

Baltimore Feminists Prank Victoria's Secret — And Spark an Internet Revolution

By **Rachel Monroe** - December 10, 2012

Last week, the internet was [shocked](#) and [pleased](#) to learn that Victoria's Secret had launched a new line of consent-themed underwear. Instead of a thong reading "SURE THING," these panties said things like "NO MEANS NO" and "ASK FIRST." Even more exciting, they were modeled by a beaming curvy woman of color. "I'm the first person to go on a tirade about how much I hate VS, but this is awesome," wrote one blogger — a sentiment that echoed throughout the [Tumblr](#)/[Facebook](#)/[Twitter](#)-sphere. Pretty shortly, though, the campaign was revealed as a sophisticated hoax perpetrated by a group of [radical Baltimore feminists](#). BFB asked Baltimore residents Hannah Brancato and Rebecca Nagle about their intentions, future plans — and the angry reaction from Victoria's Secret:

(this interview has been edited and condensed)

How did the idea come about, and how did you go about executing it?

Upsetting Rape Culture actually started as an art exhibition in Baltimore in 2010. After we did that, we wanted to keep working, so the next thing we did is we made [a line of underwear called "Consent Is Sexy."](#) We came up with this three-pack of underwear with a set of "No" underwear, "Yes" underwear and "Maybe" underwear, which we thought was a cute way of wearing what you were in the mood for. About a month later, Victoria's Secret came out with this underwear that said "Yes, No, Maybe," but it was all on the same underwear. Instead of saying yes, no *or* maybe — and "I get to decide about what happens to my body" — it's like, yes, no, maybe, I don't know.

So instead of "No" being a way for young women to set a boundary, it is a way for them to flirt, which I think is part of this understanding we have in our culture that creates and perpetuates rape. So we were like, wow, this is crazy problematic. So the idea started to do a knock-off of Victoria's Secret PINK line and we decided to time it with the fashion show. Social media was the way to go, since as individuals, this was our best shot at creating a large impact and reaching a lot of people.

We worked with an amazing web designer named Dan Staples, fantastic photographer Philip Laubner (who also shot the YES consent is sexy line), a fabulous group of models who support consent and the project, two stylists named Michelle Faulkner and Darian Gavin, and a few amazing volunteers. In addition, we recruited a group of about 100 people who were in on the prank and helped us spread the word using Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook. This was absolutely a group effort!

Why Victoria's Secret?

Fighting rape would be a major shift for Victoria's Secret. Though they are a woman-focused company, VS has never taken a stand on any women's issue.

In fact, their current designs seem to lean more toward rape culture than consent. Their PINK brand, marketed at high school and college-aged women, sports thongs with the slogan "SURE THING" printed right over the crotch. Young women across the country are wearing underwear with "SURE THING" literally printed over their vaginas. We can think of one circumstance where a vagina is treated like a "SURE THING": rape.

PINK is specifically marketed towards younger and younger girls, and like the rest of Victoria's Secret, PINK is selling a specific brand of sexuality. VS PINK has co-opted the idea of sexual freedom and twisted it into an image of sexuality in which the woman (or girl) is not really in control. The "Sure Thing" and "Yes No Maybe" and "NO peeking" underwear promote the idea of limitless availability, or on the other hand, leaving the choice up to the (presumably male) partner. The brand teaches girls to be coy instead of vocal and makes it seem uncool and unsexy to say no and mean it. By re-enforcing that sex is about an image, that looking good is more important than feeling good, PINK promotes rape culture.

What sort of reaction did you expect?

We strategically planned for the campaign to go viral on social media, and knew that there would be conversations both among girls who were consumers of PINK and related products, and feminists/activists who wanted to support this conversation about consent. We knew that the customer base of the PINK line would be excited to see such fierce and real conversation about sex. We were certain that many women would be excited to see a different, and empowered brand of sexuality being promoted. And they were!

I am sure that many people who were excited to see the conversation happening in this sphere will find other ways to keep talking about and promoting consent. There was one long conversation on our Facebook wall, as a few people tried to determine whether the project was really VS, that concluded with, *Well, if VS isn't selling this and FORCE isn't either, then we will just have to make it!* And that is a reaction that is the best, and that comes from this being a social media, grassroots campaign. Because a small group of artists were able to generate this conversation using this tactic, others that need the conversation and enjoyed it will find ways to keep it the consent revolution going.

Recent Posts by Others on Victoria's Secret Fashion Show

[See All](#)



Lilia Rissman

[@](#) I love consent! Thank you VS! <http://pinklovescons...>

2 hours ago



Margaret Rivera

Ready for the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show tonight!! ...

3 hours ago



Love Consent

Victoria's Secret we Love Consent because we want ra...

[👍](#) 1 · 3 hours ago

[More Posts](#) ▾

What are some of your favorite responses/reactions?

When we first launched the campaign and had not yet released our reveal/Jezebel had not yet posted [its article](#), the Victoria's Secret Facebook pages were flooded with "I heart consent" posts, excited campus reps were retweeting pinklovesconsent.com, and the "pink hearts" at pinknation.com were declaring their love for "open sex talk." One employee tweeted, "I am so happy to currently have a job for a company that stands for something so beautiful!! @LoveConsent #victoriasssecret #loveconsent." High school students were tweeting, "I'm loving the new @LoveConsent! Victoria's Secret goes feminist!"

One high school student eloquently blogged: "i'm still freaking out over this pink loves consent thing. And people say nothing's gonna change, that talking and educating doesn't help. Watch how many people will second-guess their actions when a widely popular company is pushing the issue. This is so fucking cool."



Lizzette Jannette @lizzistheshizzz

3m

Apparently @VSPINK doesn't have a #loveconsent line.. It was just a prank. #disappointed

Expand



Sarah Edelsburg @SarahEBURG

12m

I #loveconsent because everyone should have a choice over her or his body. Check out upsettingrapeculture.com. Wake up @VictoriasSecret @VSPINK

Expand



Kitty Stryker @kittystryker

1h

So into the #loveconsent prank that happened yesterday! Victoria's Secret should get on making consent parties before Consent Culture does.

Expand



Lizzette Jannette @lizzistheshizzz

1h

I love @VSPINK's new consent line. I also love that they realized that they were part of the problem. #loveconsent

pic.twitter.com/v6hRDFwd

[View photo](#)



Nissa @NissaDance

5h

I #loveconsent when it is given without deception & manipulation. VS does not promote rape because what a women wears does not cause rape.

Expand

How would you describe rape culture to someone who'd never heard the term before?

Rape culture are the things that allow rape to seem normal and prevent survivors from being able to speak up and out. Rape culture is silencing. In a rape culture, people are surrounded with images, language, laws, and other everyday phenomena that validate and perpetuate rape. It includes jokes, TV, music, advertising, legal jargon, laws, words and imagery that make violence against women and sexual coercion seem so normal that people believe that rape is inevitable. Rather than viewing the culture of rape as a problem to change, people in a rape culture think about the persistence of rape as “just the way things are.”

It is important that smaller groups, grassroots groups, speak up and talk about what matters to them. When people see an image like Rape is Rape or PINK Loves Consent in a mainstream venue like Facebook, even if they don't linger on the image for long, it might help them to see rape culture where it was previously invisible. Or it will inspire them to make an image, an idea, a reality. This stuff is important because it shows that no matter how big the corporate giants are, especially in the internet and social media age, people really do have the power to be heard and to change the things that are oppressive using the very same tools. And we can even be more effective than they can be.

What has the response from VS been?

Victoria's Secret has demanded that the website be taken down. They contacted our server, not us directly. Here is part of what they've said: "The registrants are using the VICTORIA'S SECRET, PINK and Heart Logo Design all without permission, to create confusion and to promote the non-authorized, non-associated sites pinklovesconsent.com and partywithpink.com." The website is back up now. We are completely within our rights, according to fair use, since we are not selling anything and the campaign is a critique of the Victoria's Secret brand. Though it was taken down briefly on Thursday night, [the website is still functioning!](#)

How do social media tools benefit (or hurt) activist campaigns like this one? (Also: Why/how did Twitter block @loveconsent – is this legal?)

During the fashion show the main Twitter handle for the consent campaign @loveconsent was suspended. The account is still blocked and its tweets have disappeared from the Twitter feeds including #loveconsent and #victoriassecret. Additionally a link at pinklovesconsent.com to let visitors tweet "Dear #victoriassecret I #loveconsent because" was blocked for most of the fashion show. Twitter was contacted Tuesday night by FORCE about the suspension and has yet to reply. Organizers aren't sure why their account is suspended. The @loveconsent handle was getting a lot of retweets and top tweets for the #victoriassecret hashtag. Maybe [Victoria's Secret] complained. We've also heard from people that you can't search for the page on Facebook, that you can only get to it with a direct link (facebook.com/heartconsent). We understand that it's tricky territory because, at first, we were pretending to be Victoria's Secret. But now the cat is out of the bag. On all our accounts we have tweeted and posted that we are a parody.

Despite the blocks, suspensions, missing tweets, and empty searches, #loveconsent has gone viral. The Internet is awash with positive feedback and support for PINK loves CONSENT. Perhaps the consent revolution has begun, even if it started with a parody and underwear.

This project relied completely on social media to spread the message and to generate a conversation. We never could have done the project without social media; however the conversation would have reached even more people if our accounts hadn't been blocked. Though the idea of social media is radical in that it is ideally directed by and for people, the networks are not completely free and neutral.

What do you have planned for the future?

We do have some ideas up our sleeves, but you'll have to stay tuned for more! We will definitely be thinking more about gender roles and playing with ways of sharing our ideas in the public sphere.

How can people become involved with your group?

[Email](#) us and [follow our efforts online!](#)

Are there any plans to actually make/sell this underwear?

We did actually print some underwear both for the photoshoot and for a nationwide panty drop which is happening this week. We will be posting on our Facebook wall throughout the next few days each time a batch gets dropped in a new city. Finders keepers!

As the campaign progressed last week, we asked ourselves — why do so many women love something they know is not real? **FORCE** made something that people want, but that a company like Victoria's Secret can never give them. Imagine how different our lives would be if we put as much time and thought into sharing ideas like consent as we do into selling underwear.

For this campaign, it is important that our services in promoting consent be free, which is one of the many things that is distinguishing us from Victoria's Secret. We are about promoting consent and instigating a national conversation about the subject, not making the product.

Ultimately, we feel that the PINK Loves Consent campaign is just one of the ways that we are working to end rape culture — we want to pursue other projects to upset and disrupt the culture of rape from other angles as well.