

Op-Ed: Why the Fashion Industry Needs to Learn the True Meaning of Diversity

by Samantha Cooper

SYRACUSE, N.Y., March 19, 2019 – Last week, Victoria’s Secret bestowed its highest honor upon Hungarian model Barbara Palvin, and people flocked to Twitter to share their thoughts. The response was positive overall, as fans expressed their excitement to see Palvin as a VS Angel. Even people who had critiqued the image of femininity projected by Victoria’s Secret gave the brand praise for highlighting a woman with natural curves, stepping away from the unnaturally thin models its roster has boasted for the last several decades. This choice may appear to be progress toward diversity, but at what cost? The fashion industry has needed to have a conversation about intention for a long time, and Victoria’s Secret may have just given the community a reason.

It is no secret that Victoria’s Secret has been on the wrong side of history many times before when it comes to diversity of sizes, races, and gender identities. This plays a major role in why we are even talking about Palvin. Standing at 5 feet 8 inches and wearing a size four, Palvin does offer a visibly healthier and more realistic contrast to the six-foot tall, double-zero models that usually walk the VS runway. However, she is far from what is actually the average body type today in America. In 2018, Plunkett Research shared that 68 percent of American women wear a dress size 14 or higher. So while Palvin may appear as a small step toward inclusion for the brand, it is crucial to consider the context of the situation.

It was only a matter of months ago that comments made by VS executives sparked public outrage. Not only did their reputation take a major hit, but their financials took an even bigger

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one. The words of one man in an attempted justification of Victoria's Secret's white-washed, stick-skinny 2018 runway did all this damage, plus it cost the CEO of VS her job. So would Victoria's Secret have created such buzz around granting Palvin her wings, let alone make her a VS Angel at all, had this media storm never happened? Almost definitely not.

Yes, adding a fuller-figured woman to their repertoire is a step toward greater representation for the brand. However, that step is heavily diluted due to the lack of pure intention behind it. Victoria's Secret's rocky, exclusionary history indicates that diversifying its roster would never have been on the minds of upper management had the lack thereof not been costing the company major money.

Simply, when a brand only invites diversity as a business strategy or a public relations ploy, true diversity does not exist.

Thanks to social media, consumers are more conscious of brand mission and more vocal about their opinions than ever before. Victoria's Secret is certainly not the only brand to pride itself on creating and perpetuating a sense of fantasy or elitism through its clothing. Diversity is important for a host of reasons, but at its most basic level, there seems to be no reason for fashion today to fit a single definition, especially as other brands like Savage X Fenty and Christian Siriano welcome diversity with open arms. And if the ethics behind the issue are not enough to convince industry giants to retire tired brand standards that communicate the same one-dimensional image of feminine beauty, just take a look at the stock prices.

On a corporate level, the fashion industry likes to ignore that the people they are working with and working for are all connected by one massively important quality: they are all human.

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Models have been historically treated like mannequins, consumers like statistics, and buyers like ATMs. When the fashion industry accepts that it is time to start treating humans like humans, intentional and honest diversity will be a natural next step, as companies will no longer be able to ignore the beautifully vast mix of people that interact with their brand. These talks of implementing diversity for the right reasons have been whispers in fashion for some time, and whether or not Victoria's Secret chooses to listen, it looks like some real change is hopefully around the corner for the industry at large. It's time for a major brand to take the leap, so who is it going to be?

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