

Cultural bridging: an extension of cultural branding in the lingerie market by Savage X Fenty

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## ABSTRACT

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Cultural branding theory assumes that iconic brands are made by leapfrogging a cultural status quo and capitalizing on an opposing cultural discourse.. Brands position themselves by taking a stance against a dominant cultural narrative. This creates two types of cultural positioning on each side of an ideological divide. This present thesis examines how a brand like Savage X Fenty practices cultural branding by reconciling the two sides (rather than opposing them) and functionally bridging the ideological gap. The findings emerge from qualitative data analysis based on 625 pages of newspaper articles from 2005-2019, a netnography of lingerie brands over the course of a year, and the archives of Savage X Fenty's social media presence. In doing so, two ideo-typical lingerie brands were conceptualized: the Bombshell and Body Positive brands. I contribute to the extent literature by showing how cultural branding can operate by bridging opposing cultural narratives, rather than taking a stance against a dominant narrative. I show how Savage X Fenty was able to reconcile the gap between these brands by blending their goal, offering products that covered and blended elements of the two brands and working with a wide variety of ambassadors. The brand's founder, pop star Rihanna, served as a catalyst for the brand's success. This brings in a human element to the existing literature on cultural branding in marketing. These results suggest there is a capability to capitalize on bridging cultural divides as well as creating iconic brands out of person-brands.

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## 1. Introduction

Brands like Coca-Cola, Budweiser, and Harley Davidson became icons by addressing a cultural tension through cultural branding (Holt, 2004). Brands can do so either by addressing tensions at the societal or the product category level. An example of the former is Axe, which provided a brand discourse around traditional masculinity at a time when politically correct gender politics were on the rise (Holt, 2016). An example of the latter is Dove, which distanced itself from the unattainable beauty standards diffused by cosmetics and personal care brands, as well as the societal discussion around such standards, by tapping into body positivity (Holt, 2016). By practicing cultural branding, these brands became symbols for use by consumers to construct their identities (Holt, 2004). When brands successfully address a cultural tension and capture the zeitgeist, they often amplify their equity long-term (Holt, 2004).

However, it is unlikely that taking an oppositional ideological stance to address a cultural tension is the sole approach to practicing cultural branding. Particularly, at the product category level—for instance, the aforementioned Dove example—this approach assumes that cultural branding needs to be performed by distancing a brand from the governing set of values, assumptions, and beliefs of a market. For example, prior to Dove, cosmetics and personal care products were branded by creating an ideal woman with unattainable beauty standards in order to generate insecurities in consumers. The brand was then positioned as the means through which consumers could minimize their insecurities with regard to body image (Illouz, 2008). Slogans like Revlon’s “The most unforgettable women in the world wear Revlon,” Noxzema’s “For healthy looking skin,” and Maybelline’s “Perfect skin day: maybe she’s born with it. Maybe it’s Maybelline,” all imply that, without the product sold by the brand, women will be forgettable, with unhealthy, unperfect skin—the skin with which they were born.



Dove's branding strategy—to mine the cultural landscape, and body positivity, to create campaigns that directly opposed the set of values, assumptions, and beliefs driving the market—led to The Real Beauty campaign. Rather than playing on women's insecurities, this campaign aimed at “rebuilding women's confidence and redefining beauty standards” (Millard, 2011) by showing that all women are beautiful, with or without makeup, specialized soaps, or trendy shampoos.

This idea of separating set of values, assumptions, and beliefs—in this case to oppose those around “all women are beautiful” and those around “beauty is unattainable”—is well-documented in work that explains how firms deal with competing cultural demands in their market (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta & Lounsbury, 2011). This body of work also discusses another alternative to dealing with competing cultural demands: blending them together. Since existing work examines how firms can manage competing cultural demands to maintain their legitimacy in their market, it is unclear whether or how blending can be used to practice cultural branding. Most strategies discussed in extant research concentrate on the reduction of internal tensions and conforming to demands, rather than the creation of brand meanings, products, or communication strategies. Yet, many brands, such as Savage X Fenty—on which I concentrate—as well as Game of Thrones and Vitaminwater, seem to practice such a blending approach.

I address this gap in the literature by asking the question: how can brands blend competing cultural contradictions to practice cultural branding? This question is answered by examining Savage X Fenty and the ever-transforming lingerie market. A brief sketch of the evolution of the market explains why it is important to answer the research question at hand.

Since the 1980s, the lingerie market has embraced a sexualized version of the past iterations of lingerie with bold lace corsets, push up bras, striking slips, and ever-shrinking underwear (Hill, 2014). From this juncture onward, lingerie was tied to heightening sex appeal until the new millennium. This first type of brand, the “bombshell,” is tied to the dominant logic of lingerie selling a heteronormative idea of sexual fantasy rooted in the male gaze and unrealistic standards of beauty.

In the mid-2010s, smaller brands redefined the lingerie category by emphasizing inclusivity (Garcia, 2019). These brands followed the cultural strategy approach; like Dove, they distanced themselves from brands that capitalized on generating insecurities through adverts showcasing unattainable bodies and embraced body positivity. This second type of brand, the “body positive” brand, is aimed at marketing lingerie for “real” women by promising items that fit and in which women will feel comfortable.

Body positive lingerie brands countered beauty ideals by creating products and ads for “real” women. This turn toward body positivity addressed women’s frustrations at not being able to find lingerie that fit their bodies or needs; it addressed a cultural contradiction in the market (Holt, 2004). Within a few years, the body positivity movement seeped into the market, and brands like Aerie, Neon Moon, and Nubian Skin were embracing all bodies in their marketing, specifically to counter the prevailing beauty ideals in lingerie (Lothian-McLean, 2018; Pennant, 2015).

By the mid-2010s, two cultural positions existed within the marketplace: bombshell brands emphasizing sexual fantasy and body positive brands emphasizing body acceptance and inclusivity. Bombshell brands dominated market share, while body positive brands evolved in periphery (Garcia, 2019).

Savage X Fenty launched in 2018 with much fanfare (Yotka, 2018) in a market that was composed of these two types of brands. The brand's promise combined sexiness and inclusivity. They *bridged* the cultural ideals of both types of brands. Alongside the benefit of being founded by prominent pop star and entrepreneur Rihanna, this cultural bridging approach seduced segments interested in both types of brands, drawing in many customers quickly (Yotka, 2018). Savage X Fenty is thus an ideal brand to conceptualize and explain the novel branding strategy introduced in this thesis: cultural bridging.

Cultural bridging expands on the elements of ideologies and myths within cultural branding. It functions by resolving the tension between and blending sets of values, assumptions, and beliefs in a market rather than by isolating them. Cultural bridging closes the gaps between dominant and emerging discourses rather than amplifying their differences.

I develop the concept of cultural bridging through an analysis of articles, social media, brand websites, and podcasts on the lingerie market. I take as a departure point Holt's (2004) cultural branding approach to explain the novelty of cultural bridging. In doing so, I argue that Savage X Fenty is able to transform characteristics of bombshell and body positive brands to create a unique brand positioning. The brand's offerings are then magnified by Rihanna's celebrity, which is important to their branding strategy. I will explain cultural branding in depth, highlighting the importance of cultural oppositions in the present literature, before describing my methodology, discussing my findings, and expanding on their implications. In doing so, I emphasize how a brand like Savage X Fenty is able to bridge the divide between opposing cultural narratives and how this mechanism is an alternative to the current approach to cultural branding.

## 2. Understanding Cultural Branding

In his book *How Brands Become Icons*, Douglas Holt (2004) introduced the concept of cultural branding. Deviating from the existing mindshare and emotional marketing strategies, Holt's theory of cultural branding relies on macro level marketing rather than micro level marketing (Holt, 2004). Brands become icons when they can address a cultural tension and attach themselves to a cultural myth.

As an example of capitalizing on cultural myths, Holt illustrates the examples of Corona beer. While Budweiser was the all-American beverage of choice for parties across the nation, Corona's myth is tied to the escape to Mexico (Holt, 2004). In the 1980s, Corona and Bud Light were considered party beers. They were both successful beer brands at the time due to their contextual differences: Bud Light was the all-American beer for frat parties and tailgating, whereas Corona was the beer for drinking on the beach for spring break debauchery (Holt, 2004). By the end of the 1980s, Corona seemed to be outdated and no longer appealed to college students the way it had in years prior; the brand had to shift the narrative. The "beach in Mexico" myth allowed for it to deviate from its origins in party culture during Spring Break to that of a tranquil vacation. Corona started to embody an escape from the monotony of a corporate job. Corona earned greater success in its understanding of the tensions of the time. Drinking a Corona beer meant you were on vacation somewhere far away, which is not the imagery other beer brands were conveying in the 1990s (see Holt, 2004).

Understanding the existing cultural tensions or disruptions is crucial to the development of an iconic brand. Cultural branding creates a beacon for consumers to resolve cultural anxieties during an uncertain period. Engaging with a product means that you are taking part in that uncertain story (Holt, 2004). For example, the Corona beer symbolizes the vacation that white-

collar workers dream of taking during the other 50 weeks of the year (Holt, 2004). It opposed the work ideology central to American work ethic with an idealized myth of escaping the 9-to-5.

Cultural branding fixates on the narrative rather than the brand-related attributes. The narrative, and therefore the brand, creates stronger cultural resources from which consumers can create their identity. Corona is not refreshing, cold, or high in alcohol content. It is a beer that says that you are relaxed and not the typical corporate job type (Holt, 2004).

Cultural branding is especially important as the world becomes more connected. In the digital age, traditional marketing strategies struggle to capture attention. In 2016, many brands were not gaining followings the way entertainment properties could (Holt, 2016). People gravitated toward stories, and branding around a product's features hinders storytelling (Holt, 2016). Social media strategies had to adapt a cultural branding approach because the medium demanded it. For example, Dove, Axe, and Old Spice successfully used cultural branding in their social media campaigns by addressing a cultural contradiction. Distribution of branded messaging relies heavily on the spread between users (Ashley & Tuten, 2015) and ads created through cultural branding met the conditions for virality.

People are unlikely to share an ad that talks about product features; however, embedding ads in stories with high identity value makes it more likely to be widely shared (Berger, 2013). For example, Axe created social media campaigns associated with traditional masculinity to address tensions emerging from the political correctness discourse against such a view on masculinity. Men who identified with ideals of traditional masculinity could then share Axe ads, which became resources to tell others about who they were as a person. Moreover, Holt (2016) suggests that practicing cultural branding allows consumers to tap into pre-existing communities

that already identify with a cultural discourse. Since pockets of people who are already discussing these topics amongst themselves exist, the branded content can be more easily spread.

Brands on social media have to participate in discourse in order to successfully earn support (Scholz & Smith, 2019). Capitalizing on a divide in discourse can actually strengthen ties to brands on social media (Scholz & Smith, 2019). In their research, Scholz and Smith (2019) examined how a fitness brand escalated a social media firestorm caused by a controversial campaign by creating a wedge between competing ideologies of body acceptance and fitness goals. The brand was able to frame the divide as “lazy crybaby” (body acceptance) vs. “work hard” (fitness goals) (Scholz & Smith, 2019). By fanning the flames of controversy so publicly, the brand was able to garner support from users on social media that did not come to their defense when the brand tried other strategies. Positioning a brand firmly on one side of an ideological discourse is an important element to cultural branding that can strongly contribute to brands’ social media success (Holt, 2016).

In summary, current work emphasizes how cultural branding is an approach where a cultural status quo is identified, and an opposing discourse is created to anchor brand narrative (e.g. political correctness vs. traditional masculinity, unrealistic beauty standards vs. body positivity, work life vs. escape, body acceptance vs. fitness goals). Brands create their icon status by becoming the embodiment of one side of the ideological divide (Holt, 2004; Holt, 2016). Brands can successfully capitalize on existing audiences on social media by further wedging the two sides of discourse. The purpose of this present research is to ask whether brands need to situate themselves on one side of the ideological divide to become icons. Is there a way for brands to blend or bridge competing ideologies? In the coming sections I will outline how Savage X Fenty bridges the ideological divide in the current lingerie market.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Contextualizing lingerie

The lingerie industry itself dates back several hundred years and over the course of its history has evolved alongside trends and fashion aesthetics of the time (Hill, 2014). Lingerie of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is much different than that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example. Lingerie is now a mass consumable product for women from all backgrounds rather than a product reserved to shape the sophisticated dressings of upper-class women (Hill, 2014). To define the characteristics of the existing ideo-typical brands in the lingerie market at the point of Savage X Fenty's launch, I followed the pattern-matching approach to qualifying institutional logics according to Reay and Jones (2016). Pattern-matching institutional logics requires drawing the characteristics from existing literature and identifying "ideal types." The ideal types in this case would build the "ideo-typical" bombshell and body positive brands that are used to determine the fit of the data and then to contrast against the ideal of the Savage X Fenty brand.

Savage X Fenty was selected as a case for bridging largely due to my acute awareness of it in the lingerie space. Because of this, I was able to identify a discrepancy between the cultural branding strategy following by Savage X Fenty, and what the theory would have predicted. The discourse in the lingerie market was very topical in the summer of 2019 as Victoria Secret was entangled in scandal relating to the comments made by former chief marketing officer Ed Razek to Vogue (Phelps, 2018). Ed Razek discussed Victoria's Secrets' decision not to include trans and plus-sized women (Phelps, 2018). He named Savage X Fenty and Rihanna in the article, as did other articles covering the scandal until his departure in 2019 (e.g. Ell, 2019). Savage X Fenty appeared to be the inclusive counter to Victoria's Secret, the market leader at the time (Garcia, 2019).

### 3.2 Archival data

To examine the trajectory of the current lingerie market, I compiled data from the last 15 years. The bulk of the data was made up of news articles from various publications around the English-speaking world. This was to provide a basis upon which to track the evolution of the broader lingerie market. News outlets provide a cultural context for the lingerie market and the trends that shape them. Using the Factiva database, I searched for specific terms relating to lingerie within the period of 2005 to 2019. Keywords used in search terms to examine sexier brands that I have categorized as Bombshell brands were *sexy* and *lingerie* as well as either *brand* or *line* in the headline or lead paragraph. This search yielded a total of 308 pages for those 176 articles. Keywords used in the more inclusive lingerie brand search, which I consider encapsulating Body Positive brands, were *diversity*, *inclusivity*, *body positivity*, *real women* or *plus-sized* and *lingerie* with the same condition of appearing in the headline or lead paragraph. This search yielded 139 pages for 86 articles. From all of these articles, I identified the characteristics of prevailing ideo-typical brands which I have classified as the Bombshell brand and the Body Positive brand.

I also collected data directly on Savage X Fenty. The Factiva search for Savage X Fenty contained the keywords *Savage X Fenty* in the lead paragraph and headline but was limited to 2017 to 2019, since the brand only launched in 2018. This search yielded 178 pages of results for 77 articles. To further analyze the brand's presence, the contents of both Rihanna's and Savage X Fenty's Twitter and Instagram profiles were downloaded, though I monitored and took field notes for these accounts. Savage X Fenty's profiles included 3855 tweets and 1256 pictures with captions. Rihanna's profiles included 9630 tweets and 4655 posts with captions. The brand-related observations were compiled into about 10 pages of fieldnotes.



### 3.3 Netnography

Further data was collected by searching for *lingerie* in the Apple podcast application for all brand-related content. Of the podcasts that I listened to, I selected three to transcribe for relevant information to branding practices and discussions of the lingerie market in general. The three episodes in question were from the series *Cost of Living*, *Made by Marketing*, and *Wait, There's More*. The *Cost of Living* episode featured an interview with Knix co-founder Joanna Griffiths to discuss the evolution of the lingerie market in 2019 (Haavardsrud & Griffiths, 2019). The excerpt of the *Made by Marketing* episode featured an interview with Lisa Perez, the head of social media and influencer marketing at Savage X Fenty (Illuminati, Keenan, Montiel & Perez, 2019). The episode of *Wait, There's More* features New York Times reporter Sapna Maheshwari discussing the rise and fall of Victoria's Secret (Khandaker & Maheshwari, 2020). In total, there were 26 pages of relevant transcriptions. Further branding and contextual data was gathered on websites and social media profiles of the lingerie brands that appeared in the data collection, including Savage X Fenty, Victoria's Secret, Aerie, Agent Provocateur, and Neon Moon. Over the course of the data collection period, I watched and took notes on the Savage X Fenty Fashion Show in September 2019 and took notes of my experience as a follower of the brand on social media sites. The data collected from websites, the fashion show and as a social media follower were compiled into 10 pages of netnographic fieldnotes.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The first wave of data analysis was conducted to familiarize myself with the state of the lingerie market over the last 15 years. This first wave was conducted to identify patterns in the data and inform the narrative of the evolution of the discussion of lingerie. This was done primarily using the newspaper articles, as well as by keeping up with Savage X Fenty's online

presence. I followed the brand on all social media platforms, watched the Savage X Fenty Fashion Show and started browsing through the website about once per month. Throughout these efforts, I took notes to assist my analysis. This wave started in September 2019 and I kept up to date with Savage X Fenty through to July 2020. The newspaper articles were reviewed initially in late 2019, and roughly coded based on emerging patterns I noticed at the time. By the time I had finished reviewing the newspaper articles, I sought podcasts to help me deepen my understanding of the lingerie business.

All text data was uploaded to the ATLAS coding software. The data was divided by source: newspaper articles, podcast transcriptions and field notes from visiting brand websites and social media. The newspaper articles were further divided the sexy and body positive search terms for clarity. Over the course of data analysis, I completed a qualitative research course and I decided to do a second wave of data collection to deepen my emerging findings. This wave increased the amount of codes and allowed for the coding of field notes and podcast transcriptions. After the second wave of analysis, I grouped the codes based on their occurrence in the bombshell or body positive brand search terms. Other codes were then grouped into either of those based on their similarity to the codes within those broad groupings.

### **3.4.1 Creating ideo-typical brands**

To assist my analysis, I created two ideal types of lingerie brands. I used logic-based compositional strategies to create my two ideo-typical brands. To do so, I first gathered examples of logic characteristics across existing literature, such as Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli's (2015) paper on complex institutions in yoga. I then similarly created ideal types of the lingerie brands, following the method used to create ideo-typical logics (see Reay and Jones 2016). I based my framework largely off Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli's (2015), which I translate into a

branding model. The characteristics I selected include brand goal, provider identity, source of authority and consumer identity. Since my work is on brands and not logics, I adapted their characteristics and added relevant ones to lingerie brands such as product offerings, examples of brands, and mission. With a list and understanding of the characteristics, I went through the data a third time in order to identify them within the Bombshell and Body Positive code groupings. The final data analysis included the newspaper article searches, the podcast transcriptions, the fieldnotes, and the downloaded tweets and Instagram archives from Savage X Fenty and Rihanna. To create the two ideo-typical brands, I drew from Reay and Jones' (2016) approach to qualitatively capture logics. I used a pattern matching approach, where I first created ideo-typical brands based on archival and academic data on the history of lingerie, and then analyze my data by matching the characteristics of brands to the idealized brands' characteristics (Reay & Jones, 2016). Using this approach, the characteristics of both brands were identified, as well as characteristics of Savage X Fenty.

#### **4. Findings**

To contextualize the mechanism through which Savage X Fenty bridges the ideological divide between the two ideo-typical lingerie brands, I first briefly discuss the evolution of the lingerie market since the 1990s. I do so to explain the conditions that led to the emergence of Savage X Fenty. I sketched how, until 2018, the lingerie market was divided into Bombshell and Body Positive brands, seemingly at odds with each other. I discuss how this divide came to be and the conditions of the market at the time of launch. I then turn my attention to explain how does Savage X Fenty resolved the contradictions in the cultural contestations between the two ideo-typical brands. I introduce an alternative approach to cultural branding—cultural bridging—and explain how Savage X Fenty created a cultural bridging mechanism through

specific branding and product strategies. I conclude by showing the role of Rihanna as a catalyst in this process.

#### **4.1 What created the conditions that led to the emergence of Savage X Fenty?**

In order to contextualize the role Savage X Fenty has in bridging the lingerie industry, it is important to examine the evolution and state of the market at the launch of the brand in May 2018. In doing so, I will establish the characteristics of two types of ideo-typical brands: the Bombshell brands that were dominant in lingerie in the 2000s to 2010s and the Body Positive brands that emerged as a countermovement of the dominance of Bombshell brands. The cultural contradiction of these brands created an important juncture for Rihanna’s brand, Savage X Fenty, to enter the market. The positioning of this brand creates a sort of “cultural bridging” phenomenon, where it is able to connect the two brand ideologies rather than to evolve further away from the Bombshell brands on the coattails of the emerging Body Positive brands.

##### **4.1.1 The Bombshell look**

Lingerie has evolved tremendously since the whale bone corsetry of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Hill, 2014). The lingerie landscape from the 1990s until the early 2000s was largely defined by brands like Victoria’s Secret, Agent Provocateur, La Perla, Triumph, and Wonderbra. These brands shaped the market—almost literally—to promote bust-enhancing silhouettes, exemplified by the rise of the push-up bra in the 1990s (Sloan, 1994; Marci, 2020). Young starlets like Christina Aguilera, Pink, and Britney Spears wore visible lingerie on the red carpet, such as bra and panty sets visible under sheer dresses or thong strings peeking over their jeans (Okwodu, 2019), contributing to the development of new trends. Victoria’s Secret had an important role in pushing the market forward, with its Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show televised to between eight and ten million viewers on CBS over the course of the decade (Safdar, 2019). The show launched the

career of many of the company's so-called "Angels," including supermodels like Tyra Banks, Heidi Klum, Alessandra Ambrosio, and Adriana Lima (Monget, 2005). Victoria's Secret Angels were featured in their marketing, gazing seductively in bras from their aptly named "Very Sexy" line. A pillar product from that line, the Bombshell bra, inspired the name of this type of lingerie brand. The Bombshell lingerie brand values sex and aesthetics to create a fantasy.

Marketing for lingerie lines in the early aughts was comprised almost exclusively of scantily clad models. Lingerie was tied to sex and female sexuality. Lingerie advertisements on television were pulled for being inappropriate and marketing in front of stores caused uproar by mall goers for being too sexy (Dwyer, 2005). Models in print and video advertisements tended to have specific body types, as evidenced by those who walked the runway of the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show (Ell, 2019). These Angels were hand-picked by Ed Razek, the chief marketing officer of the brand (Khandaker & Maheshwari, 2020). He chose women with large breasts and small waists. Other brands, like Agent Provocateur, La Perla, and Wonderbra, also featured similar models. These brands advertised a specific body type and carried limited size ranges. In that time, celebrity brands would base their marketing strategies on this Bombshell logic to varying degrees of success. Celebrities, like Britney Spears, Jennifer Lopez and Pamela Anderson, came out with short-lived collections in the mid 2000s (Monget, 2006a). During this period, Victoria's Secret was the market share leader in the lingerie industry, controlling 22% of the industry's market share at its peak (Monget, 2006b).

The lingerie industry was largely defined by the Bombshell branding and the models in advertisements would mostly have similar physiques. An article described Victoria's Secret veteran Shanina Shaik in an advert: "skimpy leopard-print lingerie drew attention to her toned posterior, while her lean and slender frame was kept under wraps in a blue printed T-shirt and a

woollen sarong” (Shahid, 2016). Marketing material would usually involve these models in a bedroom, a French-style boudoir, or even a kitchen; lingerie ranges were frequently inspired by retro or vintage aesthetics. Bombshell branding signalled sex and submission, eliciting imagery of a specific type of woman in a specific setting. Agent Provocateur teased viewers with a 2013 campaign featuring model Poppy Delevigne: “the face (and body) of lingerie brand [...] smoulders in the company's new Valentines video campaign, which sees the model prowling around her kitchen, dressed in nothing more than her underwear” (Styles, 2013). The meaning of lingerie, as evidenced by Bombshell imagery, was tied to a heteronormative idea of sex. Lingerie creates the fantasy. This was no accident, as popular lingerie brands were themselves founded to fit this ideal.

#### **4.1.2 The male gaze**

The Bombshell look was not created out of thin air. The ideal woman as advertised in marketing materials for Bombshell brands were largely a result of creative decisions of men, which perpetuates the concept of the male gaze in marketing. British film theorist Laura Mulvey’s essay titled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) is cited as the origin of the concept of the male gaze. In this essay, Mulvey describes the phenomenon of the male gaze in cinema as the lens through which women are portrayed as passive figures upon which to be looked. The essay itself is a criticism of the disparity in power and agency between men and women portrayed on film; however, the phenomenon is applicable to all forms of visual media. In marketing, the male body spray brand Axe has been a lightning rod for controversy in the portrayal of women in their advertisements. Chang and McGuire (2017) analyzed the visual imagery of a televised commercial the brand released in 2006 titled “Billions.” The commercial depicts a man spraying himself with Axe spray on a beach as bikini-clad women run out of the water towards him. The advert’s portrayal of women creates a fantasy where women are prizes to be won by wearing the body

spray, losing their agency entirely (Chang & McGuire, 2017). Axe is an obvious example, as the branding is male-centric and portrays women as the object of the protagonist's desire, but the male gaze persists in many other industries, including lingerie.

Victoria's Secret's dominance in the lingerie space is mostly the result of the efforts of two men, Roy Raymond and Les Wexner. Raymond founded the company after feeling embarrassed when shopping for lingerie for his wife (Khandaker & Maheshwari, 2020). He opened the first Victoria's Secret in Columbus, Ohio in 1977 as a lingerie store that men could feel comfortable in. He named the store after the Victorian era of England; the eponymous Victoria was a fictional woman of refinement and sophistication, a reflection of how he imagined the era to be (Khandaker & Maheshwari, 2020). Raymond expanded to six stores before selling the business to Wexner, the CEO of L Brands, in 1992 for \$1 million (Khandaker & Maheshwari, 2020). Wexner expanded the brand globally to over 1000 stores and \$7.7 billion dollars in revenue by 2016 (Hanbury, 2020). At its peak, Victoria's Secret's share of the lingerie market was 33% (Hanbury, 2020).

While Victoria's Secret is the biggest example of lingerie being defined by the male gaze, Agent Provocateur's founding is also steeped in the heteronormative fantasy. Founded in 1994 by then-married couple Joe Corre and Serena Rees, Agent Provocateur sought to be brazenly sexual by placing women in dominant positions (Alexander, 2018). One of their famous campaigns, which ran in 2001, featured Australian pop singer Kylie Minogue riding a velvet mechanical bull in a black lace bra and panty set. The commercial was banned from being shown on television (Alexander, 2018). Minogue, while being in a dominant position, is still shot from below or with close ups of her chest and bum. Agent Provocateur may claim to subvert dominant male fantasies, but the cinematography would suggest a change only in angles, looking up instead of looking down.

The male gaze is largely responsible for the shift towards lingerie being associated with heteronormative sex. Bombshell-type brands were catering to a male customer buying lingerie for their wives and girlfriends. It became apparent in instances such as the launch party for a new Intimates by Elle MacPherson campaign. The supermodel allegedly rented out a nightclub for male patrons only (Byrnes, 2007). Lingerie is also one of the top selling gifts for Valentine's Day (Monget, 2005). The top selling items listed by Women's Wear Daily for Valentine's Day 2005 included:

“- Sheer, layered baby dolls with built-in push-up bra cups at Frederick's of Hollywood and Lane Bryant.

- Dominatrix-inspired black bras, bustiers, G-strings, garters and sheer back-seam and fishnet hosiery at Victoria's Secret.

- Novelty bras, whether cut-out cups that encircle the breasts by French label Yoba or extra-low-cut balconette numbers that reveal the nipples by Myla.

- Thongs, especially styles that are embellished at the top of the derriere with rhinestones, paillettes, beading, appliques or bows. Top-selling brands included Cosabella, On Gossamer, Calvin Klein Underwear and DKNY Underwear at Bloomingdale's.

- Sex toys that resemble home accessories, such as a contemporary sculpture by Tom Dixon for Myla or assorted Objets d'Amour like a rubber ducky by Rykiel Woman at Henri Bendel.” (Monget, 2005)

Bombshell-type lingerie was a product being sold by men and patriarchal ideals structured lingerie consumption. As such, women were growing increasingly frustrated at having to look and



feel a certain way to wear underwear being sold to them by people who did not understand their personal needs.

#### **4.1.3 Countering the Bombshells**

In the wake of an overly sexualized market riddled with images of skinny women with large breasts, women began creating brands to fit their needs as lingerie consumers. One of the first brands to do so was Neon Moon. In 2014, founder Hayat Racho sought to counter the prevailing images of sexualized models with tight bodies to market lingerie to men (Pennant, 2015). Specifically, she wanted to counter Victoria's Secret's marketing. She created a Kickstarter to fund her first pieces which were "free from cleavage boosting padding or wiring" (Pennant, 2015). In the mid-2010s, similar brands started appearing in the market to offer alternatives to consumers, as brand owners themselves felt left out by the Bombshells. Shade inclusivity was the driving factor for Nubian Skin founder Ade Hassan, who expressed her frustration: "I could never find underwear in my skin tone and I realised this was my business idea," (Lothian-McLean, 2018). She went on to design underwear for darker skinned women that couldn't find a shade dark enough to look skin-like under light clothing. I group these efforts towards greater inclusivity under the umbrella of "Body Positive lingerie," which embodies practicality and functionality, and stem from women's genuine needs as consumers (vs. male ones). Body positivity seeks to foster love and acceptance for the body for being healthy and functional, regardless of appearance and size (Sastre, 2014). Lingerie brands like Neon Moon, ThirdLove, Lonely, Knix and Aerie, embraced the body positivity movement within their marketing materials. Their product offerings also lean towards comfortable pieces like bralettes and briefs in nude shades and wider product ranges. The efforts of these brands in countering the Bombshells coincided with the rise of body positivity within the greater societal landscape. The movement gained traction in the early 2010s and the

body positivity-related hashtags currently contain millions of posts, in direct contrast to #fitspiration and #thinspiration content showcasing thin and fit users (Cohen, Newton-John & Slater, 2020).

As the movement gained traction, lingerie brands featured more women who championed body positivity for various reasons. A common thread in many body positive campaigns is a focus on young girls. Activists reflect on their own struggles with body image and aim to foster a space for young girls to love their bodies. Plus-sized model Iskra Lawrence, recurring model for Aerie (the lingerie offshoot of clothing brand American Eagle) commented, “As a curvy woman, I know young women are constantly being told that they’re not good enough, but we’re trying to change that mind-set” (Olson, 2016). The messaging from body positivity lingerie brands centers around women and younger girls, rather than focusing on the male fantasy. For the body positivity brands, lingerie is for the women wearing it, not for the men watching it.

In 2014, Aerie launched the AerieREAL campaign (Ell, 2018). This embrace of the body positivity discourse was the first from a large brand in lingerie. They launched with the promise to never retouch their photos (Ell, 2018). The AerieREAL campaign continues to this day with different iterations featuring body positive activists, celebrities and Olympic athletes. The campaign has featured models with visible disabilities, transwomen, plus-sized women, and women of multiple races (Michallon, 2018a). The campaign was incredibly successful for the brand and by 2018, Aerie rapidly grew its market share. After valuing the company at \$500 million dollars in 2018, and predicting \$1 billion in the coming years, equity analyst Janine Stichter commented, “For a long time, [Victoria’s Secret] was the only player with significant scale in the intimates market. Now you see a competitor like Aerie that’s becoming sizable and a real threat” (Ell, 2018).

By the late 2010s, more body positive brands started popping up as Victoria's Secret sales began to slip. Between 2016 and 2018, the lingerie juggernaut's sales had slipped almost every quarter, and customers were expressing frustration at the brand "falling behind the times" in terms of their marketing (Ell, 2019).

#### **4.1.4 The state of the lingerie market before Savage X Fenty**

The lingerie market is now composed of two types of brands—Bombshell and Body Positive—that are in cultural contradiction. The Bombshell brands, while falling behind the times and dropping in sales, remain the market leaders of the industry. While they are rapidly growing, Body Positive brands still evolve in periphery of the lingerie market. I centralize this cultural contradiction around an opposition between fantasy and authenticity to create the two ideo-typical brands highlighted in table 1.

#### **4.2 How does Savage X Fenty resolve the contradictions in the cultural contestations of the lingerie market?**

In the coming section, I briefly reiterate relevant points of cultural branding and introduce the concept of cultural bridging. I discuss Savage X Fenty as it entered the lingerie market. Then I break down the components of the brand's makeup that combine the ideo-typical brands of the lingerie market to create a true bridge between them. I then discuss the power of Rihanna's celebrity and how her presence as the personality behind Savage X Fenty is a catalyst for cultural bridging.

##### **4.2.1 From cultural branding to cultural bridging**

Iconic brands are created by capitalizing on cultural contradictions (Holt, 2003). Brands like Coke, Budweiser, BMW, and Dove identify arising cultural tensions associated with their product category or the greater cultural landscape and center their brand strategy around some

Characteristic	Bombshell Brands	Body Positive Brands
Goal	Fantasy	Authenticity
Provider Identity	The Ideal Woman	The Real Woman
Source of Authority	Celebrities	Activists
Consumer Identity	Lingerie for Him	Lingerie for Her
Mission	The Perfect Look	The Perfect Fit
Product offerings	Push up bras, corsets, garter belts	Bralettes, briefs, wireless bras
Brands	Victoria's Secret, Agent Provocateur, Celebrity Brands, La Perla, WonderBra, Triumph	Aerie, Nubian Skin, Neon Moon, ThirdLove, Lonely Lingerie, Curvy Kate

*Table 1.* Comparing characteristics of ideo-typical brands in the lingerie market.

emerging cultural discourse that aims at resolving this tension. For example, in the mid-2000s, Dove identified a rising tension quite similar to the one happening in the lingerie market: women's beauty brands were positioning around the idea that buying them would help women get closer to some attainable beauty standards. They identified the then-emerging discourse of body positivity as a productive vector to position their brand and resolved the tension by creating campaigns orchestrated around body positivity with the Real Beauty campaign, which focalized its message around the idea that all women were beautiful. In other words, Dove resolved the tension by creating a campaign that opposed the original dominant branding discourse within the beauty product market. Brands like Aerie are similarly positioned in opposition to the Bombshell logic, and have developed messages and products, and hired spokespersons and brand ambassadors that aligned with the logic of body positivity.

This strategy has demonstrated over time its capacity to generate brand attachment through cultural narratives (Schembri, Merrilees & Kristiansen, 2010). As the recent Nike campaign

around inclusion demonstrates, it can also generate dissent amongst a group of consumers (see also Scholz and Smith, 2019).

I propose an alternative to capitalizing on the tension between two cultural discourses: cultural bridging. I argue that this strategy can be more beneficial than a positioning on an emerging-but-oppositional discourse as it can recruit constituents on both sides of the argument, therefore minimizing potential tensions related to the embrace of a contradictory cultural discourse and catering to broader consumer preferences. I now explain this strategy in more detail.

### **4.3 Theorizing cultural bridging**

Holt's understanding of cultural branding emphasizes the divisiveness in cultural discourse. Cultural bridging seeks to close the ideological gap between the opposing sides. This is achieved by spanning and blending elements of both sides of the discourse. The lingerie market in 2018 heightened the tension between "unachievable beauty standards" and "all bodies are beautiful," which is the main divide between Bombshell and Body Positive brands. The divide was emphasized by the emergence of Body Positive brands directly countering the Bombshell marketing. The ideological divide was strengthened with new Body Positive brands appearing over the course of the 2010s.

As previously demonstrated, Body Positive brands emerged from women entrepreneurs wanting to create practical lingerie that fits their needs, whether it be size inclusive, racially inclusive, more accessible for women with disabilities, or generally more comfortable to wear than heavily padded wired bras. These entrepreneurs wanted lingerie to break free from the male gaze and patriarchal brands that permeated the industry through to the late 2000s. Along with the general body positivity movement, Body Positive brands were able to capture a share of the market composed of women for whom the Bombshells did not answer their needs. The emergence of the

Body Positive brands created a cultural tension against the Bombshell brands. The lingerie market was comprised of brands that were sexy or that fit more women. Enter Savage X Fenty, the exemplar for a cultural bridging branding strategy. In the coming section, I will describe the makeup of Savage X Fenty as a bridge between the Bombshell and Body Positive brands, the catalyst for their success, and the marketing strategies that facilitate the cultural bridge.

#### **4.4 Savage X Fenty: Practicing cultural bridging between the Bombshell and the Body Positive lingerie**

##### **4.4.1 The launch**

Robyn Fenty, also known by her stage name Rihanna, entered the lingerie market on May 11, 2018 based on the promise of inclusive-yet-sexy lingerie (Yotka, 2018). The launch of the Savage X Fenty website was met with hours-long waits to check out items and every item sold out within the first month (Elven, 2019). Rihanna teased the launch with posts on Instagram and attended many public events in the lead-up. Fans were given hints of the products to come, including basics, like nude coloured bras for all shades, and sexier items with lacy pieces, garter belts, and crotchless underwear (Yotka, 2018). Although Rihanna was without a doubt a contributor to this success, I emphasize next how the brand bridged the opposition between Bombshell and Body positive brands, which provided novel avenues for value creation.

##### **4.4.2 A Bombshell Brand – “Savage”**

Savage X Fenty promised sexy and delivered. Even from teases for the initial launch, the brand’s official Instagram account posted pictures of Rihanna in “a delicate lace bra as she gazed seductively towards the camera” (Rendon, 2018). The launch of the brand included handcuffs, corsets and lace teddies (Conlon, 2018). Savage X Fenty is a brand comfortable with sex as evidenced by the visual marketing, but it imagines sex as the female fantasy rather than the male

one. As said by Rihanna about her line: “As women, we’re looked at as the needy ones, the naggy ones, the ones who are going to be heartbroken in a relationship. Savage is just the reverse. And you know, guys don’t like getting the cards flipped on them—ever,” (Conlon, 2018). In Rihanna’s words, a savage embodies sex on *her* own terms.

In order to stake its claim in the Bombshell space, Savage X Fenty put on a fashion show. At the time, the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show was the only fashion show that was televised, but it did not occur during the traditional fashion weeks. Viewership for the Angels on the runway had already begun to drop by 2018 (Gee, 2018). Savage X Fenty’s inaugural show, four months after launch, was set to close New York Fashion Week for Fall 2018 (Smith & Simpson, 2018). The show featured pieces from her collection were worn by supermodels, plus-sized models, racially diverse models, transgender models, drag queens, amputee models, and even two pregnant models (Zoellner, 2018). It also notably featured Victoria’s Secrets Angel alumnae such as Gigi Hadid, Bella Hadid, Cara Delevigne, and Joan Smalls (Storm, 2018). The Savage X Fenty Fashion Show was the most discussed show at New York Fashion Week (Lockwood, 2018). Savage X Fenty doing the show both mirrored the practice by Victoria’s Secret and caught the attention of the fashion world by closing that year’s New York Fashion week.

#### **4.4.3 A Body Positive Brand – “X”**

While Savage X Fenty is undeniably sexy, it has always been an inclusive brand. The official brand announcement posts—not the teases mentioned previously—included plus sized models in their lingerie alongside the singer (Siebert, 2018). A clip posted to Instagram, discussing Rihanna’s relationship with her own body and claiming “Savages come in all shapes,” was captioned “X stands for all” (Savage X Fenty, 2018). Her lingerie line launched with sizes ranging up to 3X and 44DD (for comparison, Victoria’s Secret’s range at the time went up to XL and

38DDD), as well as multiple nude tones to flatter all skin colours (Phelan, 2018). The inclusive marketing and sizing in the imagery allows for immediate identification of the brand as Body Positive (for example see figure 1 below). The imagery is present on the website, in social media posts and on the runway.

Body Positive brands are rooted in authenticity: their marketing teams promise to deliver campaigns that are unretouched. As stated by Aerie's brand president Jennifer Foyle at the launch of AerieREAL: "Our newest bra models are part of our brand's ongoing commitment to show real, authentic and unretouched women, who are at the core of everything that we do" (Michallon, 2018a). The purpose in doing so is to show real women wearing the line. Savage X Fenty applies this strategy by relying heavily on user-generated content (Illuminati et al., 2019), an approach that amplifies the voices of real women and which has been adopted by Body Positive lingerie brands' social media presence and websites (e.g., Aerie's website and Instagram profiles), but not by Bombshell brands (e.g., Victoria's Secret's website and Instagram profiles). User-generated content captures the authenticity of real women that is mirrored by Body Positive brands' commitment to providing unretouched campaigns. The brand has been applauded by body positivity activists, such as Gabi Gregg for their inclusivity (Michallon C. , 2018b). In addition to size and colour offerings, Savage X Fenty sells loungewear, bralettes and briefs that mirror the offerings by brands like Aerie (SavageX.com).

#### **4.4.4 Rihanna as a catalyst – "Fenty"**

Rihanna is a Barbadian singer who rose to fame in 2006 with her hit "Pon de Replay" off her debut album *Music of the Sun* (Smith, 2017). Since her breakout, she has released seven more albums and won nine Grammy awards (Smith, 2017). The third album, *Good Girl Gone Bad*, is a notable milestone in Rihanna's career, as Billboard argues it cemented her as an international icon



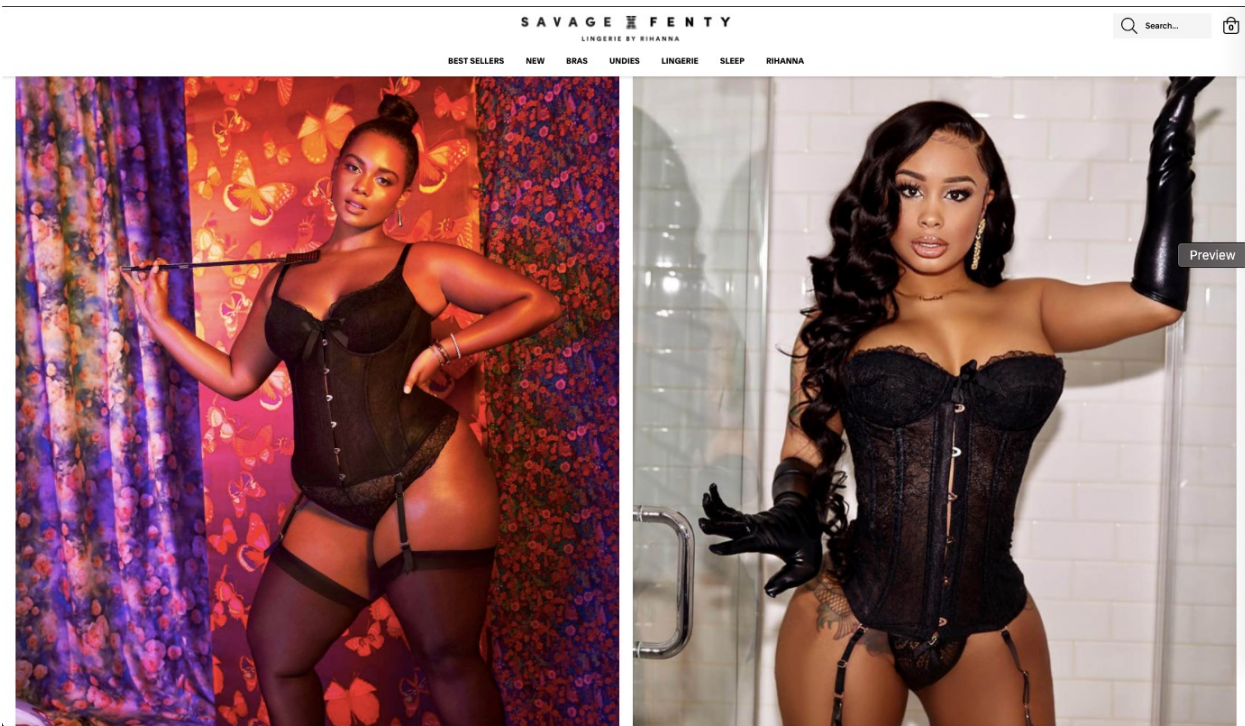


Figure 1. Screenshot of the Savage X Fenty website in June 2020.

(Smith, 2017). Her onstage persona notably took a sexy turn, as evidenced by this album's title and increasingly suggestive lyrics. Her sixth album, *Talk That Talk*, was born out of a desire to express sexual liberation, the way Madonna's *Erotica* did a generation prior (Smith, 2017). Rihanna's life and appearance has been scrutinized since she was a teenager. Her celebrity status allows her to be a common topic of conversation for red carpet fashion throughout her career (Daire, Boan, & Fernandez, 2020). She has been a frequent guest of the Met Gala and even hosted the 2018 iteration of the event. Rihanna has also collaborated with Puma to the tune of \$1 billion in sales and with Emporio Armani to produce a lingerie line (Medina, 2018). By 2017, Rihanna was a celebrity icon that had a proven record of generating sales.

Rihanna used her star-appeal to launch a series of business ventures structured around inclusivity. In 2017, she launched Fenty Beauty at an event in New York City (Medina, 2018). The line launched with 40 shades of the Pro Filt'r foundation, essentially disrupting the beauty

industry towards inclusivity. Fenty Beauty was poised to make several hundred million dollars in its first year as foundation bottles were flying off the shelves (Medina, 2018). She was outperforming celebrity makeup brands like Kylie Jenner's Kylie Cosmetics by about 500% (Medina, 2018). Fashion group TechStyle, owner of Kate Hudson's Fabletics line, approached Rihanna with a partnership for lingerie (Medina, 2018). Fans knew this meant the thread of Rihanna's championing of inclusivity would carry through to her new line.

Like her cosmetics line, which addressed the lack of options in cosmetics for people of colour, as experienced by Rihanna herself unable to find her foundation shade (Saltzman, 2017), the positioning of Savage X Fenty resonated with the life of its celebrity founder as a highly mediatized icon. For much of her career, audiences have seen Rihanna as a sex symbol. She was named Esquire magazine's Sexiest Woman Alive in 2011 (ABC News, 2011). As such, her image has been closely monitored and policed by a male-gazey media. For example, in 2017, a male reporter from sports magazine Barstool Sports blasted the singer for gaining weight and "pushing 180 [pounds]," which was met with intense backlash from her fans and ultimately led to the writer being fired from his position at the company (Servantes, 2017). She responded to the article with a meme posted to her Instagram feed poking fun at her weight gain (Schulte-Hillen, 2017). In a Vogue interview, she said about her body, "You've just got to laugh at yourself, honestly. I mean, I know when I'm having a fat day and when I've lost weight. I accept all of the bodies, I'm not built like a Victoria's Secret girl, and I still feel very beautiful and confident in my lingerie" (Nnadi, 2018). In short, Rihanna both materially represents and embodies the cultural bridging of sexy and body positivity.

The launch of Savage X Fenty was highly anticipated as Rihanna seductively teased the line on her personal Instagram as well as at public events leading up to it. The Met Gala she hosted

occurred under two weeks prior to the launch (Medina, 2018). The eyes of the fashion and celebrity worlds were on Rihanna as she spoke about the upcoming line. She had a successful launch of an inclusive range with Fenty Beauty less than a year prior and was poised to introduce an inclusive line of lingerie that was also sexy (Medina, 2018). She had the persona that was tied to sex and she had previously been a champion of inclusivity as the face of a brand. Rihanna was positioned to synthesize sex and inclusivity with the added catalyst of celebrity. In 2018, Randy Konik, a business manager at analyst company Jefferies, stated that Rihanna's celebrity status and brand awareness would be very fruitful for the new lingerie line (Medina, 2018). Rihanna's social media participation was covered by the press, and all mentions of Savage X Fenty in the data were attached to Rihanna. She attracted attention and the brand is intrinsically an extension of her celebrity (see Fournier and Eckardt 2019).

#### **4.5 Bridging the ideo-typical brands**

Rihanna's entry into the lingerie market was driven by her championing of inclusivity. Her vision of Savage X Fenty was to create a brand that let women decide for themselves how they wanted to wear lingerie. The existing Body Positive brands in the market created a tension from the "Bombshell look." The Bombshell look was created to appeal to men; as women decided to reclaim the lingerie market for themselves, they created products to counter the male gaze. Rihanna was no stranger to men evaluating her as a sex symbol (ABC News, 2011; Servantes, 2017). Even after her body was deemed less desirable by men when she gained weight (Servantes, 2017), she still embraced her figure and how it looked in lingerie as she publicly stated when asked for comment (Nnadi, 2018). Savage X Fenty reflects Rihanna in that it bridges both ideo-typical brands. Instead of further deviating from the Bombshell brand, it allows integrative elements of the Bombshell brands to be incorporated back into the burgeoning counter of a Body Positive

brand. The bridging is transformative, taking elements of both brands to create something in between. Savage X Fenty was born from the desire to look sexy on your own terms. This new brand does not determine any one way to wear lingerie. It can be sexy, comfortable, or anywhere in between—but most importantly, it’s available to any woman who wants to unleash her inner Savage.

Next, I discuss how cultural bridging operates through three different mechanisms: By bridging brand goals, products, and sources of authority. This exemplifies how cultural bridging blends characteristic of opposing ideo-typical brands (see table 1).

#### **4.5.1 Goal bridging**

Goal bridging refers to the transformation of goals of ideo-typical brands within the bridging brand. Bombshell brands and Body Positive brands appear to have goals that are diametrically opposed. As highlighted in table 1, Bombshell brands seek to create a fantasy and Body Positive brands ground themselves in authenticity. These goals were apparent from the inception of the brands: Bombshell brands were founded to appeal to men and Body Positive brands were founded to appeal to “real” women. In the following section, I demonstrate how Savage X Fenty’s goal bridges these two oppositional goals cohesively.

On the Savage X Fenty website, Rihanna is quoted saying “Savage X means making your own rules and expressing your mood, character and style for you – not for anyone else” (Savage X Fenty, n.d.). As previously stated, Rihanna is a sex symbol as well as a champion of inclusivity. Her lingerie line’s purpose is to allow women to decide for themselves who they want to be. Its brand narrative is orchestrated around consumers’ freedom to create a fantasy grounded in who they are. Body Positive brands leapfrogged the cultural status quo of lingerie as a “fantasy” imposed through the male gaze that permeate Bombshell brands marketing by refusing to engage

with this goal (see Pennant, 2015). Instead of doing so, Savage X Fenty transformed what the fantasy meant. For the brand, fantasy is defined by the customer, based on her wants and needs. Goal bridging for Savage X Fenty drives other types of bridging within the brand, namely in product offering and source of authority. Products cover the range offered by both ideo-typical lingerie brands in a wide variety of sizes and colours. Further, the brand ambassadors and marketing imagery promote several types of bodies in nearly every product offered. Their ambassador partnerships create a source of authority by bridging a wide range of bombshell and body positive actors, evenly weighting their partnerships, and by using discursive presentation to keep consistent messaging across ambassadors. Savage X Fenty's marketing strategies bridge the gap by giving the opportunity for real women to wear lingerie the way they want to. Women do not have to choose between sexy or comfortable based on the limitations of sizes and colour. The goal is built into the brand's DNA. "Savage," "X" and "Fenty" essentially translates into Rihanna's fantasy for all.

#### **4.5.2 Product bridging**

Product bridging refers to products that bridge offerings and attributes from those of the ideo-typical brands. In this case, product bridging is exemplified in three ways: bridging product offerings, bridging product attributes, and bridging product functionality. I will demonstrate product bridging using examples from the website.

The product offerings from Savage X Fenty present both worlds of the ideo-typical lingerie brands. Since lingerie covers many types of products, I will use the bra category as an example of product bridging. As shown in Figure 2, the bras offered by Savage X Fenty range from cotton unlined bralettes to caged bras. The bridging of product types within the categories is demonstrated by the range of product offerings. For bras, Savage X Fenty offers the sexy options, such as a

caged bra (model 7), and a comfortable option, such as the cotton bralette (models 1 and 3). The caged bra is paired with a garter belt and low-rise panty, which is evocative of the sexual imagery of Bombshell brands. The cotton bralettes are worn with matching cotton panties on models that are styled with casual hairstyles and minimal makeup. Body Positive brands offer products with soft fabrics and less structure, which Savage X Fenty captures with their bralette offerings.

Product bridging within Savage X Fenty also occurs in the design of the items, which I consider bridging product attributes. Model 4 is shown wearing a sheer bralette and a matching set of sheer panties. Savage X Fenty's goal bridging is further evidenced by this type of product bridging because it further allows the customizability of the fantasy. The sheerness of the fabric is risqué while maintaining the comfort of the bralette. Savage X Fenty captures the product attributes of both type of brands (see table 1) while transforming them into products unique to the brand itself.

The final example of product bridging is displayed in the needs that the products address. The plus-sized and straight-sized models in figure 3 are wearing the bralette on model 3 in figure 2. The models in figure 3 may be modelling the same product by name, but they are designed differently.

The plus-sized model's bralette has thicker straps than those found on the straight sized model. Presumably, the straps are wider as a result of supporting more weight from the larger chest sizes of the women shopping for those sizes of bralettes. Savage X Fenty appears to be the only brand in the data collection that has this feature for their bra offerings. This further increases inclusiveness because the bras are designed to have the same appeal while catering to the needs of different bodies.

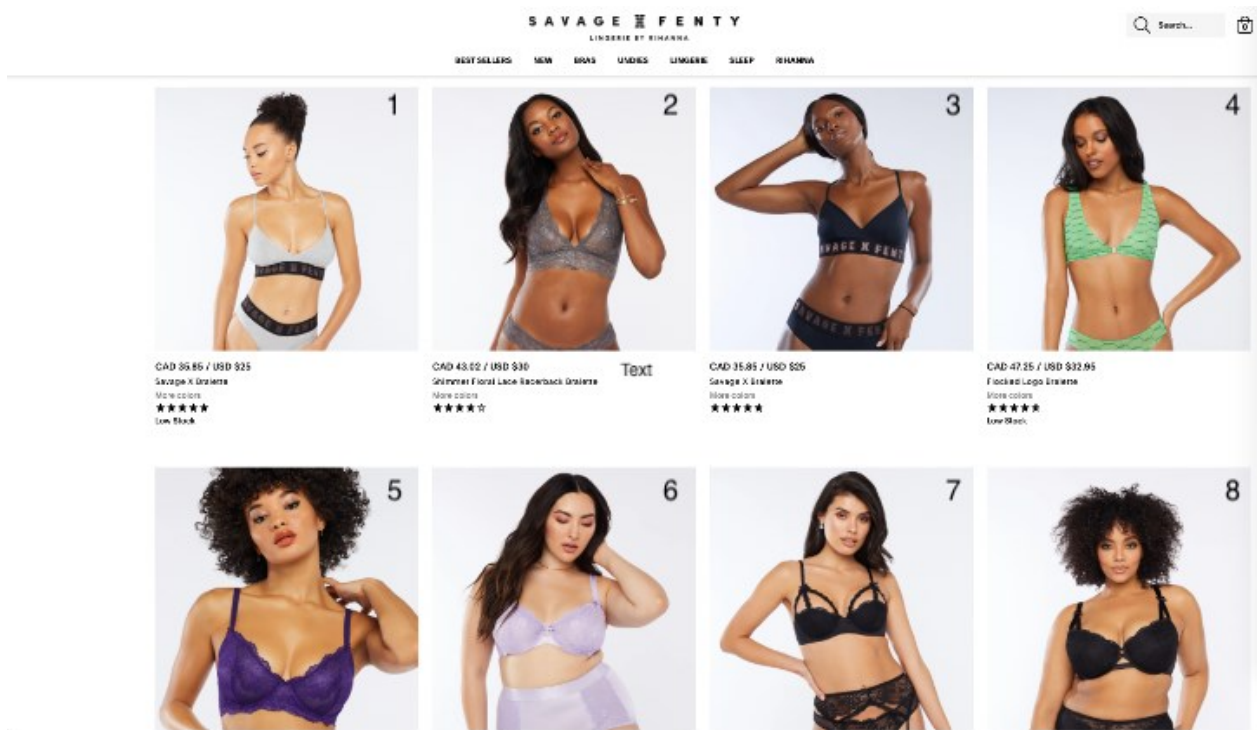


Figure 2. The bra offerings on Savage X Fenty’s website in June 2020.

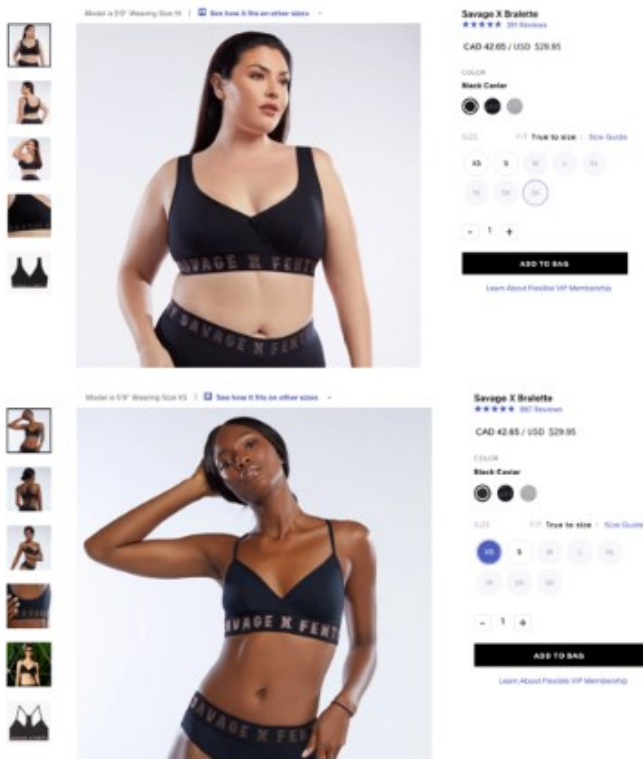


Figure 3. Comparison of the larger and smaller sizes of the Savage X bralette’s product page.

### 4.5.3 Source of authority bridging

Source of authority bridging refers to the use of sources of authority from both ideo-typical brands during marketing activities. I exemplify this by showing how Savage X Fenty bridged the sources of authority for both ideo-typical brands by merging the presence of both celebrities and activists. Bombshell brands were historically associated with celebrities and supermodels. Body Positive brands, for their parts, used activists championing diversity. Savage X Fenty bridges the brands' sources of authority with their spokesperson strategy by bridging types of actors, bridging discourse and by the founder being the bridge herself.

Savage X Fenty promotes their #savagexambassadors, which cover a wide array of promotional partnerships. These ambassadors range from body positive influencers to celebrities, mirroring the sources of authority from the ideo-typical brands (see table 1). The body positive influencers include the likes of Sierra Schultzie, Jazzmyne Jay, and Loey Lane, posing in both sexy and comfortable lingerie on the brand's Instagram feed. The use of body positive influencers is significant because of the movement's popularity on Instagram. Some of them were featured on the brand's website throughout the data collection period. Celebrity ambassadors such as actress Sydney Sweeney, singer Christina Milian, singer Normani, and rapper Megan Thee Stallion were featured prominently on the Savage X Fenty website and on their Instagram feed as well. Aligned with their goal bridging approach, Savage X Fenty covers the fantasy element of celebrity, coupling it with body positive influencers for authenticity. With both body positive influencers and celebrities, Savage X Fenty's legitimacy is fielded by both the Bombshell and Body Positive ideal types. They are cultivating their narrative as the brand that is equally Bombshell and Body Positive. The bridging of the actors and the equal weight attributed to the types of actors done here



creates a spectrum of spokespeople; however, Savage X Fenty uses discursive presentation to create a unique partnership model.

The #savagexambassadors bridge the ideo-typical lingerie brands' sources of authority by tapping into the influence of the body positive movement and the celebrity surrounding Rihanna and her friends. This title is applied universally across all types of creators and their approach is to present all #savagexambassadors uniformly. I will refer to this as discursive presentation, which I define as the practice of unique and consistent messaging across a brand that arises from cultural bridging. Language for Bombshell and Body Positive marketing messages differ. Bombshell brands speak of being sexy and creating the look (e.g. Melocco, 2005; Alexander, 2007) whereas Body Positive brands emphasize a good fit and how the lingerie feels (e.g. Mlotek, 2016; Nsenduluka, 2016). Savage X Fenty has defined its own voice in all marketing efforts. Figure 4 highlights an example from their website.

This voice is uniquely Rihanna's. Rihanna has used this strategy for Fenty Beauty as well. Both brands use a mix of internet slang and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to speak, as demonstrated in figure 4. Rihanna's tweets and Instagram captions tend to have a similar voice as hers (Figure 5).

The creation of a strong brand voice leads to a specific type of discursive presentation. In this example, by developing a brand voice that deviates from the messaging from ideo-typical brands, Savage X Fenty can present their #savagexambassadors consistently across marketing efforts. They have a wide range of ambassadors that they feature equally, but the captions or descriptions associated with them fit into the brand voice, rather than being dependent on the ambassador's archetype. Discursive presentation here is greatly aided by a strong brand voice that remains consistent through branded messaging.



Figure 4. Personas listed on the Savage X Fenty website.



Figure 5. Examples of Rihanna's speaking style on Twitter.

The discursive presentation strategy presented relies heavily on the strong brand voice. The brand voice mirroring Rihanna's voice online is largely due to her own embodiment of source of authority bridging. As previously stated, her positioning as both a sex symbol and champion of inclusivity was important for the brand's efforts to bridge both the Bombshell and the Body Positive ideo-typical brands. Rihanna herself covers the bridge between celebrity and activist. By

having Rihanna as the founder, face, and voice of the brand, the source of authority bridging is embedded into its DNA, so to speak. Rihanna's celebrity has been used in Bombshell marketing efforts, such as her performance at the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show in 2012 (Proud, 2012) as well as the Emporio Armani collaboration (Medina, 2018). Her activism is documented in her existing Fenty Beauty line as well as her work with her charity the Clara Lionel Foundation ([claralionelfoundation.org](http://claralionelfoundation.org)). Her celebrity is the catalyst for bringing attention to the brand, but it is also a key facet in bridging the source of authority between the two ideo-typical brands. The brand markets itself as an extension of Rihanna and therefore, she is the ultimate source of authority.

## 5. Discussion

In an industry in flux, the prevailing lingerie brands fit into one of two camps: the bombshell brands and the body positive brands. These archetypes demonstrated the struggle between the dominance of the male gaze in lingerie and the brands that sought to counter the unrealistic body ideals portrayed by those marketing tactics. Body positive brands attached themselves to a rising movement on Instagram and sought to show real women in their natural state. Bombshell brands lost ground but remained dominant players in the market still in the mid 2010s (Garcia, 2019). The tension in the culture centered around fantasy vs. authenticity. The fantasy presented overly sexualized women to men, whereas the authenticity presented women's natural and diverse bodies to other women. Brands in the lingerie market belonged mostly to one of either of these camps. The discourse in the market wedged a divide between these two brands, until one brand successfully managed to *bridge* the two sides.

Savage X Fenty entered the market a few years after the emergence of body positive brands. As the brainchild of pop singer Rihanna, the brand was a natural extension of her

persona, which already synthesized elements of authenticity and fantasy. Savage X Fenty is a brand that allows customers to create the fantasy for themselves. The brand is able to incorporate elements of bombshell and body positive brands into several aspects, including product offerings and source of authority. These elements create a bridge between the two sides of the discourse then the bridge is further reinforced by the ability of Savage X Fenty to blend the bombshell and body positive elements within the brand.

### **5.1 Contribution**

The present paper draws heavily from Douglas Holt's strategy of cultural branding (e.g. Holt, 2004; Holt, 2016). To practice cultural branding, brands must resolve a cultural tension by leverage an emerging cultural discourse (Holt, 2004). My findings expand cultural branding by showing how brands can, instead of leapfrogging a dominant cultural narrative and leveraging an emerging cultural discourse to oppose a dominant ideology in a market, bridge the dominant and emerging ideological discourses to create a novel ideological positioning. By incorporating elements of opposing ideologies, brands define themselves as the middle ground between oppositional arguments. By having a clear goal of bridging the gap, brands can then create branding strategies to include product offerings that both span and blend elements from the two opposing sides, as well as partnering with spokespeople that would typically be associated with those sides. These create physical representations of the cultural bridge as the blending of characteristics rather than trying to capitalize on the opposition of their stances.

### **5.2 The human element of cultural branding**

Holt's cultural branding theory acknowledges how cultural shifts can give meaning to brands. Brands attach themselves to ideologies in order to become iconic (Holt, 2004). An under-explored aspect of cultural branding that my work examines is the role of celebrity CEOs in

constructing cultural brands. This is important because people can become figureheads of specific ideologies. For the Tories in Britain, “Thatcherism” was the prevailing ideology for the party through to David Cameron’s tenure as Prime Minister (Smith & Speed, 2011). Thatcherism as an ideology refers to the policies for small government and privatization that served as the ideological underpinning of the British Conservative Party for decades (Smith & Speed, 2011). It was named after Margaret Thatcher, whose policies shifted British politics. She is a figurehead of conservative politics in Britain, much like U.S. President Ronald Reagan’s namesake “Reaganomics.” While neither of these examples relate to commercial brands, it highlights that Holt’s cultural branding theory could benefit from an analysis of the role of person-brands in creating culturally relevant brands.

Celebrities are in and of themselves cultural agents that facilitate identification from the masses (O’Guinn, 1991). The influence of figures and celebrities in all aspects of culture should be considered when discussing branding strategies. Celebrities’ relationships with brands and marketing efforts are complex. Celebrities can themselves be brands (Schroeder, 1992). Their works represent the symbolic capital and their contributions to culture can be tied to larger movements within specific industries (Kerrigan, Brownlie, Hower & Daza-LeTouze, 2011). Andy Warhol was an early adopter of pop art, a bridge between high art and the mundane (Kerrigan et al., 2011). His work is immediately recognizable and identifiable, even over thirty years after his death. His paintings added monetary value to everyday objects, which in the public’s eye generated symbolic value (Holt, 2003). He is an icon of the art world, and his process necessitated a sort of cultural bridge between the artistic elite and the common person (Kerrigan et al., 2011).

Cultural branding can work well with celebrity brands, as is the case with Andy Warhol's prolonged success. I argue that this is equally possible for cultural bridging, assuming there is a fit between the celebrity and what the cultural bridging strategy aims at achieving. In the case of creating a successful cultural bridge, if the celebrity component is the spark, the fit is the match. Both Rihanna and Andy Warhol are examples of people who sought to bridge a gap in a specific market. By embodying the bridge, they can add symbolic value to the actual bridging mechanism because followers are attached to the co-created meaning of their personal brands (Holt, 2003). Person-brand strategies are more volatile than iconic brands due to the human they are attached to (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). The unpredictability of humans makes them appear more authentic, which is attractive to prospective customers (Fournier & Eckhart, 2019). The person in the person-brand could therefore be the case for actual business ventures of celebrities that embody the brand because it becomes an extension of the celebrity.

### **5.3 Managerial Implications**

Cultural branding usually implies picking a side. In a culture where brands may feel that any decision requires taking a stand, perhaps the best approach is one that bridges the ideological gaps. Rather than championing one side, brands can seek to bring two sides together and potentially reach a wider customer base. This practice is ideal in markets and industries where there are already brands that have attached themselves to either side of the discourse such as Axe and Dove being oppositional for body care branding.

Cultural bridging requires a rich understanding of the discourses present in the industry in order to create a clear goal. To find the discourse, managers should create ideo-typical brands within their industries that represent either side. The easiest way to do so is to create a table (such as table 1) as a visual aid. I would recommend following Reay and Jones' (2016) approach

of pattern matching to create the table. This technique is used to empirically assess the ideal types of institutional logics, but, as my findings show, can be adapted to create “ideo-typical brands” that are positioned around different ideologies. The x-axis of the comparison table would lay out the labelled ideo-typical brands, and the y-axis would list out the components of the brands (Reay & Jones, 2016). The components are essentially categorizing the typical characteristics of the brand. Having direct comparisons of the characteristics will help strategize the bridging. As a starting point, I recommend finding the goals, product offerings and sources of authority for the discourses of the brands.

Firms that pursue cultural bridging must still create brand meaning. This would require outlining the brand goals for both archetypical brands and then blending them in an actionable way (e.g., Game of Thrones has been qualified as “fantasy for jocks,” and author George R.R. Martin compared the series to the NFL (Lyons, 2012). To implement a cultural bridging strategy, it is important to map out the divide that exists in the market.

Cultural bridging is about bringing two sides of a cultural divide together. Rather than emphasizing the differences between any two sides of a market, firms should strive to blend them together. Using a celebrity to catalyze bridging also seems like a fruitful strategy. Savage X Fenty capitalized on having a major celebrity like Rihanna who embodied the blending of two ideals. If this is not possible, recruiting brand ambassador that either blend or concomitantly represent both sides of the cultural narratives could support the cultural bridging strategy. Take for example the HBO show ‘Game of Thrones.’ Adapting the popular book series, A Song of Ice and Fire, the narrative already bridged cultural ideals by blending elements associated with jock and nerd interests, according to Martin himself (Lyons, 2012). The show wove through the dense web of characters, but was marked with the violence and nudity that other HBO mainstays like

the Sopranos were known for. Notably, the top billed actor for season 1 was Sean Bean, an actor known for both high fantasy movies as Boromir in Lord of the Rings and for action movies like GoldenEye (Hughes, 2011), emphasizing the role of key person-brand in furthering cultural bridging.

#### **5.4 Limitations**

The current study encapsulated the larger trends evident in media coverage over the data collection period. There could have been more exhaustive social media cataloguing from often repeated brands in the data collection as well. Brand and industry level financial data was therefore limited to the reportings available in the media outlets or on the brand websites. The data was limited to a Western, English speaking market, and may not have encapsulated the breadth of global data, especially in key Asian markets (e.g. China and the Middle East).



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