

Why Marketing's Inclusion Crisis Persists: The Limits of Diversity Without Intersectionality

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Marketing shapes cultural conventions regarding who belongs, who is valued, and whose lives are visible or invisible (Sobande 2020), contributing to the normalization of social hierarchies (Uduehi, Saint Clair, and Crabbe 2025). While marketing research increasingly recognizes diversity and inclusion issues, inequality remains insufficiently addressed. Marketers often rely on unidimensional identity categories, rather than nuanced reflections of multidimensional power systems that structure lived experience (Gopaldas 2013; Uduehi, Saint Clair, and Crabbe 2025). Such perspectives overlook how marketing systems, recognition, and legitimacy are constructed at intersecting social positions. Consequently, seemingly diverse marketing practices can foster inclusion for some groups while structurally excluding others. Nuanced analysis of how inclusion and exclusion are coproduced across intersectional identities is critical.

Diversity and inclusion must therefore be understood not as a unidimensional representational exercise but as a multilevel process through which marketing constructs inclusion in markets (Henderson and Williams 2013; Shultz et al. 2022). Crenshaw (1991) articulates three levels of intersectionality—representational, structural and political—offering a strong theoretical lens. Representational intersectionality concerns identity construction through image and narrative, structural intersectionality examines uneven institutional opportunities, and political intersectionality addresses which struggles are legitimized or are sidelined (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Crenshaw 1991). Marketing occurs at all three levels. However, most strategies remain at a representational brand level (e.g., advertising) often restricted to visible, singular markers (e.g., race). Without interrogation of the structural and political dimensions of marketing, representational diversity and inclusion efforts can mask ongoing exclusion (Sharifzadeh and Brison 2024). This positions intersectionality as a key principle of marketing design rather than a sociopolitical adjunct. This commentary demonstrates how an intersectional discourse framework analyzes brand-led inclusion efforts.

Methodology

We employ critical discourse analysis (CDA; Fairclough 2010) to investigate how brand communications construct inclusion.

Empirically, we analyze 144 Instagram posts by lingerie and beauty retailer Victoria's Secret (VS), historically associated with hyper-thin femininity yet attempting to regenerate legitimacy through selective diversity. We analyzed social media posts from the 2025 VS Fashion Show campaign (July 30 through October 30, 2025). CDA protocols helped us analyze inclusion discourse across three levels: textual features (captions, sounds, camera work, visuals), discursive practices (sequencing and framing), and practices of sociality (how brand meaning, controversies and strategies shape discourse). Figure 1 synthesizes these analyses, mapping how diversity is represented and inclusion produced or constrained across levels.

Findings

Representational

While the 2025 show included diversity (racially diverse, transgender, pregnant, plus-size, and older models), CDA revealed tokenistic and hierarchized inclusion. Diversity remained limited and symbolically differentiated. Thin, white-passing models and particularly "Legacy Angels" received proportional dominance. "Legacy Angels" are considered the models contracted as VS Angels from the brand's peak era (late 1990s–2018), known for their winged runway looks, dominance of the fashion show, and role as ambassadors embodying an unattainable beauty ideal. Intersectionally marginalized models were often visually peripheral. Plus-size women appear in fuller-coverage fashion, with camera shots concealing bodies, reinforcing normative narratives. A transgender model is visually marked yet framed through a cool, "it girl" persona, discursively neutralizing the political significance of her presence. While models of color are visible, representation is recalibrated to fit VS's dominant aesthetic, with limited emphasis on

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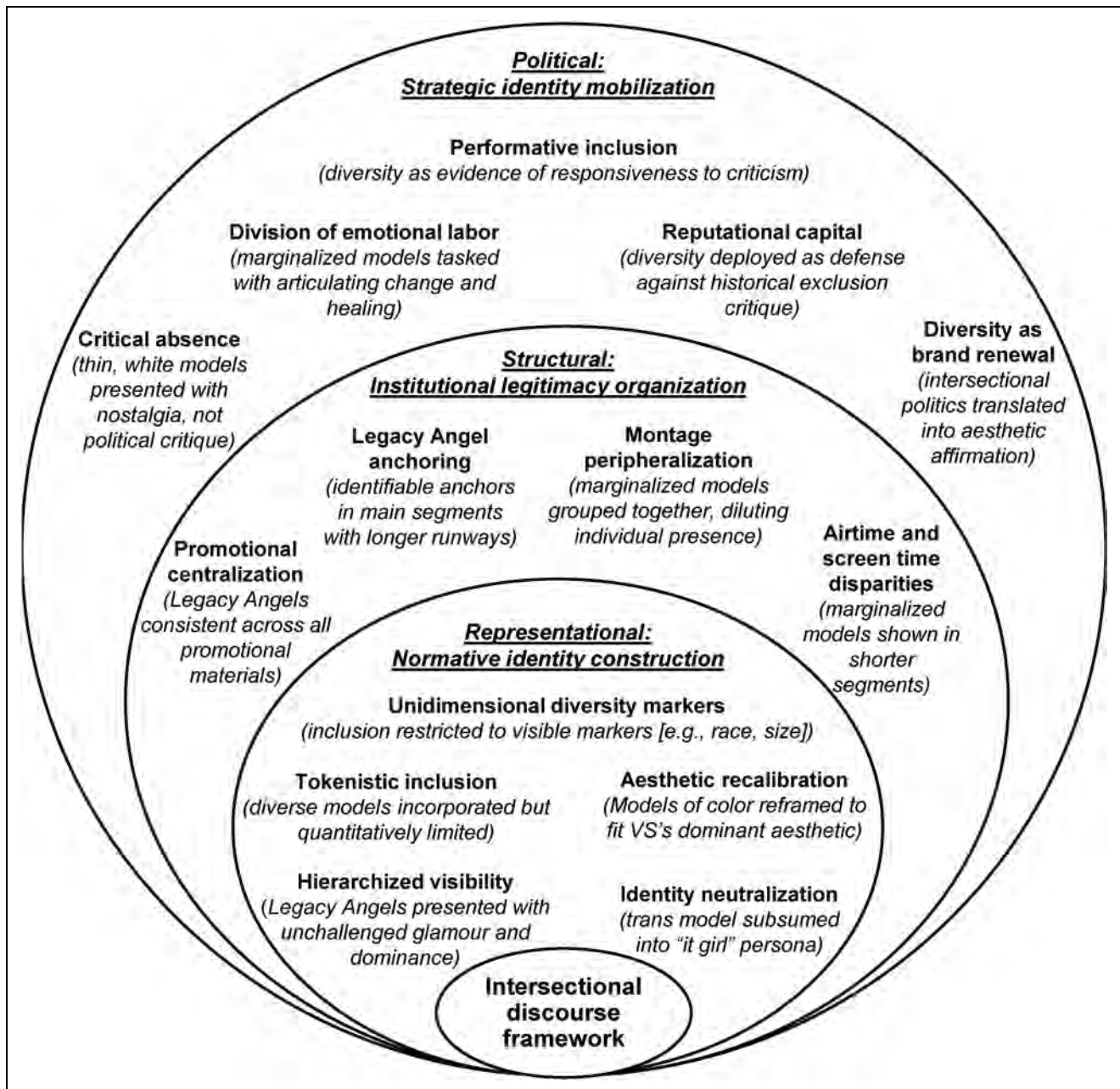


Figure 1. Victoria's Secret's Three Levels of Intersectionality.

culturally specific markers. Despite representational diversity, inclusion remained uneven, reinforcing aesthetic conformity.

Structural

Structural inequality was scribed into how the show organized visibility and narrative centrality. Institutional visibility, authority, and value were organized along structural inequity lines. Legacy Angels are identifiable anchors in the show and have longer runways. Those models' images remain consistent in promotional materials representative of the brand. In contrast, intersectionally marginalized models are shown in montages, through shorter segments, or as single appearances, maintaining less centrality throughout the overall presentation. These

intentional practices preserve the historical standard as the organizing norm. Together, casting, airtime allocation, and promotional priority maintained a center of desirability. Diversity is added without redistributing underlying systems of power. Criteria for representing the brand remain unchanged, making hierarchy aesthetic rather than systemic. Despite the appearance of diversity, the underlying structure allocating legitimacy and narrative authority remains constrained.

Political

As a "reformed" brand, VS's discourse centers on women's empowerment, spirituality, and community. Concepts of

sisterhood, vulnerability, ritual, and gratitude are performed by marginalized models (e.g., Paloma Elsesser shared personal stories of being plus-sized in behind-the-scenes segments), while thin, white models are presented with celebratory nostalgia rather than the burden of serving political critique (e.g., Candice Swanepoel was featured in behind-the-scenes segments focusing on her Legacy Angel experiences). Intersectional identities are tasked with the emotional labor of articulating change, healing, and development. The fashion show becomes a spectacle of political intersectionality. Intersecting identities perform reform while the brand's historical core remains protected from structural accountability. The intersecting axes of identity (race, gender, size, age, and sexuality) constructing the brand's heritage of exclusion were highlighted or downplayed to serve the brand's narrative of empowerment. Identity categories were managed strategically rather than concurrently. As a result, diversity is often used as a form of reputational capital and as a defense against criticism, instead of as a means of redistributing power. The brand reclaims "diversity" not as a challenge to governing norms but as evidence of renewal, translating intersectional politics into aesthetic affirmation.

Discussion

When representational diversity is the singular focus in marketing, systemic exclusion is reproduced. Brands can represent diversity without changing deeper narrative privileges or symbolic authority. Yet intersectionality offers a foundational reframing for marketing: to redefine diversity as power relationships within a system, rather than bodies in a frame.

Our intersectional discourse framework shows that inclusion requires scrutiny of visual and narrative hierarchies. Marketers should investigate not only who is featured in campaigns but also who receives narrative depth and brand ambassadorship and who is tasked with emotional labor. Discursive audits deploying CDA would assist brands in reforming their content architectures, ensuring that intersectional identities are not constrained to montages or empowerment rhetoric that bears unduly large political weight. Regulators anxious to cultivate fair representation or market access need inventories that include intersectional visibility. Intersectional discourse analysis drives evaluation of how brands systematically distribute glamour, intimacy, and voice across race, gender, age, and size.

Marketing's inclusion crisis is not a matter of insufficient diversity, but of insufficient intersectionality. The VS case demonstrates that visible diversity can coexist with intact, institutional inequality. An intersectional framework of discourse incorporating Crenshaw's (1991) levels and CDA provides marketers with an instrument to diagnose chasms and encourage transformative practice. To regain inclusion as a marketing mandate, marketers and scholars must go beyond counts of who is visible to examine how power is distributed in opportunity and legitimacy. Only when representational, structural, and political diversity occurs can marketing provide more inclusive markets.

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