ellie (posted December 26): “In my Mexican tradition it's always been red undies and[they] have to be brand new for a year full of love . . . knownthatforever :)

(1 like)

Both Pages’ Connotative Focus on Clothing, Style and the Feminine Body

The focus on femininity (achieved through appearance and fashion) was less explicit on the Nike Women Page, but the connotations still show through on posts such as this Nike Training Club video link from December 28, 2011:
Finally a drill that brings you closer to getting in those skinny jeans. PATRICK GOUDEAU FITNESS explains this metabolism-boosting drill so you can rock the pants you've been eyeing at the mall.

While most of the time the NTC video posts focused on the benefits to the viewer’s strength and fitness levels, this post focused on toning one’s body to be thin enough to fit in “skinny jeans,” a style of very tight and fitted pants. Commenters on the NTC Now live-chat sessions posted by the Nike Women Page also asked frequent questions about exercises that would make them appear thinner and more toned – focusing on how the exercises would affect their appearance rather than their internal health or fitness. For example, in a November 23 chat with Nike Master Trainer Sonja Moses, many women express concern about toning and slimming their bodies after giving birth:

Tiffany: I had twins 3 years ago and I do abs workout everyday, but I still can’t get my lower abs to tighten up. Any suggestions?

Nerys: What is the best exercise to do to lose baby weight?

Bazilah: Hai sonja when can i start doing exercise after giving birth? What is the best exercise to slim down and get my prepregnancy weight. I just finished my confinement maternity for 6 weeks and i need to lose at least 6 more kg.

Other users in this same chat session also ask about exercises to improve the appearance of their abdominal muscles, triceps, and upper thighs.
Semiotic Codes: Victoria’s Secret PINK

In the course of my analysis, I identified three semiotic codes expressed on PINK Page updates and through photos accompanying these updates. These semiotic codes specifically express the hegemonic or dominant views of femininity and female body image perpetuated through the PINK branded Page updates. The three codes are “cheekiness,” “sweetness,” and “spirit.”

Cheekiness represents a coy, playful, and indirect sexuality. Rather than explicitly referencing sex or discussing the construction of the products themselves - as Nike Women does in their style posts - the posts on the PINK Page rely on quips, double meanings, and word games to express the “flirty” connotations of PINK brand clothing. This reinforces the findings of Ringrose (2011) that discursive frames in media limit the expression of sexuality by teen girls and young women within very specific, and narrow, boundaries. In Ringrose’s study, a teen girl was interviewed who did not want to post explicitly sexy photos online chose instead to post “cute” advertising icons, such as the Playboy bunny (Ringrose, p.108). During the observation time period I saw many fans who had adopted the PINK logos and icons for their own profile photos (photos used to identify who a user is on Facebook, which appear at regular size on the user’s profile page, and in thumbnail form next to any comments she posts). Signs within this code can also be observed in the bright colors of the clothing and graphic designs on the PINK Facebook Page, the often-goofy expressions and poses of the models shown in the photos, and the wording of updates.

“Cheekiness” also encompasses a play on words on the part of Victoria’s Secret in the marketing a newer underwear style, called “Sexy Little Cheekies” or “Cheekinis,”
which are panties that are less skimpy than a thong, but only cover about half of the wearer’s rear end — the cut of the products themselves attempts to strike a balance between the porn-inspired, outright sexuality of a thong, and the maximum coverage of full briefs, or “granny panties” as many commenters call them. On the site (http://www.victoriassecret.com/panties/cheekies), the product is described as “a little panty with lots of cheek peek. Perfect under flirty skirts”. This recalls the research by Jantzen, Ostergaard, & Sucena Vieira (2006), in which female interviewees felt that sexy lingerie was too bold, and basic cotton panties too plain, for “flirty” everyday style under work clothes.

A second semiotic code communicated by the PINK Page is “sweetness”: I use this phrase to describe the connotations of youthful girlishness that are emphasized in PINK-branded posts, as opposed to a code of serious, sexual “adulthood.” Like “Cheekiness,” “sweetness” plays on the tension between being “cute” and being “sexy,” but it also idealizes youth, and implies romantic rather than sexual closeness with a partner. Whereas the larger Victoria’s Secret brand image expresses a more voluptuous and womanly sexuality, the PINK brand offers sexualization in a more sanitized and “innocent” disguise. One of the new products being promoted during the observation period was the “Total Sweetheart Demi Bra,” advertised in posts such as

Figure 4. This photo of a model wearing a pastel-colored “Total Sweetheart” bra and panties, posted on the PINK Facebook Page at www.facebook.com/vspink, exemplifies the semiotic code of “sweetness”. 
these, posted Thursday, January 26, and Friday, January 27:

Hello sweetie! The new Total Sweetheart Demi Bra has arrived! Get it now for a
FREE Racerback Tank with purchase, in stores and online thru February 2.

For the love of lace! Are you sweet enough for our flirty new floral lace print?

The text of these posts was accompanied by a photo of a model wearing the new bra
style, pictured with tousled hair. The model’s bra and panties are shown in pastel, girlish
colors—a flowered beige and a pale pink. She wears a delicate necklace and bracelet
adorned with plastic charms. Her expression—biting her lip and playing with her hair—is
reminiscent of a young girl’s fidgeting rather than the expressions of sexuality typically
identified with women in lingerie advertising. The model in this photo and in other PINK
photos appear to have agency—they gaze directly at the camera, are usually in motion,
and appear lively and energetic—however, the codes of “cheekiness” and “sweetness”
are very similar to many of the themes Kilbourne (1999) has identified in the past
surrounding women pictured in advertising. The models are not shown as completely
powerless, but they are waiflike:

To present an image of fragility, to look like a waif … demonstrates that one is
both in control and still very ‘feminine.’ One of the many double binds
tormenting young women today is the need to be both sophisticated and
accomplished, yet also delicate and childlike … this applies mostly to
middle-to upper-class white women (p. 137).

“Spirit” is the third code expressed in visual and verbal signs from the PINK Page. The
licensing of team insignia from the NCAA, National Football League and Major League
Baseball means that the PINK Page administrators frequently promote the idea of “team
spirit,” “cheering” on favorite college and professional teams and athletes. However, I also use “spirit” to refer to the sense of youthful energy and vitality, the “party” atmosphere that permeates the bright colors of the clothing and sunny expressions of the young models. For example, a PINK post from December 30 urges fans of college football to cheer on their teams:

    Real fans wear PINK! Gear up for the Sugar Bowl on January 3 and show the love for your team! Michigan vs. Virginia Tech, who’s gonna take the big game?

Photos accompanying these “team spirit” posts typically show the models in motion, wearing PINK team-licensed clothing, but the models are never shown playing any sports. They often hold a football, or wear a helmet, but their motion is purposeless.

    At the end of the observation period, the PINK Page also began sharing updates related to spring break “partying.” A January 31 post states:

    Wanna know where we’re partying this Spring Break? Press play for a sneak peek and stay tuned for more info, including all the deets of our Spring Break beach bash!

As Pitcher (2006) found in a content analysis of “Girls Gone Wild,” Spring Break symbolism and imagery also call up the image of a middle- or upper-class, young white woman letting go of her typical propriety in the temporary “carnival” atmosphere evoked in warm-weather Spring Break destinations, popular with college students. It is possible to extend this idea to the PINK posts related to college football games and the Super Bowl, which both also evoke a “carnival” atmosphere full of lost inhibitions due to excessive drinking and tailgating. In fact, the Super Bowl is notorious for attracting a
large number of child sexual-trafficking and prostitution violations to its host city in the
days surrounding the event (Prann, 2012).

Together, these three codes work together to encourage consumers to associate
themselves with the traits shown in their component signs. To be young, innocent yet
sexy, and full of energy is - as seen in the review of literature - the ideal for many
consumers of lifestyle products, both female and male. The three PINK codes are also
notable for the signs that they exclude, perhaps even more so than the signs that they
include. During the observation period, there was only one woman of color who modeled
for the PINK brand – Chanel Iman. All of the other models are white, and the majority
are blonde. All are in their early
twenties, but appear much younger
when posed for most of the photos
I observed.

**Semiotic Codes: Nike Women**

Three main semiotic codes
were identified in posts and images
shared by administrators on the
Nike Women Page. These are
“role-model athleticism,” “globalism,” and “discipline.”

A focus on achievement by both professional and amateur athletes can be seen
both explicitly and implicitly in the majority of Nike Women posts. This focus reflects
the mission of the parent brand. The live-chat sessions with featured athletes or trainers
offered a cross-section of the type of motivations and concerns that brought commenters
to the Nike Women Page and encouraged them to comment in the chat sessions. The Nike Women Page presents the featured athletes and trainers as experts and role models in athleticism, mentors that the “everyday” Facebook fans can learn from. The Nike Women Page posted many more “interactive” status updates (that is, updates that invited fans to comment with a specific question or suggestion) than did the PINK Page. The increased focus on interactivity fosters an impression that fans are also athletic “experts” in-the-making and can learn from each other. The images shown on the Nike Women Page also communicate the code of athletic expertise, by depicting the female athletes performing some amazing feat (a precarious yoga pose, a flying leap) and highlighting their muscular, toned limbs.

The featured Nike Training Club videos highlight athleticism by depicting the featured athletes and trainers successfully completing each exercise that the participants can then imitate at home. The high “quality” of the athletes’ activities, as they are portrayed by Nike Women, represents an attempt to bring that same aura of expertise and high performance to the products themselves. These images express a different type of female body ideal than the images on the PINK Page. There are more images depicting women of color posted to the Nike Women Page; the women are shown covered in sweat and without noticeable makeup; the photo subjects are not typically smiling or looking at the camera; they are seemingly unaware of the camera. Finally, the featured Nike Women athletes are almost always the “models” in the photos, which adds an extra layer of “realism” to the images. The Nike Women Page updates are crafted to show featured athletes as a more practical type of role model for teen girls and young women.
“Globalism” is the second semiotic code identified in Nike Women posts. In several different posts published during the observation period, the Nike Women Page highlights different cities and locales around the world. This can be seen when the Page posted about cities and residents’ favorite things to do and also in several posts promoting Nike FOUND, a “street style” Tumblr photo blog featuring photos taken by Nike staff. The candid photos on the blog feature young people on the street wearing Nike clothes, taken in cities around the world. The featured athletes and trainers themselves also hail from around the world. This semiotic code, and Nike’s global popularity in general, are reinforced through the contributions of the many international and non-English speaking fans the Page has attracted. An example of this code can be read in this December 29 post highlighting the city of Johannesburg, South Africa:

A veritable melting pot of cultures, Johannesburg is South Africa’s number one metropolis and its unofficial soccer capital. We’re loving it’s energetic, almost electric vibe—whether you’re chilling at Emmarentia Dam or riding bikes at Delta Park, the town’s charged atmosphere (literally; lightning storms are quite common) is perfect for clocking some serious NTC minutes. So natives of Jozi, let us know: where are your prime spots for some NTC training?

This “global” focus stands out as a semiotic code (that is, it is a mixture of connotative signs and not denotative) because the Nike Women Page is not literally “global.” In the post above, the Page administrators refer to Johannesburg as a “soccer” capital, not a “football” capital. Only American English speakers typically use the word “soccer.” The Nike parent brand actually maintains many international Pages: there are Pages for Argentina, Brazil, France, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Portugal, Spain and Turkey—but all
of these Pages are geared toward a male audience, and are mainly devoted to the sport of football/soccer. The Nike Women Page is the only Nike Page directed to a primarily female audience; most of the images and text content of the main Nike Page feature male athletes and teams.

"Discipline" is the final semiotic code found in the Nike Women posts, and the most pervasive. Through the regular Nike Training Club video updates, the motivational posts that ask for fitness tips and techniques from fans, and the inspiring New Year messages all suggest that the Nike Women Page strives to create disciplined athletes (and also dedicated customers) out of its fans. One of several motivational posts shared on New Year’s Day by the Nike Women Page invites fans to share their specific fitness goals to stay focused:

*New Year. New you. What are your goals? The more specific, the better you can define the necessary path to reach them. How will you #makeeverymovecount in 2012? Share what you've got your sights set on...*

While the " #makeeverymovecount" campaign was also promoted on Nike’s other Facebook Pages, there are other posts that emphasize personal workout choices on the Nike Women Page, whereas the main Nike Page updates relate more to the products themselves and general sports-related updates from around the world. For example, on December 24, 2011, the main Nike Page posted about a professional American football game:

*One city. United by a love of the game. For the first time in four years, the G-Men go toe-to-toe with the Green and White at the prospect of reaching the playoffs. Who will stand victorious?*
In contrast, the Nike Women Page was updated from December 24, 2011 with this post:

*There are so many delicious foods that surface during the holidays. How do you put a healthy spin on some of your favorite traditional meals—and keep your nutrition on track, but your appetite satisfied? Share your tricks and tips as a comment below.*

Unlike the playful connotations of the PINK posts, the Nike Women posts connote seriousness and focus, two components of discipline. However, the text of the Nike Women posts combined the interactivity of the “role-model athleticism” code with the connotations of style and fashion, and the “discipline”-oriented posts which referred to diet and fitness motivation to present a gendered focus which was different in tone than the PINK posts, but which still communicated to female fans the need to exercise and eat right for appearance’s sake.

The three semiotic codes found in the Nike Women posts reflect many of the original ideas that Grow (2008) analyzed in research on the founding of the Nike Women brand. Just as with the PINK brand, the Nike Women brand chooses to privilege some portrayals of athleticism and leave others out. It is clear from my observation that the tension between athleticism and femininity seen during the founding of the Nike Women brand (Grow, p. 316) is glossed over or avoided in the content of the Nike Women posts. Even though the female athletes’ muscular bodies are seen, all of the featured female athletes pictured on the Nike Women Page still exemplify a patriarchal ideal of femininity: they have long hair, curvy figures, pretty faces, and slim rather than bulky frames. The Nike Women photos exemplify the “toned” ideal described by Bordo (1993) in her work: even though they are not stick-thin and airbrushed like the PINK models, the
“discipline” code also applies to these athletes’ bodies: their motions are strictly controlled, no stray fat or “jiggly” parts can be seen on their bodies, and they are still dressed very scantily, in order to display both the sports bras and their highly-disciplined abdominal muscles.

Figures 6 and 7. Two photos posted to Facebook.com by Victoria’s Secret PINK which exemplify the semiotic codes of “cheekiness,” “sweetness,” and “spirit.”

Photos posted by the administrators of the two Pages highlight the differences between the semiotic codes communicated by the two brands. PINK models’ photos are colorful, cheery and non-serious, as shown in Figures 6 and 7. Figure 6 is a still taken from the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show coverage and posted to the PINK Facebook Page. The model in the still wears neon-bright, chunky plastic jewelry and a bright red light-up bra with illuminated hearts built into both bra cups. Figure 7, a photo screen capture taken from the PINK Page, portrays a model wearing a black sequined PINK “bling” (sparkling) sweatshirt, panties, and Converse shoes, making an outrageous face and posing with a heart-shaped Mylar balloon. The repetition of the heart shapes in both photos connotes sweetness, the models’ expressions connote cheekiness, and the exuberant jumping pose of the model in Figure 7 connotes spirit.
The Nike Women photos are quite different in tone. They evoke a gritty, dark atmosphere, with many of the photos taken in backgrounds like a stripped-down gym, an abandoned warehouse, and a city rooftop. The photos are often posted in black-and-white rather than full color and are taken from more unusual angles (very far away, very close up, radical perspectives from below or to the side), making them appear more "artistic" and less like product advertisements. The two photos shown here (Figures 8 and 9) were originally posted in black-and-white on Facebook, which connotes simplicity, timelessness, and seriousness. Professional dancer Sofia Boutella, who is from France, is pictured in the middle of a flying leap in Figure 8, connoting globalism and athleticism. U.S. Soccer player Hope Solo is pictured in Figure 9. The close range of the photo, showing the drops of sweat on her face, and her serious expression connote discipline. The angle of the photo, taken through a prison-like web of fencing, also connotes discipline and athleticism, suggesting that the athlete is separated from her fans both
physically, through a barrier around the field, and psychologically, through her far-off, meditative expression as she watches the action on the field from the bench.

At first glance, the photos posted by Nike Women appear somewhat more realistic than the PINK photos, but they are stylized in a completely different way. Most “everyday” women work out in well-lit gyms or in their own homes while their children are napping, not in urban warehouses or rooftops.

In summation, both Pages portrays women’s bodies as objects of display. The PINK Page displays them along with various props that connote lightheartedness and fun, allowing viewers to slip into a college fantasy world. The Nike Women displays them as objects of admiration; viewers are meant to see and admire their athletic prowess and their dedication, and to imagine themselves in this highly disciplined world. The semiotic codes expressed by Nike Women encourage women to consume through “empowerment” (Riordan, 2001) by displaying the physical and mental power of the disciplined athletes on the Page and implying that “everyday” Nike women can achieve this power through buying the products. The codes expressed on the PINK Page encourage consumers to chase after eternal youth and fun (Featherstone, 1991) through the carnival atmosphere of college partying and the festivities surrounding (male) professional sports. For older fans, who may be mothers or grandmothers, the PINK brand’s semiotic codes carry a sense of nostalgia for youthful days gone by, and for teen and ‘tween fans, it presents an idealistic vision of the college life they may hope to have in the future.
Fans’ Responses - Denotative Meanings

Background

During November and December 2011, two controversies involving Victoria’s Secret attracted attention on the Internet, influencing the subject matter of some fans’ responses to updates on the PINK Page. In November a controversy emerged over facts revealed in news coverage leading up to the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show. The controversy dealt with eating, health, and body image. A November 7, 2011 article published online by British newspaper *The Telegraph* included an interview with Victoria’s Secret model and fashion-show “Angel” Adriana Lima. In this article, Lima described the Angels’ pre-Fashion Show food, drink, and exercise regimen. Lima had been working out once a day with a trainer since August, and then twice a day since October. The article describes her food intake this way:

She sees a nutritionist, who has measured her body’s muscle mass, fat ratio and levels of water retention. He prescribes protein shakes, vitamins and supplements to keep Lima’s energy levels up during this training period. Lima drinks a gallon of water a day. For nine days before the show, she will drink only protein shakes - ‘no solids’. The concoctions include powdered egg. Two days before the show, she will abstain from the daily gallon of water, and ‘just drink normally’. Then, 12 hours before the show, she will stop drinking entirely.

This is followed by a quote from Sophia Neophitou, a British fashion editor and stylist for the 2011 Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show that compares Lima’s regimen to “training
for a marathon.” (Whitworth, 2011). Reactions to the Fashion Show coverage and its broadcast will be discussed later in this section.

In December 2011, a second controversy influenced the comments of some Victoria’s Secret fans. On December 15, Bloomberg News published an online article accompanied by videos allegedly portraying Clarisse Kambire, a 13-year-old cotton picker in Burkina Faso who works under that country’s Fair Trade program, a program that the Victoria’s Secret company subscribes to (Simpson, 2011). Representatives of Limited Brands stated that the company would launch an investigation into the Fair Trade programs and stated that cotton picked in Burkina Faso was used in a very small percentage of their products, and also that the use of child labor was expressly forbidden by their corporate values (Levs, 2011). Commenters brought up the topic on PINK status updates later that same day. On an unrelated status update (about panty deals) published by PINK Page administrators on December 15 at 6:53 p.m., commenters made the following statements – through the night on December 15 and into the following day:

*Tiana:* I can’t believe they made little children pick their cotton and beat them with branches!

*Kelsey:* They just got caught using illegal child labor...i guess thats why they can have a sale. *Sunshine:* I just heard on the news VS is in trouble because they have little children in Africa working in sweat shops making all the lingerie.

*Anjelica:* what’s with the news story ...children getting abused for cotton to make underwear hmmm i hope this is taken care of i don’t buy mas[s] amounts of VS thinking this would be happening.....
It only takes hours for these young women, surrounded by different media, to learn about and comment on the rapidly-spreading news story. However, just as in all the other Victoria’s Secret PINK status updates, a company representative never addresses any of the fans’ concerns. It is also worth noting that neither these fans nor any of the other commenters linked to the actual news coverage, which highlights how fast “hearsay” can spread on social-networking sites.

Technical Support Requests

Fans often used both the Nike Women and the Victoria’s Secret PINK Facebook Pages to ask questions or make technical support requests of the Page administrators. These requests were most often made on the Nike Women Page for two topics: figuring out how to register for the “Get Gifted” contest in December (users had to be at a computer, and not accessing Facebook via a mobile phone) and requests regarding the Nike Training Club app. During the observation period, this app was only available for the Apple iPhone device, and not for phones or devices using the Android operating system. Many of the Nike Training Club video posts added by Nike Women contained one or more user comments asking when the app would be available for owners of Android phones and devices. In both of these situations, the Nike Women administrators were relatively quick to respond to users with instructions about how fans could access the additional content. All of the NTC videos were also posted to the Nike Women YouTube Channel, so the Page administrators often used the Android users’ complaints as an opportunity to encourage these fans to access the workout videos via the YouTube Channel instead.
In the case of Victoria’s Secret PINK, technical support requests were most often added as comments when the Page administrators posted statuses about sales or special online deals and giveaways. Many users could not get the correct promotional codes for use on the Victoria’s Secret online shopping website, or they had other technical issues transitioning between Facebook and the links provided to the online shopping site in order to take advantage of these special offers. In every case that I observed, a Victoria’s Secret administrator never responded to these types of comments. Instead, other fans would assist the person who was struggling, posting their advice or instructions as comments in the thread.

**Men’s Posts on the Two Pages**

Although both Pages’ goal on Facebook is to advertise and engage female fans, there were contingents of male fans who would post regularly on each of the brands’ posts. Since Victoria’s Secret PINK has a larger amount of fans overall, more men posted responses to status updates on the PINK Page. The Victoria’s Secret models have a certain cultural cachet that fascinates men as well as women, so most of the time the men’s motivation for being a fan was seemingly related to the multiple pictures of nearly-naked women shared by the PINK Page. However, there also were a few fans who identified themselves as gender-queer or transgender that posted responses to PINK status updates as well: “Rachael” commented on a December 26 PINK post: “I love shoppin here! The girls treat this ladyboy like a real female”. Most often, the men who posted to the PINK Page either provided jokes about the messages of the brand, or made explicitly sexual comments, particularly about the models pictured in each post. At times, the women in the comment thread would chastise these men, but not very often. This
dialogue among fans on a December 22 post illustrates a typical response to men’s comments:

Leigh: Why are there so many guys that comment on here? Ain't this a girls website? Lmao [laughing my ass off] weirdos (2 likes)

Alicia: I know leigh I was thinking that too but men will be men and like to see [Victoria’s Secret] too (2 likes)

KSandra: LOL [laughing out loud] gotta LOVE pink when Girls are admiring the clothing/underwear/bras, and Guys are admiring the models WEARING the clothing/bras/underwear XD [emoticon for a wide smile/laughing face] (1 like)

The men who posted to the Nike Women Page frequently tried to solicit female companionship on Facebook. Many male fans of the Nike Women Page were from non-English speaking countries in Africa and Asia, so it was not possible for me to translate their remarks accurately, but it seemed that a lot of the international male Facebook users that had “liked” the Page were under the impression that it was a dating site for meeting women who like Nike products. Many of the men asked to be added as friends, wanted to chat online with “Nike women”, and some even provided their phone numbers and asked for dates or liaisons. Nike administrators generally ignored these comments, perhaps because many of them mixed English and other languages and couldn’t be accurately tagged as offensive by the staff. However, in the following comment thread, a female user who also was a Hindi speaker complained about the men’s inappropriate comments and another user asked for help from administrators:

Kim: Not surprised by all the comments from the men.... sort of sad. (8 likes)
Michelle: the first few comments were in hindi..sadly, i know what they were saying..and it's not very appropriate or respectful...unless you have to buy a bra [...] you don't need to be here and objectify all the images on Nike WOMEN. (3 likes)

Sarah: @ [Replying to] Nike is there any way you can stop these men & their comments, not appropriate at all? (2 likes)

Surprisingly, although Nike administrators were quick to respond to user questions in other contexts (technical support, questions about products), no Page administrator addressed Sarah's concern in the following days.

**Playful and Supportive Fan Comments**

The majority of comments—approximately two-thirds of total comments observed—were supportive of the posts' intended messages on both the Victoria's Secret PINK and Nike Women Pages. Very similar to the phenomenon Hermes describes in her study of women's consumption of magazines (1995), many fans' monitoring of the Facebook News Feed is an "in-between" activity accomplished in the spare moments between daily tasks: "it fills empty time, it does not require much attention" (p. 32). "Nice!" "Cute!" "Love it!" and other short, positive statements appear on nearly all of the comment threads that were observed in this study. These quick and short responses show the ephemeral nature of Facebook Page updates as users quickly see them in their news feeds, comment, and then move on as they kill time on the website.

A common phenomenon in Internet commenting is many users' urge to be the first person to comment on a particular post or thread, so that may account for some of the motivation behind these quick responses. Of course, an even more minimal
investment than the quick comment is the “like” button on Facebook - fans can press this button to show they “like” the update, or they can support other commenters’ views by “liking” those individual comments as well.

Fans on Facebook also sometimes use playful language and textual symbols such as the heart “♥” symbol to express how they feel about the brands. This was observed more often on the PINK comment threads than on the Nike Women threads, possibly because the PINK fans appear to be a younger group, and the heart shape is a common graphic motif used on PINK clothing and PINK branded designs. Fans like to leave funny, nonsensical posts with lots of transposed letters, shortened word spellings, emoticons (punctuation marks that look like smiling faces or different facial expressions), hearts, and other text-based symbols - reflecting the brand’s semiotic codes of sweetness and cheekiness - even in their comments about the brand. Many fans are also browsing Facebook posts and leaving comments via mobile phone applications, which explains much of the shortened “texting” language, employed by users because of a phone’s small and limited keyboard.

“Superfan” Comments

Many fans take their dedication over and above the act of simply leaving positive comments on a post. Commenters on the PINK and Nike Women Pages already show an increased investment in the brand’s message by taking the time to read and comment on the regular updates from these brands. Additionally, since both brands offer fans higher levels of engagement with the Pink Nation and Nike Training Club apps and their associated online communities, many of the fans who care enough to comment are also devoted members of these groups.
Some fans express an even higher level of online brand devotion as indicated by their comments about how much they use and consume the branded products. For example, some of the users of the Nike Training Club app comment on the Nike Women updates about the workouts they just completed using the app, or how much they use the app every day. In response to a February 2 post by Nike Women about making time for exercise during the work day, several users discussed how much they used the NTC app during their workday.

*Heather:* *My lunchtime is when I get my Nike Training Club on! Today was a 30-minute Get Strong workout. Back in the office now and feeling great!*

*Truentz:* *Yesterday I did the Allison Felix workout on my NTC club app; OMG [Oh My God]! Woke up today muscles pumped but ready for a jog today!!!*

*Loving ea[ch] work out. Today [I'll] be trying out [the] Sofia Boutella workout ;D*

On both the Nike Women and PINK branded Pages, fans comment about how many items of clothing they own from each brand, how much they spend on the brand, and their love for the products. In a comment on a November 26 PINK post, “Lizzie” gives out shopping tips and lists all of her favorite Victoria’s Secret products:

*...for all the girls who live in Michigan, Great Lakes Crossing mall has stuff for such cheap prices at their PINK, and it’s not even because [of] Black Friday, they always have like everything in the store for like 75% off and higher. I would walk in with like $35 and walk out with like 20 different products. I am obsessed with V.S. and have to get all 6 PINK dogs. I have almost 100 pink and V.S. perfumes, lotions, and make-up...*
These “superfans” make a point of sharing their devotion to the brand with the Page administrators. Many of the fans also pride themselves on knowing the best ways to shop and get deals from their favorite brands. As described by Belk & Ger in their 2003 study of consumer desire, these fans continue to pursue and collect items and experiences related to their favorite brand because they use the branded products to construct and express facets of their individual and group identities.

**Fans’ Responses: Connotative Meanings**

The following section describes connotative meanings in fan responses, which combine to create a separate set of semiotic codes generated by the fan audiences of both Pages. As previously discussed, the women featured on both of the Pages are the topic of much fan interest, and their photos generate many comments. Many fans see them as role models, and discuss how they look up to them in the comments. This may be an important part of generating a sense of individual and social identity for the young fans of PINK and Nike Women. Additionally, parents who post on the Pages refer to their children often. It seems that the parents pass on a love of the brand through family interactions. Fans of both Pages also comment often on economic or practical concerns: at present, many families in the United States are struggling to stay in the middle class, and the comments regarding prices, quality of the products, and sizing suggest that many fans commenting via Facebook are being very careful about how they spend their money. Finally, fans on the PINK Page frequently debate in comment threads about body size and female body images portrayed on the Page and in the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show. These three themes distill down into two main semiotic codes: the first being “savvy consumers,” and the second being “real bodies.”
Comments About Role Models, Family and Peer Influence

Particularly in the case of the Victoria’s Secret PINK Page, many comments shed light on how individuals pass on their brand loyalty to their peers and family members. In comment threads related to the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show, one fan recounts watching the show with her daughter, demonstrating both how the consumerist mindset and the patriarchal female-body ideal can be transmitted unconsciously to younger family members:

Melanie: My 9 year old daughter watched the show and said that's what she wants to do when [she] grows up. I told her start working on those abs.

Another fan who is also a mother watches the show with her young sons:

Jeseka: I have a 10 yr old son and twins boys that are 9 and this will be our 3rd watching as a family :) They really loved the sports runway last year!

The PINK brand is meant to be marketed toward college students, but the PINK brand name can also be found in the hands and the bedrooms of some much younger consumers, thanks to a special incentive that keeps consumers from many different age groups coming back again and again. During the observation time period, there were two different instances in which the PINK Page advertised new colors and patterns of “PINK Mini Dogs,” which are small, collectible stuffed animals emblazoned with the PINK logo. The small stuffed animals are brightly colored in a variety of shades and patterns, and the company regularly releases new “limited edition” sets of the dogs in different colors and patterns. In the comment threads related to the dog giveaways, women who seemed to be from a variety of age groups commented on how they enjoyed collecting the dogs – a consumer phenomenon similar to the collection of Beanie Babies stuffed
animals, Cabbage Patch dolls, or Barbie dolls. While some were “superfans” who love the brand and would attempt to build a collection of Mini Dogs featuring every color and pattern, others tried to obtain the free toys for different reasons. Some were mothers giving the dogs to their young children, possibly cultivating a love of the brand in girls who were significantly younger than the PINK target demographic, as in this comment thread posted in response to a December 29 post about mini dogs:

Dana: Never figured out the hoopla over stuff[ed] animals from VS. Do adult women collect these things??? Is it me or are they kind of lame?????? (7 likes)

Angie: I have these things all over my house hahahaha

Jenn: [Replying to] Dana: I get just a couple but I have to REALLY like them. Primarily if it comes with my purchase, my children get it. They love them.

But...idont see the point in collecting them all.

In a comment on a January 17 post about the mini dogs, “Aldina” describes how she used to collect PINK mini dogs but grew out of it: “Yes they are cute but seems pointless to collect these as an adult, I did when I was 16. Now they just take up space.” And, some collectors were actually dog owners and had found that their pets chose the PINK dogs as a favorite toy. In the December 29 comment thread, “Anjelica” says, “my Yorkie always takes mine the[y’re] so cute :)

The women featured on the two Pages were also frequently discussed in the comments: the Nike Women athletes, and the Victoria’s Secret models. While adults tended to discuss the models’ appearance in a frank or sexual manner, many female commenters who appeared to be in their teens expressed their love for the models and their wish to someday be a Victoria’s Secret “Angel.” This was especially evident during
the live coverage of the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show on November 29, 2011. Here is a sampling of some girls’ comments posted to the Fashion Show updates on Facebook:

Amber: [...] I always pick one of the models & say I am her! They are gorgeous

Chrissy: Love The VS Fashion Show!!! The models are stunning, i’d love to look as gorgeous as them!!! =)

Alexandra: OMG (Oh My God), I’m loving it! It’s every girl[’s] dream, to be [a] VS Angel! I wish I could be one!

Kylie: They are so gorgeous..it really is every girls dream to be a Victorias secret model.. I know its mine!

Sheena: Watching now!! God what I wouldn't give to be one of those beautiful girls walking that runway.

Lauren: I would DIE to be a Pink girl! :) JEALOUSS!!! They're beautiful!

Renee: Is there any way possible I could become a model? It'd make me the happiest girl in the world to be a VS model. Looking for people willing to take me!(::[smiling face]

Melanie: Loved the show it was awesome. My daughter says she wants to be avs model when she grows up.

Jessica: Sign me up! I wanna be an angel when im older, ive already got the body to pull it off(: [Smiling face]

In the Nike Women comment threads, featured soccer player Hope Solo was frequently singled out by teen or college-age female fans as a role model. A December 16 post in the Nike Women “Get Gifted” promotion, which invited fans to win an iPod autographed by
Solo, attracted many comments from parents and teen girls about Solo's importance as a role model:

Heather: Hope is such an amazing athlete and person! Her NTC workouts are killer! I love Nike too. Slowly becoming a walking Nike billboard. :) Hope I win!

Angie: this would make the best gift ever for a huge Hope fan whose been kicked in the rear by Life lately! hope I win!

Amy: My daughter is such a huge Hope fan and she is a goalie herself...she has had a tough year and I think this would definitely put a smile on her face! Enter me please!

Ashley: I've entered every single day and haven't won and I'm really happy I didn't because now I can try to win this one. I have had 2 knee surgeries and the surgeon told me I would never be able to play soccer again. I told them that hope solo's doctors probably told her the same thing, but look at her. I have been working to get back to my goalie level since I played since I was 5. My morning [regimen] is hope solo's nike work outs. Please pick me!

Lauren: hope is my idol. i live and breathe hope solo. not even kidding. heck, my heart jumps at the phrase "hope so"! it'd be an honor if you picked me to win this. i promise you that i'll treasure it forever. seriously.

In these ways, the messages of the brands were spread among fans, their friends, and even their children in ways that expanded far beyond the original products for sale. The lure of brightly-colored, cute stuffed animals and memorabilia signed by a sports heroine attracted younger teens and girls to the comment thread who otherwise may not have commented or engaged with the brand. In these cases, the brand "identity" begins to
spread as more of an abstract concept, becoming tied up with physical objects or activities that are peripheral to the actual products being sold. As described by Klein (2002) and Moffitt & Dover (2011), the brand becomes an object of affection, passion and even love.

Comments About Economic Concerns

One of the largest sources of negotiated and oppositional fan comments had to do chiefly with the prices of the products being marketed. In the Introduction of this study I suggested that young people who are “treaders,” those who live in an atmosphere of economic uncertainty, may consume name brands such as Victoria’s Secret or Nike Women mainly through their virtual presences. Additionally, I suggested the “swimmers” that the brands try to attract are discerning consumers concerned with quality, a prize demographic for any brand. The comments that fans added to posts about product prices and sales support these ideas. On both the Nike Women and Victoria’s Secret posts, fans often shared the thought that they felt the items being sold were too expensive for everyday shopping. On a Thursday, December 16 post from PINK about purchasing 5 pairs of panties for $26, commenters reacted to the price:

Debbie: Don't get me wrong I love v.s. but they [are] a rip off....I can get panties for half the price and still look sexy ha! Lol [laughing out loud](6 likes).

Jacqueline: they've already gone up in price to 5/$25.50, now 5/$26? nope. and the quality has gone to crap in the past few years anyways. i'll shop elsewhere (1 like).

Nike Women fans discuss prices in comments on a post from Sunday, January 28, advertising the Nike Pro Hyperwarm Half-Zip Printed Shirt:
Emily: LOVE! Its the only thing I run in and the pants are great too! Wish they weren't so expensive so I could have more!! ps thank you Santa for giving me a black one!!

Angela: I have a yellow one, and I love it but not cheap!

Jennifer: @ [replying to] angela: how expensive was it? gonna shop around but wanna see what the approx price was...ty [thank you]!

Many commenters also advised others about assessing the quality of the products. On a December 14 PINK post about the NFL line, “Kristal” writes:

Love my Broncos sweats...but don't put them thru the dryer! Tag says tumble dry low......and they sh[r]unk! I still love them!

On a January 17 post advertising the Total Sweetheart Demi Bra, two commenters discuss the quality and fit of the product:

Edyta: This bra is nothing special guys. It's cheap and doesn't look right on most of the people. They just try to come up with new designs so the bra finally starts selling

Elizabeth: Is it a bra they currently sell? It says it arrives in stores January 26. I see where others posted that it fits funny.

Commenters on the Victoria’s Secret Page, especially, were quick to suggest alternative stores or brands to other shoppers, such as Wal-Mart (primarily because of price) and Lane Bryant (because of both price and the range of plus sizes offered.)

While many people may follow the brands to “consume” them virtually, other commenters seem to be shopping through the Facebook updates, and use the knowledge of their fellow fans to ask questions and to help with purchasing decisions.
Semiotic Codes in Fan Responses

Savvy Consumers

Earlier in this results section, the tech support interchanges between Page administrators and fans (in the case of Nike Women) and between fellow fans (in the case of PINK) were discussed. This type of instructional interchange happened several times among the commenters on PINK updates, and the interactions did not always focus on Internet usability issues. Sometimes, the commenters shared tips and information among themselves about how to get the best deals through visits to the physical locations of the Victoria’s Secret stores: what to do and what not to do to take the best advantage of the specials and free offers, and how to make the most of one’s money in the stores. These conversations most often happened in the comment threads of posts advertising these special types of sales and/or free deals or offers.

In this way, fans negotiated and decoded the differences between which special “deals” were actually real sales or free item offers in stores, and which were regular-price items that Victoria’s Secret was trying to advertise under the guise of special sales or deals. This dialogue on the December 17 PINK panty deal post provides an illustrative example:

Dinma: b4 [before] it used to be 7 for 25 or 7 for 25.50..weth[i]nk we gett[i]n[g] a "deal" but the "deal" price increases little by little (9 likes)

Mariah: I work at VS and it says exclusively pink panties this time around. Don’t forgot about the yoga panty!! This goes on until the 31st! Read your email for more details. :) (2 likes)
Storm: Do not be afraid to bargain with the store they need the sales the moola
and us remember this girls... (1 like)

Alyanna: Don't fall for it guys- they're trying to weed us of our money so we can't
get the super cheap deals during the Semi Annual Sale. ;)

Through these exchanges in many different comment threads, budget-conscious fans
formed a community based on dialogue about the price and quality of different items
advertised through the Facebook Pages. Fans were not afraid to write posts stating their
oppositional views to the claims of quality made in the Page posts. Many fans included
supportive and oppositional statements in the same sentence. Brand loyalty is important
to both groups of fans in shaping their identities online, but loyalty only goes so far if the
fans are not getting actual value out of the products.

“Real” Bodies

Throughout many of the comment threads on the Victoria’s Secret Page, there
was debate among fans surrounding the photos of the models posted with PINK Page
status updates. Most initial, or short pass-by comments, made about the images simply
said “too Photoshopped” or “too skinny.” (Adobe Photoshop is a frequently used
software tool for photo editing and correction of “flaws” in creative industries such as
graphic design). Later in the thread, users would then debate about the size and
appearance of the models in the photos. A few comment threads were notable for
sparking much of this discussion, particularly the live updates about the Victoria’s Secret
Fashion Show. Significant discussions about clothing sizes offered by Victoria’s Secret
also occurred a few times during the observation period. Finally, participants in these
discussions often escalated into hostile exchanges that divided commenters into two
social groups: those who advocated for more realistic Victoria’s Secret models to be pictured, and those who thought the models’ bodies were appropriate for marketing the products.

Nike Women commenters did not engage in any significant discussions about body image, or whether the women pictured in Page updates were realistic, aside from occasional comments about how physically fit some of the athletes appeared. I believe this is because most commenters on the Nike Women Page recognized the women pictured there as athletes who just “happened” to be modeling Nike clothing, and not primarily as models.

The Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show and the Runway “Angels”

The 2011 Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show made news in other online media outside of Facebook because of the coverage of models’ diets and exercise routines in the weeks leading up to the Fashion Show staging. Some users commented on this coverage, and others used the opportunity to comment on the state of the fashion and modeling world in general. Others commented on the types of models they did not see onstage: several fans wished to see more models

*Figure 10.* Video still of a model walking the runway at the 2011 Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show, posted to the Victoria’s Secret PINK Facebook Page on November 29, 2011.
of different ethnicities, red-haired models, short-haired models, and older models on the catwalk. Finally, the conversation turned into a back-and-forth argument between two groups of fans: the first group felt that the models were too thin and that other body types should be represented on the runway, and the second group believed the models’ regimen was healthy and that the “Angels” body type is the one best suited for runway modeling and/or lingerie modeling. Figure 10 is a screen capture from a photo posted to Facebook during the Fashion Show coverage, showing a very slim model walking the runway in a cut-off sweatshirt and brief panties. Her hip bones and a gap between her thighs are clearly visible in the image. A selection of quotes from that dialogue follows:

Connie: I love this show but this year a couple of the new girls were way to skinny!!! It is important that Victoria Secret represent the beauty in women and not the skinniness! Anorexic girls do nothing for the industry! (9 likes).

Sonja: I would like to see more plus size women in pretty underwear....some plus size women look just as beautiful as the smaller ones....FYI! (21 likes).

Heidi: Since we all help make Victoria secret the huge biz that it is why not have a contest and have some everyday pink customers walk down that runway and be an angel for a day, so what if our bodies aren't perfect, it's us everyday people that buys clothes, bras, panties and girly stuff!! Love ya Pink !!” (4 likes).

Amber: Its called exercise and eating in moderation. Not everyone has to consume a whole grocery aisle worth of food to feel full, nor do they have to fill up on junk. Theres a difference between skinny...and being healthy & toned. Apparently with the majority of the US population being obese its hard for the overweight crowd to accept this concept or believe that theres many left not
Commenters continued the dialogue about the models on a November 30 post:

Tannia: personally I think all the VS models looked gorgeous! anyone who is calling them "gross" and "anorexic" is ignorant. If you watched the show, you'd see all these beautiful women have great muscle definition on their legs and arms. These women work hard to stay in shape and look as great as they do! don't judge just because you don't feel it's a realistic look. Eating healthy, working hard, and dedication is all it takes. Great job VS angels! ♥ (24 likes).

Kaylah: Whether they are naturally skinny, take care of themselves, or starve themselves, looking like this is only 5% OF THE WORLD! So feel beautiful in your own skin. Don't try to fit yourself in a box that only 5% of the world is.

Everyone is beautiful! :D [Wide smile] (8 likes).

These discussions on body image sparked many passionate comments similar to these, each falling into one of the two groups: those who felt the models' bodies were acceptable, and those who thought they were unrealistic. According to Postmes & Baym (2005), intergroup communication on the Internet intersects in many ways with identity formation, as described previously in this paper by Hall (2005), and Ludwig & Koester (2010). Postmes & Baym argue that communication scholars should study Internet comment exchanges through the lens of intergroup communication rather than interpersonal communication (p. 223), because in these types of back-and-forth online exchanges, "personal identity and its idiosyncratic needs and motives are pushed to the background. Instead, different aspects of self become relevant. Prominent among
these is social identity – that aspect of self that is derived from a particular social group membership” (p. 227). In the case of the PINK fans’ debate, then, the commenters divided into two distinct social groups based on what they believe about the media’s representation of women.

**Product Sizing at Victoria’s Secret**

Another issue brought forth by Victoria’s Secret fans was related to the sizes offered through the PINK clothing line, and also by Victoria’s Secret in general. Victoria’s Secret offers its loungewear in sizes XS (fits size 0-2) to size XL (fits size 14-16), but the PINK clothing is sold only in sizes XS - Large. There is no true “plus-size” clothing offered through Victoria’s Secret. The bras are not available in every combination of cup size and measurement, and PINK bras also have a limited selection of styles, colors and patterns that, according to the commenters, favors the slim and small-breasted. On the Nike Women website, bras are available in sizes Small - XL, with extra large being a C or D cup. However, the Nike training and loungewear does cover a greater range of sizes, from size XS (0-2) to XXL (20-22). While I never saw any complaints about available sizes posted to the Nike Women Page during the time of observation, sizing was discussed frequently among the PINK fans. One post from Monday, January 23 about Victoria’s Secret adding a few new bra sizes sparked a large discussion about the sizes available at stores, and the message that Victoria’s Secret was sending to consumers by only offering a limited array of sizes, with few offerings for full-figured or plus-size women. The post itself reads:
Size me up! You asked, we heard & they’ve arrived! We’ve added your most requested sizes to the Multi-Way Push-Up & Wear Everywhere bra mix. Look for 32C, 32D & 36A in stores now.

Following are some comments from fans on the size additions:

Alyssa: How about more bigger double d options in stores! Some of us love your stuff but have very large breasts and it sucks having to always order online when there is not much to choose from. I want to shop in store! Big boobies need love too from VS! (35 likes)

Hayley: Lane Bryant is the way to go for anyone larger than a 36 C or so...even though it's technically a plus-size store their bras are fantastic for anyone who's larger-chested even if you're a small girl! (6 likes)

Janet: I have found Fredricks of Hollywood is good for those looking for larger sizes...all the way to 34 F (1 like)

Nicole: I so dig that we request bigger bra sizes for ALL sexy women..and all smaller-bosomed ladies get listened to...again..hello!! Do you realize your market if voluptuous women could buy bras from you?? Think..you ignorant skinny bitches.. (2 likes)

Marlen: What about 32 AA small boobs need pretty bras too!! (3 likes)

Nycole: Nordstrom sells all of the sizes you all are asking for from the 30s to the G cups...ijs [I'm just saying].

Chelsea: How about a simple 34 dd in the PINK line.. actually had a conversation today with someone about how all bras for women who aren't large but aren't a 32 but also have big boobs only get the ugly plain bras with a ton of padding...
Chances are if you're a d or above the last thing you need is a bra that increases your breasts two more sizes... Don't get me wrong I LOVE VS... Spent almost 700$ on the semi annual sale but why should all the tiny girls with tiny boobs get all the cute bras? (7 likes)

In this situation, Victoria’s Secret is physically excluding women whose bodies are above a certain size, specifically for its PINK line: in order to wear these clothes marketed toward teenage and college-age girls, consumers’ bodies must match the slim, girlish ideal. In this way, the brand is “aspirational” for many women not only because of the prices, but also because fuller-figured women would need to slim down significantly in order to fit into the “skinny” clothing—in the case of breast size in particular, this is virtually impossible without undergoing cosmetic surgery. In this way, the brand promotes the popular ideals of thinness and youth for women (Featherstone, 1991; Kilbourne, 1999), not only virtually, but concretely. Kilbourne’s perspective on the sexualization of thin bodies in particular also applies to this dialogue: the larger bras carried by Victoria’s Secret are plainer and more basic than the smaller bras, implying that fuller-figured women merely need a functional undergarment, not a sexy patterned or embellished bra designed to be admired by a partner in the bedroom.

“Real” bodies versus “Haters”

Related to discussions of the photos and Fashion Show coverage of the Victoria’s Secret models, the discussion about body image and portrayal boiled down to two divided groups of users: those who felt the Victoria’s Secret models’ body types did not accurately reflect those of the “real” women who patronize the store, and a second group that felt the first group’s comments were made out of jealousy - that they were “haters.”
In the world of Internet comments, “haters” typically are assumed to express their trademark emotion because of feelings of jealousy or personal inadequacy. Commenters protested against “haters” for several reasons: they felt the “haters” should look in the mirror before casting the first stone, or they emphasized the body of the modeling industry and stressed that modeling was a legitimate career and that the women shown were merely trying to “do their jobs well.” This dialogue was especially heated during the November 29 Fashion Show posts:

Christina: I think that everything is beautiful. My only wish is that there should be a plus size line and have plus size models. (2 likes)

Andrew (male): People that are hating on this picture are mostly fat. Lose those love handles before you talk shit. Fatties!!

Robbie (male): Is that supposed to be beautiful? That's horrible, she's just bone.

It's no wonder why young teenagers starve themselves, the media is making it seems cool to weigh 90 pounds! (6 likes).

Sarah: They aren't saying this is how women really look, people just don't want to see big women with their cellulite and rolls on the catwalk! (5 likes).

Stephanie: Who cares how skinny they are? Not my problem plus victoria secret s stuff tend to fit skinny woman better... Who cares if it offends thicker woman.. Our mall has a place for thicker woman to buy sexy stuff (1 like).

Katherine: Isn't it hilarious how pathetic those haters look when they call VS models anorexic, that they need a burger blah blah oh and that they need curvy models? Well for your information curvy women are the ones who have an hour glass shape body, not a size 18 like you. (16 likes).
Jineane: Theyyy ate retardedly a week or two befor[e] :( a ridiculous diet, how skinny they were isn't really attracting its somewhat scary n the first thing most [people probably] think is EAT!! HOW MUCH DO THEY WEIGHT CUZ I LIKE AROUND 120 THESE GIRLS R LIKE 80POUNDS OR SUMTHN? WHERE'S THE REAL CURVES NOT SCILICON BREAsTs N BONE!!!” (7 likes).

Rebecca: Well i love Victoria Secret but its true the models are a bit to[o] skinny you dont see this type of skinny walking around @ the mall!!! i think they need use an average type model an everyday healthy women & I dont mean fat!!! Its really sad when someone shares their opinion & they are labeled a hater...Really come on ladies show some class! (3 likes).

Cianna: I also was a little shocked to see how emaciated some of the models looked. VS used to be about the woman with a little more curves and I don't see that anymore. Save the spines and hip bones for anatomy class, not a runway show. I love VS and always will, but it would be nice to see less bones and a little more junk in the trunk.. (3 likes).

Felicia: They don't have an eating disorder . I am that little but it's only because i can't gain weight . If you people don't know, us skinny people have feelings just as well as the not so skinny people do. It hurts when someone puts you down because of how little you are. Put yourself in their shoes before you judge them or make rude comments on how they look. Maybe they have a depression disease that causes them not to gain weight.. (it's called IBS , i have it ) . Some girls that are really tiny would give anything to be chubby . Every person is beautiful in their own way . Whether it be looks , personality , or just how they are built . Try
walking a mile in their shoes before you point out the things that are wrong with them. Better yet, start thinking of others and how they feel more often. (12 likes).

Isamar: To me she looks healthy skinny. ...and i remembered victorias secrets used to have models with all kinds of body shapes but I was just wondering what happened to the curvier girls? Like tyra or the way adriana used to look to me they were the sexiest ones. ..but I guess that's just my point of view as a latina (5 likes).

Some commenters pointed out that the focus on “real” bodies subsequently marginalizes women who are naturally thin. “Ashley,” commenting on the January 23 post about bra sizes, writes:

...‘Real Women’? I’m sorry but i hate that line. It’s BS--just because she isn't as curvy with big boobs, does not mean she is ANY LESS of a woman. All women are beautiful no matter what shape/or size. It's pathetic you think that way just because they don't have your size. Go to lane bryant. There's many other stores with cute bikinis, not just VS. (8 likes).

In a later comment, Ashley continues:

...It's really frustrating when girls use those two words ['Real Women'] just because they can't find something that fits them properly .... I agree-VS should make bigger bras to fit every bust, but don't take it out on the world and call yourself 'real' and try to make other girls with the opposite problem feel less of themselves'...it's not going to solve anything. (3 likes)

On a December 12 post, “Sarah” makes the point that the fans are not required to continue following the VS PINK updates if they disagree with the brand’s message:
I think she is gorgeous! As a bigger woman I can say comfortably that I don't think she is unattractively skinny. This woman works really hard to keep her body like this ... I really don't understand why I always see people complaining about how the models look for VS. If you're gunna complain "unfriend" them, get a magazine subscription, and complain to yourself cuz no one else seems to really care. This woman is beautiful. A lot of people are but their ugly personalities ruin it. Common people, show your beauty! (15 likes).

A few commenters were able to bridge the gap between these two divided groups with some insightful posts advocating for all women to band together: during the Fashion Show broadcast on November 29, "Maya," "Moriah," "Sherry" and "Danielle" posted the following comments:

Maya: Ugh this show totally affects girls and women and their body images everyone I hope you are all comfortable in your own skin never forget how beautiful you are all!!

Moriah: Hmmm, all this talk about weight. I am a size 12. And let me tell you, I have battled with it. I used to work out nonstop and starve myself. But not anymore. I love my body and my curves. It doesn't matter what size you are. It matters what's inside. I don't even care if a guy or girl calls me fat because their opinion does not matter. They can think that all they want, I know I'm not (: as for this girl above me, you're a size four! You're tiny! You're beautiful, just the way you are. Screw anyone who tells you otherwise .... I am ashamed we have let our society become so wrapped up in looks and weight. Girls shouldn't have to put themselves down or fret every day for the way they were born to look. People just
need to get over it and look past all of that. You're right, this girl is gorgeous. But I bet she struggle[s] with her weight and people calling her fat every day. It's not okay. I wish this madness could stop. Women are always beautiful. (7 likes).

Sherry: Damn...listening to all the bad mouthing women do to each other...We women need to smarten up!! And start banding together instead of cutting each other down...Empower the females...instead of always judging...We all are beautiful...in our own ways...and hating is just such a waste of time!!! (5 likes).

Danielle: Plenty of skinny girls struggle with their weight. They struggle to gain it, keep it on and have to constantly deal with ignorant people saying "eat a cheeseburger" when they do or being called anorexic when they're not. Beauty comes in all shapes though and I really wish VS would showcase all body types to show women that tall, short, thin, curvy our stuff will make you look sexy (19 likes).

Others wondered why such a “heavy” conversation was taking place in the comments field for Facebook updates about underwear: (examples). “Erica” summed up the back-and-forth conversation in her comment on a December 12 post:

[I]t’s like this on every single photo VS puts up "omg she needs to eat" "omg y'all stop makin fun of her" "omg omg becky!" Same story different panty lol.

Other commenters echoed this sentiment by posting comments that also referred to the models “just doing their job” and the fans “just here to look at the products for sale.”

Fans’ Debate Mirrored in Other Internet Trends

The “real” vs. “skinny” body binarism observed on the Victoria’s Secret PINK posts was mirrored in other dialogues on Facebook and on other websites during the
observation period. An image created in early January 2012 and posted to Facebook made the rounds of various social-networking sites, comparing the bodies of millennium-era starlets such as Keira Knightley and Nicole Richie to mid-20th Century images of women such as actress Marilyn Monroe and pin-up queen Bettie Page (www.knowyourmeme.com). For many of the women who shared this photo on Facebook (including a few of my own Facebook friends), the collage represents their desire to see different body types for women portrayed in the media. A similar viral photo-sharing trend paired the same picture of Marilyn Monroe in her white bathing suit with captions such as “PROOF that you can be adored by thousands of men, even when your thighs touch” (http://thesocietypages.org/socimages, 2012). However, as some bloggers pointed out in reaction pieces to the body-image trend, the collages weren’t a true representation of a spectrum of women’s body types, but rather pit two body types against each other: one that currently represents a North American cultural ideal of female beauty, and one that represents that same ideal, only 50 or 60 years in the past.

Blogger Heather Cromarty wrote:

If women are fighting amongst ourselves about who is more ‘beautiful,’ if we compare ourselves to other women endlessly, we don’t have time to notice that we’re trapped in a hamster-wheel of low self-esteem. Society hopes that you’ll buy things, to try and make yourself feel better.

(Cromarty, 2011).

The sizing of women’s clothing has changed drastically since Monroe’s era, but many still believe the urban legend of Monroe’s size 12 (or 14, or 16, depending on the source) body—when, in reality, she fit into an 8 or 10 by today’s standards (Snopes.com, 2011)
—typically a size Medium or Large in Victoria’s Secret sizes. There was even a comment about her posted to a PINK status update from January 18, 2012:

Karin: A woman looks better with a little natural curve. I love my Pink too, but just barely make their size cut-off. Not healthy that they restrict it to tiny-skinny girls only. Think about it — Marilyn Monroe would not have been able to fit in any VS Pink styles except maybe some baggy sweatpants.

The binaries observed between “real bodies” and “haters” and between “skinny” and “voluptuous” mirror a larger cultural crisis that separates all young women into these two groups—and it appears from many of the comments that young women themselves are buying into these false divisions. Critiques, such as Kilbourne’s, of the female body in advertising have penetrated into popular culture to some degree—many of the women recognized that the bodies of the Victoria’s Secret models were highly unhealthy and very unrealistic, and felt free to object to this in their comments on the updates—but so many commenters bought into the divisions between the two body types that it is clear
there is far to go. Another disturbing trend was observed in commenters’ willingness to invoke the obesity crisis in America to shut down those who critiqued the photos of the Victoria’s Secret models. This was repeated across many comments by men and women:

Noelle (November 30, 2011): This is pink and its all about teens. So of course they won't have full sized cup boobs and fully formed bodies ....Also. For who evers com[p]laining about this "horrible anorexia problem" we have more of an Obesity problem than an anorexia problem. And other countries that have healthier cultures prefer skinnier healthier people ... Sooo that may be "average" here but that's only because soooo many people are overweight and obese here.

Andrea (December 12, 2011): All of the haters that say she [the Victoria's Secret model] is too skinny are fat. America is so used to eating McDonald's and being overweight and unhealthy. Hit the gym. (3 likes)

Posting inflammatory comments to evoke conflict is a common phenomenon in Internet communication, often known as “trolling” (Hardaker, 2010). Commenters enter a thread and post insulting or divisive comments in the hope of sparking argument; this further illustrates the influence of Internet communication on aspects of group identity, by forcing others in the discussion to divide into two more types of groups: those who take the troll’s “bait” and participate in an inflammatory argument and those who refuse to be goaded. Also, according to Hardaker, the definition of who is a “troll” will differ from group to group (p. 237). As the PINK comment threads were very minimally monitored, commenters had looser regulations to follow and were less likely to be seen as “trolls,” resulting in a large amount of inflammatory posts. The divisive language used in
“trolling” behavior describe obesity sets up another binarism for women participating in the thread. Any individual who criticizes the models is automatically contributing to America’s obesity crisis. As Raisborough (2011) noted, using narratives of “disgust, humiliation, mockery, or pity” serves to further alienate the fat body from mainstream discourse and implies that the individual cannot control her lifestyle choices (p. 18). And, as Kilbourne and Kimmel described, obesity and anorexia are not two separate “epidemics” but represent two sides of the same coin, as individuals go to extremes (in consumption or in abstention) to fulfill what may be lacking in the rest of their lives.

Discussion and Opportunities for Future Research

Despite the capabilities of social-networking sites such as Facebook that allow consumers to interact directly with corporations online—or perhaps because of the ubiquity of Facebook posts—it seemed that the commenters still wanted to compare themselves to the women pictured, whether they took the step of allying themselves with the women in the images or opposing what the women in the images represent (the campaign for “real” bodies). In the midst of debate, it was easy for both the commenters and myself—the observer—to lose sight of the fact that the women pictured in the images and described in the status updates are all “real people” too.

Despite the positive aspects of interactive technologies, their main drawback is the attraction for users to speak much more harshly or divisively than they would in real life, because the communication is not face-to-face. (Postmes & Baym, 2005; Hardaker, 2010). Also, when we interact with others or see images of others online, it can become easier to objectify others. This may be what prompts some of the male commenters on
both Pages to post comments of a sexual nature. Individuals can be more honest, but that also devolves the quality of the conversation into an arguing match at times when commenters’ social-group identity is more salient than individual identity.

Until commenters begin to engage in a higher level of self-censorship and think about what their words sound like to others, it will be difficult for both consumers and corporations to get concrete, positive results out of these branded interactions. Page administrators may not be getting informative feedback from those users who speed by and leave a lot of comments without much meaning or thought behind them. Also, consumers may not get their questions and concerns answered through the venue of the Facebook-branded Page, but may need to seek out other sources for straightforward information on—for instance—the practices of Victoria’s Secret in sourcing fair-trade cotton. When users get so much of their information from one site, such as Facebook, it limits the potential discourses or perspectives they could interact with by searching around the Internet for different perspectives.

While online technologies present us with an endless array of information choices, the quality of interpersonal communication in online venues may not improve until users are willing to seek out different perspectives, or when administrators/moderators have an incentive to offer new perspectives to users. When websites such as Facebook surround us with our closest friends and family, our favorite news sources, and our most prized brands, it’s easy to react quickly to those who do not share our views. Internet comment discussion is a very easy place to find black-and-white binarisms, and a difficult place to explore subtle shades of gray. The comments on body image and critiques of different body types, along with users’ own admissions of body
insecurity, were sometimes difficult to read because the same oppositions were repeated in every thread about women’s bodies. Postmes & Baym (2005) and Hardaker (2010) both call for further research to be conducted into intergroup communication online.

The results of this study only underscore the need for communication scholars to focus on this important area, as the integration continues between everyday life events and the use of networked technologies, especially via mobile devices. As we move more and more of our interactions online, we must develop a greater understanding of how these forms of communication evolved from prior methods, and how they are changing our expressions of identity and our intergroup communication tactics (Baym, 2009).

The results of my analysis show evidence that, for women (and, increasingly, some men), the issues of body image, social group identity, and intergroup communication on the Internet are very closely tied together. A conceptual shift in one of these areas can potentially affect the others. During the time I was writing this thesis, a study was released by the London School of Economics (Costa-Font & Jofre-Bonet, 2011) in which the authors tracked data from a lifestyle survey of 2,871 European women between the ages of 15 and 34. This study from the field of economics is one of the first that has found evidence for a connection between self-image, social group identity, and the likelihood of anorexia. The authors found that women who lived among peer groups with higher BMI (body mass index) were less likely to develop anorexia, and they found a correlation between self-image and body weight in the sample of women surveyed (p. 19). These results only emphasize the idea that our identities as individuals within social groups are malleable depending on which groups we choose to ally ourselves with. The harsher divisions between social groups during computer-mediated communication
online may make it more difficult for young women suffering from eating disorders to speak out, or to be flexible in terms of cultivating identity as a process, online and in “real life.”

On the positive side, the semiotic codes observed in these Facebook comments point toward the larger trend toward more integration of physical location and online activity, and a greater accountability toward corporations to create affordable, useful, and durable products for consumers. Social networks such as Foursquare and Groupon have taken advantage of location-based specials and deals for consumers that drive them both to engage in online activity and to visit more local businesses in their communities. The savvy shoppers who trade tips and advice in the comments field have a choice of different online communities where they can find more deals and band together to get the most out of their shopping experiences: for example, plasticjungle.com is a site that offers gift-card exchanges and purchases. Sites such as stockpilingmoms.com take advantage of the “couponing” trend that became popular in 2011, in which consumers seek out and use many different coupons together to save vast amounts of money. All of these are examples of a phenomenon that combines online communication, consumerism, and saving through tough economic times - but in a much different way than people have in the past: saving through spending (“stocking up” on multiple boxes of cereal, for example), and then storing and using the resources gradually.

The trends I observed in these Facebook comments also reflect some larger changes in online political activity: the petition website Change.org offers users the ability to create their own petitions protesting both governmental and corporate decisions, and then allows visitors to that site to quickly view and sign many petitions related to
causes they support, in about the same amount of time it takes to leave a Facebook comment. Petitions on this website had quite an impact on many issues in late 2011: one consumer who created a petition on the site protesting a Bank of America debit-card fee garnered over 300,000 signatures, sparked a national “Switch Banks Day” and contributed to the bank subsequently dropping the fee (Ambrose, 2012).

During the time of this study, all of these venues offered consumers new opportunities to save money and to band together with others at the same time, creating communities around savvy consumerism, saving money, and encouraging change in the corporations consumers are buying from. As consumers and citizens band together to form larger groups, they are finding alternate routes around traditional capitalism. The “couponing” trend is just one example—the DIY, or do-it-yourself movement, and the eat-local movement are other sociocultural trends that owe their growth to networked communication technologies and online discourse. This intersection of consumption and computer-mediated communication will be a rich area for future study as scholars explore what these “deal” sites offer to both communities of fans, and to the corporations making the deals.

If consumers can take this approach to hold corporations accountable for the ways in which women are portrayed in their advertising, we could see significant changes in the advertising images and the sexualized media culture that is currently popular. Once consumers’ pocketbooks are involved, and they make their voices heard, corporations will listen. The issue remaining is to educate young consumers about these issues so that they will feel inspired enough to form a unified—rather than divisive—discourse about
changing the face (and the body) of lifestyle and fashion advertising.
APPENDIX

Glossary: Facebook and social media terms
**Acronyms and Wordplay**

The comments of users on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter often will shorten words, leave out vowels, turn popular phrases into acronyms, and add symbols such as “hearts” in their status updates and comments. Character limits are often imposed by social networking sites, and many users access the sites through mobile phones so they use “texting”-style speech - these two factors most likely account for the high level of language play in Facebook status updates and comments.

**“@” Replies**

The @ (“at” symbol) can be typed directly in front of another Facebook or Twitter user’s name to address a reply directly to that user in a conversation or comment thread.

**Ads with Social**

These branded messages on Facebook are paid for by advertisers with a social context on the unit that can appear to Friends of Fans. (So-and-so likes such-and-such a brand). Currently, they appear on the right hand side of the screen to the Facebook user.

**Emoticons**

Emoticons are another form of wordplay users employ online. By grouping letter keys and punctuation keystrokes together, a user can create images that look like smiling faces :, laughing faces XD, ambivalent faces o_O, or sad faces :(

**“Likes”**

When an individual “Likes” a branded page, she agrees to subscribe to updates form that page that will then appear in her Newsfeed along with friends’ updates. When individuals connect on Facebook, a Friend Request is sent and both parties must agree to connect.
For brands, the “Like” is one-way, so a page administrator does not have to do anything.

“Likes” on Statuses or Comments

Facebook users also have the opportunity to show their approval of a specific status update or comment by “liking” these individual pieces of information. Many users have also petitioned Facebook to add a “Dislike” button, but this feature has not been added to the website.

News Feed

Currently, this component of Facebook appears in the center of the screen to the user. The News Feed updates in real time with status updates, links, videos and photos posted by both a users’ Friends and the brands they have engaged with on the site.

Pages

Every user of Facebook and every brand using Facebook each have a unique home page. Friends or Fans can visit this Page to view a “timeline” of status updates, review photo albums and video posts, see what other Friends or Fans subscribe to the page, and post comments.

Page Administrators

These are the employees or contractors chosen by a company or organization to oversee their branded Facebook page. Acting as a representative of the brand, they post text updates, links, videos and photos. The Page Administrator can also delete inappropriate comments from Fans that appear on the Wall or status updates for the brand, and she can report spam or inappropriate activity to Facebook for further action. Often the Page Administrator will also reply to fans’ questions and complaints as a representative of the brand, making Facebook a portal for customer service as well as a social network. Page
Administrators also have access to traffic reports from Facebook which track statistics on who is visiting their page.

**Page Publishing/Posts/Status Updates**

Unpaid advertisements—text, photos, and video links—written and published by representatives of an organization with a Facebook Page that appear on the Fan Page Wall and may also appear in the Newsfeed of a Fan or a Friend of a Fan.

**Photo Albums**

Companies and organizations may create photo albums on their pages by uploading a batch of images. The album appears in the Newsfeed as a collection of thumbnail images, which contain links to a photo gallery view which, when clicked, will display the photos in a larger size.

**Stories About Friends**

These unpaid advertisements occur when a Friend actively engages with a brand and becomes visible either on a friend’s wall or in the Newsfeed.

**Sponsored Stories**

These paid advertisements are similar to stories about friends, but they have been actively distributed more broadly and appear in the right hand column to Fans and Friends of Fans.

**Status Update**

A brief message posted by a user, their Friends, or branded Pages that appears in a user’s Newsfeed. This message can be accompanied by links to other Facebook pages or outside web or e-commerce pages.
**Trolling**

A “Troll” is someone who contributes inflammatory, false, or attack language in a forum or comment thread on the Internet. Trolling is considered rude and negative online behavior.

**Video Posts**

Individual users and brand Pages can upload short videos to Facebook and add a message to accompany the video. These video posts appear in the user’s Newsfeed and also under the Videos section of a user’s or brand’s Page.

**Wall**

This is the center portion of the individual or brand’s home page on Facebook. At the time of writing, the Wall is being phased out by Facebook in favor of a redesigned “timeline” layout. The Timeline has been opened up to individuals, but not to branded Pages yet, so this paper refers to the Wall when discussing branded Pages.
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