

## Designed for pleasure: style, indulgence and accessorized sex

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## Designed for pleasure

*Style, indulgence and accessorized sex*

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines sex retailing in the United Kingdom and advancements in sex toy design in order to explore the part that these products play in discourses of female sexual self-discovery. As British culture appears increasingly transfixed by sex and sexual adventure, the proliferation of sex toys could be explained as just another instance of its relaxed attitudes. The existence of specialist erotic boutiques for women indicates a shift in perceptions of women's sexuality, although the focus on 'acceptance' of sexual practices ignores the ways in which women's consumption of sexual artefacts is dependent upon the intersections of gender and class identities and the construction of a particular form of hedonistic femininity. This article explores the ways in which High Street sex retailing engages with feminism and questions of identity and taste.

**KEYWORDS** *consumption, hedonistic femininity, sex toys, taste*

**Since the early** 1990s goods centred on sexual arousal, play and pleasure aimed primarily at women have proliferated<sup>1</sup> – even mass-market fashion store Top Shop has made a foray into the sale of vibrators – reawakening debate about the desirability of widespread consumption of sexually explicit materials. The availability of vibrators, sexy lingerie, nipple clamps and other accoutrements for the sexually adventurous woman has grown – an interesting phenomenon in itself, but these goods are now being sold in increasingly stylish environments. Once the province of sleaze, the sex shop has moved upmarket and the previously euphemistically titled 'marital aids' have become a matter of fashion, so much so that the doyen of style mores *Tatler* (Berens, 2002: 94) proclaimed that 'sex toys are the new pashminas'. The 'specialness' of sex enshrined in attempts to hide it away is seemingly erased by the discursive production of the sex toy as a fashionable domestic appliance – every household needs a vibrator and every woman deserves a stylish one. The rise of designer sex shops such as Coco de Mer and Myla indicate a 'poshing up' of sex, where the orgasmic efficacy of a toy is perhaps less important than having a designer object to display to friends. Pursuit of orgasm is rendered secondary to appreciation



of the tasteful contours of one's sex accessory, with the added bonus that its primary function is disavowed: indeed some toys are sold as '75% Art and 25% sex toy'.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is not just at the 'Art' end that design has become important. Top sellers proclaim their ergonomics and innovative shaping, perfectly moulded to the contours of female pleasure. Judging by sales figures alone (demand for the 'Jelly' or 'Rampant Rabbit' outstripped supply worldwide),<sup>3</sup> women are enthusiastically embracing new designer toys in all shades of jelly, resin or glass. Form is clearly as important as function. As one entrepreneur justifies her interest in revolutionizing the vibrator, 'Toasters and kettles have been designed, but sex toys haven't' (Semler, quoted in *Tatler*, 2002: 99); surely the clearest instance of what Juffer (1998) has termed the 'domestication' of sexual materials. However, it also draws attention to the connotative cachet of exclusivity and sophistication which has begun to characterize designed toys.

This examination of sex retailing and sex toy design draws on theories of consumption and taste to explore the connections between discourses of female sexual self-discovery and discourses of differentiation which constitute particular sexual identities of liberation while reproducing sets of beliefs and structures of privilege in relation to sexual play. It is in this light that *Tatler's* declaration of sex toys as 'the new pashminas' becomes important as a demonstration of a particular disposition towards sex. Commodities do not exist in and of themselves, but circulate as signs within systems of differences (Baudrillard, 1988). Groups and individuals use possessions to indicate differences of taste, lifestyle and identity, and this is no less true of sexual artefacts. Although we, as a culture, have a tendency to view all sex products as the same (witness the constant refrains that porn is boring and repetitive), not all dildos, vibrators or romance enhancement products are alike. The differentiation of products rests on more than functionality: aesthetics, taste and application all contribute to the horizon of possibilities in which the consumer structures meaning for herself. The production of 'designed' toys, retailing at prices never envisaged by the so-called sex industry, is evidence not only of the increasing availability of sex toys but also of the construction of classed sexual identities. Sex aids embody and signify particular meanings in the course of their circulation and consumption (Appadurai, 1986) and, as Baudrillard has argued, this is an intrinsically political process:

Although we experience pleasure for ourselves, when we consume we never do it on our own (the isolated consumer is the carefully maintained illusion of the *ideological* discourse on consumption). Consumers are mutually implicated, despite themselves, in a general system of exchange and in the production of coded values. (1988: 48; emphasis in original)

Despite their placing as 'intimate' accessories to that most 'private' of activities, sex, this process of coded values is at work here. Toys (and stores)



design, luxuriousness, femaleness, how lifelike they are, technological innovation, reliability, pleasure, how displayable they are, etc. Toys are tools for producing orgasm and 'symbolic goods', they are signifiers of cultural values and the ability to consume the right goods in the right ways (Bourdieu, 1984; Veblen, 1994). Hence this article begins by outlining current organizations of sex toy retailing in the United Kingdom but will go on to focus on the intersections of gender and class identities integral to this marketing sector. This article performs an introductory task; further work is required if the actual practices of consumption of sex toys and the place that they hold in their owners' lives are to be understood.

## **Regulating sex on the High Street**

Britain has a long history of preventing sales of sexual items to anyone, let alone women (O'Toole, 1998; Thompson, 1994). Of the various statutes limiting the availability of sexually explicit materials in the UK, the most successful is the Local Government Miscellaneous Provisions Act 1982.<sup>4</sup> Since the introduction of the Act, the number of licensed sex shops has remained static at fewer than 200 shops nationwide.<sup>5</sup> Licences are difficult to obtain, reviewed regularly, susceptible to withdrawal and, most importantly, expensive.<sup>6</sup> Most are located in metropolitan areas, with the biggest concentration in London's Soho.<sup>7</sup> Legislation dictates the form that a sex shop can take, requiring blacked out windows and double doors. Because licences are often temporary, shop owners have rarely invested in properties. During the 1980s, the retail boom and gentrification of High Streets, corner sex shops remained oases of ugliness. The reputation of the shop, its blacked out windows, precarious existence on the fringes of shopping centres and the fear of what lurks within, all enhance its reputation as a 'no-go' area for women. Combined with the notion that male sexuality is exploitative and dark, the sex shop has occupied a public space abandoned to sleaze and inadequacy.

Ironically, local authorities' attempts to hinder sex shops actually have contributed to the successful targeting of women consumers. Female-focused shops such as Ann Summers, Coco de Mer, Myla and Sh! have created shopping spaces that do not need to be licensed. The story of the market leader is interesting in this respect. The Ann Summers chain looked very down-at-heel when Jacqueline Gold took over its management in the early 1980s. Stock was updated and revamped with an eye to attracting women consumers. Furthermore, Gold launched parties employing the direct selling techniques successfully used by Tupperware (see Clarke, 1999). Ann Summers has more than 6000 self-employed party planners hosting thousands of parties per week in the UK (official company figures). These retailing techniques were extended to the company's stores, creating an atmosphere at once familiar and comfortable and demarcating the shops as significantly different from those premises requiring licenses. The



company successfully exploited the 10 percent rule<sup>8</sup> by stocking lingerie and other non-sexual items such that the provisions of the Local Government Miscellaneous Provisions Act 1982 and the Indecent Displays Act 1981 do not apply. Stores have opened throughout the UK with colourful displays of lingerie, women-friendly sex toys and novelty items. A key element in marketing to women has 'involved the taming of a traditionally male genre ... and rewriting/reworking it within every day routines' (Juffer, 1998: 5). As Gold puts it:

We're not really a sex shop, and we're more than a lingerie shop. What we've achieved is a very female-friendly environment where both men and women can be entirely comfortable ... It's become part of a normal shopping experience, women go out to shop in Croydon or Lakeside or wherever, and popping into Ann Summers is just part of a regular shopping trip. (quoted in Addley, 2003: 2)

Ann Summers is the market leader with gross sales of £110 million and more than 1 million vibrators sold per year (Perrone, 2002).

### **Public/private distinctions on the High Street**

There are, then, two divergent practices of sex retail coexisting on high streets, divided across gender lines and formalized through the licensing system. While licensed sex shops still function as male preserves of private (and, generally designated, seedy) sexuality, the emergence of highly-visible women's stores illustrates an interesting operation of the 'private' and the 'public' in mainstream British culture. Although this article focuses on the marketing of sex toys and the retailing address to female consumers, the cross-cutting terms 'public' and 'private' frame the following discussion. As Marx argues in relation to surveillance and new technologies, too often

the distinction 'public' and 'private' is ... treated as a uni-dimensional, rigidly dichotomous and absolute, fixed and universal concept, whose meaning can be determined ... [but it is, in fact] more subtle, diffused and ambiguous. (2001: 157)

This is particularly so when the gendered dimensions of sex retailing is examined. On the one hand, any retail premise is a public space, but the blacked out windows and double doors required by law establish in the licensed sex shop a sense of privacy that is fostered further, on entering the shop, by customers' refusal to meet each others' eyes and the 'hands-off' approach adopted by staff. The sense of furtiveness, secrecy and anonymity is integral to this retail experience and draws attention to the 'taboo' of sex, attesting to the concerns of wider society that sexuality is a problem to be kept within guarded environs. It is an expression of sexuality figured as 'authentic' but not 'good' or 'healthy'. The newer breed of shops – sex boutiques targeting women – present their goods very differently and draw



on other notions of authenticity: sex is a natural part of women's lives, and its public expression is part of the exploration of women's hitherto repressed sexual needs and desires. Thus, for women, there is no need for secretiveness or shame.

The experience of public/private here is conceived as 'an oscillation' (Juffer, 1998: 5), recognizing that consumers are in constant movement between public and private spaces and their associations. The 'public' is not simply a spatial phenomenon in relation to the 'privacy' of the 'home'; rather, there are associations of privacy, secrecy, solitude and anonymity that cross into the public social space that is a shopping street. Concomitantly, elements of publicness occur in the supposed 'privacy' of the home; clearly, an Ann Summers party would fall into this category.

The claims of anti-porn feminism (see in particular Dworkin, 1981) and by more recent theorists of the pornographication of culture (see McNair, 2002) that 'pornography is everywhere' fails to recognize the ways in which the public practice of producing, disseminating and consuming sexually explicit materials is influenced by a range of formalized and more informal discourses of privacy and secrecy – what Giddens (1984) has called 'practical consciousness' – the pragmatic understandings and negotiations of space, place and occasion that inform everyday life. Thus the marketing strategies discussed here should be understood as being in dialogue with the practical consciousness of sex as a private act imbued with public meaning.

In marketing sexual products for women, retailers have engaged in a 'struggle for legitimization' (Frow, 1995: 85) to distinguish their goods from pornography, so examining the aesthetic distinctions made between sex aids is illuminating. This is not to designate some products as better than others; instead, as Juffer argues, the term 'erotica' and its associations can be understood as a marketing brand and identity resource. Therefore, it is possible to understand how certain forms of sexually explicit writings, images and artefacts are made available to women through the delineation of tastes, styles of play and consumption. Indeed, this article goes on to argue that while certain marketing techniques draw on feminist discourses of freedom, choice and fulfilment, they also exploit anxieties about social status and reformulate modes of sexual experimentation along traditional lines of class distinction.

## Targeting women

The use of objects for sexual excitation is not an entirely new phenomenon,<sup>9</sup> but a history of sex toys is beyond the scope of this article. In any case, women's earlier uses of paraphernalia in order to produce orgasm may not be mapped easily onto the phenomenon examined here – the widespread, mainstream availability of sex toys and the enthusiastic embrace in mainstream media of female sexual experimentation. Whereas once women



were figured as the objects of sex talk and sex production, they are now addressed as consumers in their own right. The innovation of the past decade lies in the open address to women consumers. Invariably, early commentaries on the use of sex toys focused on the idea of 'replacement' or 'therapeutic' use rather than any expectation of pleasure for pleasure's sake. In line with their configuration as 'marital aids', vibrators had names that emphasized their therapeutic effects – the 'Non Doctor' vibrator being the most popular (and scary) of these names. And in keeping with the alternative placing of them as simply a bit of fun, sex toys were sold as 'novelties' acquiring a reputation for shoddy manufacture, non-function or unreliability. Furthermore, colours, finish and design were tacky. While aids may have been recommended as tools to discover one's orgasmic potential, they were rarely objects worth boasting about.

Early 1990s press advertising of toys demonstrates little attention to allure; descriptions focused on the purely functional or, at best, wild claims of satisfaction. For example:

'Lite up' Vibrator – big, life-like and fun – It even lights up! 'You'll never lose this in the dark.' Sold elsewhere at £24.95 OUR PRICE £14.95. (*For Women*, June 1995)

Thus the functionality of the item was most important: the products are not suggested to confer anything beyond the physiological or convenience. The jokey tone and novelty elements served to disavow toys' great marketing hindrance – that the purchase of a vibrator signified sexual inadequacy. The presence of toys replicating the pleasure zones of male and female bodies would seem to justify that perception of lack.<sup>10</sup> Although some manufacturers still produce 'lifelike' penises, most toys for women have shifted away from simulation to organic shapes and more 'feminized' products and toys have acquired a more positive symbolism. Loe (1999) has suggested that the vibrator is, like the speculum of the 1970s, 'an icon of women's claiming their bodies ... women's symbol of independence and pleasure' (quoted in McCaughey and French, 2001: 92).

How did this occur? Examining the phenomenon in the United States, where women were targeted much earlier, Barbara Ehrenreich et al. observe:

In this consumer arena female sexuality functioned differently than it had previously in mainstream society: it was clearly unattached to reproduction, motherhood, and monogamy – even heterosexuality. Women, whether gay or straight, married or single, all had something in common in this arena: The pursuit of pleasure – at a reasonable price. (1986: 105)

The development of a sex industry for women is linked to the burgeoning discussion of sexual practices which encouraged women to explore their own sexual interests separately from earlier models of heterosexual monogamy. Sex manuals addressed women as 'liberated', urging them to reject



passive receptivity and shame for more 'active' and pleasure-seeking sex. Juffer describes this larger process as the democratization of desire or the 'mainstreaming of masturbation' (1998: 69) for women, whereby female orgasm is considered part of the routine of women's everyday lives. The masturbation projects of Second Wave feminism contributed to a climate in which women should understand their own potential for pleasure and should be able to achieve orgasm, especially for themselves.

Yet the exploration of female sexual pleasure has not proceeded without difficulty, especially in regard to its political status. The 1980s 'sex wars' are well documented, but it is worth reiterating that those debates have continued to exercise powerful sway over conceptualizations of the possible pleasures of sex for women, whether heterosexual or not. The debates centred on quite lopsided arguments: on the one hand, anti-pornography feminists argued against representations of female sexual activity as degrading to women and capable of misappropriation by patriarchal forces. On the other hand, less uniformly organized voices called for acknowledgement of the conflicts, tensions and complexities of sex. As Vance observed, anti-porn arguments completely refused the idea of women's autonomous desires under patriarchy: 'although theoretically acknowledged as possible in a utopian future, [female desire] remained an ethereal and remote presence' (Vance, 1992: xix). This utopian presence has influenced subsequent investigations: a key requirement of properly 'feminist' sexual practice required the removal of all eroticization of power, not just in heterosexual relations but also in lesbian relationships, where gender equality was expected to 'undermine (or magically "destabilize") power imbalance' (Gaines, 1995: 392).

Thus, an ideal of 'egalitarian sex' has entered feminist examination of sexual practices, measuring sexual relations for their adherence to 'correct' pleasures and rejection of 'incorrect' pleasures. Of course, pleasures often were found to be outside the recommendations – notably lesbian practices of sadomasochism, which flew in the face of the dearest-held claims that women would not eroticize pain and power of their own accord.<sup>11</sup> Sexual pleasure, the slipperiness of desire and the unexpectedness of sexual arousal have posed real problems for feminist interventions. Sexual liberation has been a double-edged sword, offering opportunities to expand women's potential for pleasure, whether on their own, with other women or with men, but at the same time liberation often seemed to make women's bodies more accessible to men with little benefit to women (Jeffreys, 1990).

Thus, sexual practices and representations are regarded often with suspicion and, where they are analysed, are assessed for their genesis (is this by women, for women?), their presentation (does this pander to male sexual preoccupations?) and their outcomes (does this destabilize or transgress heteronormative/patriarchal sexual practice?). As Findlay describes them, the 'lesbian dildo debates' brought to the fore the problems of using sex toys: while lesbian sex was presented as 'woman identified',





the use of a phallic-shaped piece of plastic or latex posed real issues for observers and practitioners alike. Again, questions turned on whether using sex toys, especially the dildo, merely replicated male sexual styles; as one faction asked: why did women want to “portra[y]” themselves as equipped with penises?” (Findlay, 1992: 564). Their opponents argued that there was no direct reference between the dildo and the penis. The issue remains unresolved but, as Findlay comments, it has had an effect upon the kinds of sex toys that are produced:

Lesbians ... have marketed a series of dildos which, in an obvious attempt to break the association between a piece of silicon and a penis, are shaped like dolphins, ears of corn, and even the Goddess. This urge to steer away from realism stems from the fact that these feminist dildo suppliers and their customers are suspicious of conflating a representation with reality, especially in the case of a phallus. (1992: 566)

Newer vibes aimed at heterosexual women also shun the overt ‘phallicness’ or genital focus of the simulation forms. Moreover, a vocabulary of appropriate design for manufacturers and retailers alike has developed: Candida Royalle’s ‘Utime’ range draws on a political authentication summed up in the phrase ‘By women, for women’. Royalle is a one-time porn actress-turned-director of sexually explicit films targeted at female viewers. Her toys are described as specifically designed for the needs and rhythms of female sexuality:

[U]sing a vibrator is as essential as brushing your teeth ... Our current favourite is Candida Royalle’s new *Utime* – the latest in her line of vibrators called Natural Contours which are beautiful, high-tech, and ergonomically designed to fit the contours of a woman’s body. What we really like about the *Utime* is that it offers strong vibrations (as well as dual speeds) on both ends, allowing this innovative design to serve pleasure points ... well, all over the map. (Amazing how it locates the G-spot so effortlessly!) On top of it all, this beautifully designed vibrator is whisper-quiet. No one will think you are out mowing the lawn. (<http://www.libidomag.com>)

Descriptions like this draw on the authenticating narratives of female sexuality – the toy takes its cue from the female body and its pleasure points. Its beauty and ergonomics ensure the maximization of pleasure without effort. Marketing has moved from emphasis on functional features or cost to the idea of the sex toy as an object to be enjoyed for its aesthetic qualities as well as its ability to deliver sensation. Indeed, some displays show the toys as erotic objects in their own right, thereby amplifying the pleasures that they offer consumers. These toys exploit the qualities of new materials and technologies, from moulding through to vibrations<sup>12</sup> and remote controls. Jelly has replaced hard plastic in traditional vibe shapes but also has enabled newer and more ‘exciting’ designs. Stimulation and extra sensation are provided by the decorative properties of textures, bumps and lumps. Curved surfaces are used for aesthetic reference as well



as 'efficiency' and 'ergonomics'. Alongside bold symbolism, the colours and gleaming surfaces speak for themselves as technological efficiency and/or friendliness, cuteness, luxury, beauty, etc. The visual and tactile simulations of skin are still used but jewels, water and other 'natural' forms are also referenced. A toy's good looks are now a major selling point. Toys are accoutrements that signal sophistication, experimentation, an educative tool required by an era of 'reflexive selfhood' (Giddens, 1991). No longer the province of the frustrated spinster or married couples bored by years of unadventurous sex, toys have blossomed as items to enhance relationships, for play, exploration and the indulgence of fantasy for people who 'are serious about sex'.<sup>15</sup>

### **It's all a bit of a giggle at Ann Summers**

Ann Summers has been an important innovator in developing this female-centred marketing style. As McCaughey and French (2001) argue, the dissemination of information and practices at Ann Summers' parties has expanded women's expectations of orgasm, pleasure and empowerment. Women sharing, talking with and selling sex aids to other women has rendered the sex toy 'safe' for some consumers. However, Ann Summers is credited with cheapening the experience of sexual experimentation and normalizing phallogocentric notions of sexual pleasure as often as it is praised for widening women's opportunities to experience orgasm.

In her fascinating but troubling account of 'post-feminist homosociability' at Ann Summers parties, Merl Storr draws on Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' to explore the parties' place in the acquisition of 'the "know-how" to be feminine' (2003: 221). In so doing, Storr argues for an understanding of heterosexuality as 'not just something that happens between men and women; it is also something that happens among women themselves' (2003: 219). Storr argues that Ann Summers parties contribute to a normalizing of phallogocentric sexuality because

women experience and express their heterosexual desires, but they do so from their position as sexual objects. Moreover they do so in a way which neither challenges their positioning as objects nor lessens their heterosexual enthusiasm for men. This is achieved by the construction at such events of men as desirable because they are powerful, strong or authoritative (or, if one is really lucky, all three) ... what is desirable about them is, precisely, their masculinity. (2003: 91)

Thus party organizers and guests are constantly talking about 'willies' and defining their sexuality in relation to men. This dismissal of Ann Summers as 'male-centred' is central to the distinctions in retailing styles that this article goes on to examine now. In the past four years, an emergent hedonist femininity has been targeted particularly by a new breed of unlicensed sex shop which constructs the pleasures of sex toys as



beginning with the point of purchase. In a recent article examining the website presentations of sex emporia, Feona Attwood has suggested that shops such as Myla speak to a particular 'femininity constructed around a self-possessed auto-eroticism' (2005: 394). In what is essentially a survey of an undeveloped research field, Attwood is careful not to make definitive claims about the importance or desirability of this form of post-feminist sexual consumerism, instead drawing readers' attention to a number of important questions about the burgeoning market in sexual commodities. In particular, she asks:

[H]ow does the 'fun' of Ann Summers draw on a British bawdy tradition and how is the sensuous pleasure of the more upmarket sites constructed in opposition to this? What does this tell us about class and sexual sensibilities? (2005: 404)

The next section examines part of that question in order to highlight the discursive construction of the 'sensuous pleasure' of more upmarket stores as offering more liberated and liberatory sex than Ann Summers. It also explores this 'sensuous pleasure' as a refashioning of the old boundaries between high and low, erotic and pornographic.

### **The rise of the erotic emporium and its construction of luxury**

Ky Hoyle founded Sh!, one of the first 'erotic boutiques', as an antidote to the embarrassments of licensed premises:

The idea for Sh! was sown one dark January day in 1992 when the Sh! Girlz whirled into London's Soho hoping to satisfy their curiosity and have some fun. Sadly, it wasn't to be ... horror-struck, they found themselves skulking around sleaze-pits, while men-in-macs leered from behind the pages of greasy magazines ... after all, the only women they'd ever seen inside a sex-shop were the inflatable sort. (<http://www.sh-womenstore.com/docs/story.html>)<sup>14</sup>

Painted pink and eschewing penis-shaped dildos, the shop has traded as an erotic haven for women, priding itself on its integrity (all items are clearly labelled and prices do not change according to who is buying) and its women-centredness (with 'ordinary' female assistants on hand to offer advice). Hackney Council attempted to impose a licence (and accompanying fee of £17,000 a year) but backed down to arguments that the shop was more than 'just' a retail space. Hoyles is particularly adamant that the shop is a space that differs from traditional sex retailing:

We're probably best defined by the things we don't sell ... We don't stock blow up dolls, we don't do any of those silly novelty toys that are made for a 'Carry On' sense of humour and we don't have any porn. (Bark, nd)

Other boutiques have followed suit. Sam Roddick (daughter of Anita Roddick, founder of The Body Shop) opened Coco de Mer in London's



Covent Garden three years ago. In numerous newspaper articles and magazine features, the shop has been portrayed as the pinnacle of erotic emporiums selling expensive lingerie and sex toys, from £15 for an essential oil to almost £3000 for a bondage rocking horse. Inbetween are vibrators and dildos in all shapes, sizes and colours with an emphasis on luxury: their highest priced dildo is the ‘feather tickler’ at £1500. The shop approximates a boudoir decorated in deep reds and luxurious fabrics. The dressing rooms are small but sumptuous and have peepholes, so that couples can discover the visual pleasures of their purchases before leaving the shop.

Myla opened in Notting Hill in 2001 and, with a concession in the London flagship store Liberty, is described as:

A luxury and designer brand first and foremost, and a sex brand as well. But we are really happy to describe ourselves as a sex shop ... We cater for people who don't think sex is dirty or freaky ... Sex is part of everyday life and 'Myla' is part of a new attitude to sex whereby a woman wants to indulge. (<http://www.myla.com>)

Each of the above claims makes a presumption about the prospective clientele for these boutiques: the use of, and shopping for, a sex toy is framed here as a feminine thing to do; stylish, sophisticated and adventurous. It assumes a level of customer interest and commitment demonstrating ‘a new attitude to sex’, but it also strategically positions consumers – who would want to declare that they do not have a new attitude to sex? The ‘nicer’ environments of these shops offer ‘semiotic’ benefits over traditional ‘dirty’ sex shops. The indulgent interiors encourage customers to fulfil their fantasies and explore their new attitudes. So, while Myla might be happy to describe itself as a sex shop, it signals its distinction from those premises by emphasizing its designer qualities – ‘the Gucci of sex shops’ (Addley, 2003: 2) – offering the cachet of exclusivity and sophistication.

In addition, this is extended to the toys. Myla approached designers Tom Dixon and Marc Newson, and sculptors Mari Ruth Oda and Tara Cottan, to create limited-edition toys for their store. Two such products are described below – ‘Bone’ by Dixon retails at £150 and ‘Pebble’ by Oda at £89 – with all the allure and shine that only Art and ‘expense’ can provide:

Tom believes that design becomes interesting when you start looking at areas where design has never gone before. He felt that this uncharted territory was particularly evident in sex toys. It seemed extraordinary to him that objects destined for such intimate and pleasurable use were so devoid of quality in terms of design, manufacturing and material. With Bone, Tom set out to address this by creating the finest vibrator ever made. The ergonomic shape of Bone was inspired by ancient fertility symbols and in this modern incarnation the shape creates different intensities and patterns of vibration from different areas of its surface. (<http://www.myla.com>)



Alongside lingerie made of quality silks and lace, the toys add to the visual excitement of the boutique and appeal to the consumer's aesthetic senses and knowledges. Designer toys attempt a balance between the decorative and functional uses of new materials and toy shapes; they are visually and materially more attractive than cheaper toys and thereby signal a move away from overtly technological forms of sex and orgasm. The extravagance of some designs, with their perfect industrial finishes, hints at secret pleasures; they are described as brushed, polished or gleaming. Many sparkle and have shimmering surfaces.<sup>15</sup> Their fabrication suggests the artificial perfection of the machine but their curves and colours (best sellers are clear, pink and lavender) attempt to feminize. These designed vibes are to be seen from all angles, their surfaces and textures are evocative of female sexuality as more labile, sensuous and curvaceous than male sexual styles. Some toys, such as Shiri Zinn's crystal and bejewelled dildos, are rather baroque and reference imagined historical periods, particularly the Victorian and Art Nouveau or Art Deco eras, reanimating a form of sexual privacy that is highly aesthetic and hints at the forbidden. Displayed with a knowing artifice and a sense of glamour, the toys and their settings are the stuff of fantasy: they exude quality and an atmosphere of dark, sexy romance. The flamboyance, rich tones and preponderance of black, white, pinks and jewel colours signify opulence and glamour, crying 'Indulge yourself!'

Needless to say, this indulgence is not cheap and its attractiveness depends on it *not* being made available to all women. Just as the statements about physical aspects of the sex boutique stressed their superiority and style, these toys are described in terms which confer superiority on their consumers, through their use of the vocabularies of Art and high culture:

Mari-Ruth's work is inspired by the calm and serene environment of the traditional Japanese architecture and gardens; a quality she also strives to apply to her sculptures. Mari is also inspired by fruit, the human figure, the landscape and other natural forms. 'I am interested in how the body becomes a negative space when moulding itself to the positive space of a human form. This interest encouraged me to make an object of beauty that would be tempting to hold and to explore, or explore with.' (<http://www.myla.com>)

This discursive fabrication of an object of artistic appreciation rather than sexual excitation functions on a number of levels: using the language of Art, the toy is established as more than just a material thing. It carries with it the knowledges and cultural competences to understand the exotic significance and the luxury of beauty. Reference to Japanese art signifies a sophisticated and cosmopolitan knowledge, and the idea of familiarity with the calm and serene environments offered by those exotic gardens suggests the financial ability to visit them. Therefore, these are not just toys; they are a reworking of symbolic capital, offering distinction and status to their purchasers.



The 'Bone', 'Pebble' and 'Tickler' are targeted at a class of young professional women, usually urban and certainly metropolitan or cosmopolitan in orientation. The toys are marketed to a feminine identity of knowing and sophisticated sexual individualism: an identity which has impeccable taste in matters sexual and certainly in possessions sexual; an expression of sophisticated hedonism represented as understanding the slow burn of true pleasure rather than the promiscuity of 'Wham bam, thank you ma'am'. It could be termed a new romanticism, with its focus on elegant simplicity and an ability to express this through one's possessions and sexual styles. Campbell (1987) describes romantic consumption as a commitment to experience and to experiencing pleasure. This has very significant resonances for the forms of marketing discussed here, in that the romantic consumer is conceived as active and imaginatively engaged in their own use of particular commodities. With their claims of 'ethically sourced' products and designer-made luxury, the erotic emporia promise a shopping experience as emotionally charged as 'love at first sight', consequently promising the possibility of the ultimate orgasm. This dream-response to a product is one which Roddick of Coco de Mer claims as a reality:

A friend told me about this vibrator in the shape of a tree with a snake wrapped round it that made you burst into tears when you had an orgasm. I did not believe it but I bought one and it worked. (quoted in Macalister, 2005: 28)

This mythical instrument with its biblical references promises a more intense emotional and imaginative interaction between self and commodity than the 'Jelly Willy Stress Buster' on offer at Ann Summers, whose nomenclature suggests a very practical use. In a culture increasingly accepting of pornography and explicit sexual representations, one needs to be sexy but also exude sexual style. Of course, this stylishness is much easier to demonstrate if one purchases designed sex objects. Moreover, the class distinctions of the differentiating discourses point to demarcate particular instances of sexual consumption as 'liberated', and others as not.

## **The politics of brand distinction**

A key element of this class distinction lies in the top-end boutiques' definitions of themselves as more authentically sexual than Ann Summers. In an interview in the *Observer*, Julia Gash, owner of Gash (a sex boutique) commented:

Ann Summers is the market leader and they sell a million vibrators a year which is great ... But they also sell sheep willy warmers and condom earrings and maids' outfits. It's a traditional male agenda, and British postcard humour. You could go there to buy something sexy and end up slinking away with something that makes you feel ridiculous. (quoted in Moore, 2003)

Thus the dichotomies of high and low culture are employed as organizational structures of distinction. The explanation of what Ann Summers



sells and offers its customers and the distance that Gash places between the market leader and her own stores serves the important rhetorical function of undermining any political or feminist potential in a visit to Ann Summers (a traditional male agenda), firmly establishing its lower class position. The erotica/pornography divide is referenced once again, along with the degrees of sexual sophistication or embarrassment that separate them, creating an active role for potential consumers to differentiate between the offerings at Gash or Ann Summers. The goods at the erotic emporium are not just capable of providing sex (the technology to produce orgasm), they also provide the appearance and emotional resonance of *good sex* – a visit to Gash will not leave you feeling ridiculous.

It is through these differentiations that erotic emporia appeal to the legitimizing authorities of public intellectuals, journalists and academics who see these shops and their owners as ‘good enough’ to legitimize sex play. These ‘authorities’ may not have anticipated a need for these shops but when they arrive, they approve – as testified by articles in broadsheet newspapers and glossy magazines, all stressing the fashionableness, independence, intellect and ethics of the proprietors. Such accounts bring into being what we might call a sexual elite: not a category of person within the social structure, but an identity represented through references to knowledge, taste, culture and experience, illuminating the élitism that Williams (1977) described as a structure of feeling. Hence, although linking indulgence and female consumption is not new, these toys and stores speak to a particular kind of consuming identity: highly-visible, middle-class consumers.

The boutiques may offer customers a more ‘thrilling’ experience as they shop, but this should not be confused with more liberated or more female-orientated potentials. Not all women and men have equal access to sexually explicit materials. In the UK, there are legal and less institutional structurings of the public settings of (hetero)sexual consumption along gender and class lines. Access to, and experience of, the (hetero)sexual public sphere is not undifferentiated. British culture is still deeply ambivalent about the expressions of sexuality of certain social classes, and thus an account of the experiences of sexual culture must explore differences without hierarchizing sexual expressions and desire.

Storr’s description of the satisfaction that Ann Summers’ customers draw from their purchases is particularly interesting here:

[P]arty goers regard Ann Summers parties as an opportunity to treat themselves to a non-essential purchase; in fact the meaning of the purchase is precisely that it is non-essential – that it is a luxury. (2003: 192)

Storr goes on to argue that such purchases cannot be viewed as aspirational; rather, they are a reaction *against* middle or upper-class tastes ‘as unacceptable, inappropriate, stuffy and boring ... Posh women can’t be “one of the girls”’ (2003: 197). This description indicates a class orientation to



sexuality not of these women's own making. In fact, it is in dialogue with practices of discrimination against working-class women and their sexual behaviours which have constructed them as repositories of hypersexualized behaviours, tacky tastes, excessive femininity and subservience to men (see for example, Lees, 1993; Skeggs, 1997). Increased accessibility is interesting but the availability of sex toys and retailing styles and practices also need examination because the practices of delineation between good and bad sex, 'better' erotica and 'bad' pornography are part of the conditions in which the experiential dimensions of sexual consumption are felt and can be understood.

This article has focused on the accoutrements of sexual experimentation and the discourses that surround them rather than the acts of sexual experimentation, and this is, of course, a key element missing from almost all discussions of sexually explicit materials. Future research needs to focus on the place of sex toys in women's lives and their actual practices of use and experimentation. Only then can the potentials of sexual consumption to change and improve women's experiences of sex (whether heterosexual, lesbian or solo) be assessed and understood. Ann Summers could be seen to offer versions of the ideology of heterosexuality as 'natural' and 'normal', perhaps contributing to the maintenance of the status quo in selling toys to take home to please 'hubby', but this would rule out discussion of sexual artefacts at just the moment that they really begin to matter: in the processes and experiences of consumption, after the product has been bought and made one's own. And indeed this is a particular problem with theories of consumption, which seem to stop at the point of purchase. Campbell's idea of the romantic consumer fits very easily with seemingly upmarket patterns of purchasing, but there is no reason to believe that the experimentation and playfulness that characterizes his notion of the active consumer is any less available to purchasers of a jelly willy from Ann Summers. Sex toys are material objects but they are also corporeal objects (used in and on the body) and increasingly, they are objects that are related intimately to our conceptions of sex, sexual and domestic relationships. They are objects for pleasure, but the kinds of pleasure that they make available are not considered. Research needs to address the ways in which sex toys are experienced as part of our personal and social lives. It might be difficult to undertake but not impossible; the pleasures (and displeasures are also likely) of sex toys could be examined through the ways in which toys are talked about, the meanings they have for their users, and in the narratives of their use.

## Notes

1. These products include magazines (*For Women*, *Playgirl* and, more recently, *Scarlet*), novels (Black Lace imprint), films (for example, Candida Royalle's *Femme Productions*), guides (such as *Sex Toys 101* and *Sex Tips for Girls*) as well as strip shows such as *The Chippendales*.





2. These are products sold by Clear Ecstasy: 'the highest quality artistic Pyrex glass dildos, dongs, glass sex toys, marital aids, anal probes, and butt plugs in the universe' (<http://www.clear ecstasy.com>).
3. In a number of interviews with retailers I have been told that the massive increase in demand for the 'Rabbit' was caused by its appearance in the 'Turtle and the Hare' episode of *Sex And The City*; waiting lists were often operated in order to meet demand.
4. There has been very little academic interest in this area of retailing and legislation, but see Manchester (1986, 1999), and CARE (1990; CARE is one of the leading campaigners against licensed sex shops). For discussion of the 'sex shops wars', see Hunt (1998), Killick (1994) and Thompson (1994); on Ann Summers shops, see Storr (2003).
5. Claims that there are more than 500 sex shops in the UK and numbers are increasing are not unusual. However, the number of licensed shops has altered hardly in the past two decades. The confusion probably arises because there are shops operating illegally (and temporarily) and because commentators mistake shops such as Ann Summers for licensed premises (they are not). For a list of licensed (and some unlicensed) shops, see the melonfarmers website (<http://www.melonfarmers.co.uk>).
6. Licences cost anything between £2000 and £25,000 per annum, depending upon location and the licensing council. These sums are, of course, in addition to any other operating costs such as local business tax and rent.
7. Soho's unique role as the English metropolitan sex capital is discussed in Mort (2004).
8. The '10 percent rule' has arisen as a result of the 'consists to a significant degree' element of the Miscellaneous Provisions Act 1982, whereby a licence is required if a significant proportion of stock and/or profits are sex-related. Individual local authorities have different views of what constitutes 'significant': Westminster City Council assesses in terms of shelf space and storage, with 10 percent of total stock comprising 'significant', but in Croydon the level is in excess of 20 percent of either stock or value. In the London Borough of Lambeth, the council attempted to set the standard at 10 or more sex articles, but Lord Justice Mustill ruled in the High Court that the law surely meant 'more than a trifling' amount (*Lambeth Borough Council v. Grewal* (1985) 84 LGR 538). The situation is complicated further by the fact that it is not always clear what constitutes a 'sex article' (see Manchester, 1999).
9. Maines (1999) describes the use of vibrating machines employed by doctors to 'cure' women of hysteria and other psychosexual ailments. Her history of vibrators as women's best-kept secrets has been challenged – were these therapies overtly sexual in intention and experience?
10. Put crudely, a man uses a rubber doll because he cannot get a real woman.
11. See Gaines (1995), Rich (1986), the collection of essays in Vance (1992) and the many works by Pat Califia (see e.g. Califia, 1980).
12. For example, the Vido Ultrawave is made of a pliable silicone and 'has a patented two motor system that oppose each other producing a completely new sensation' – throbbing rather than vibrating ([www.love2playtogether.co.uk](http://www.love2playtogether.co.uk)).



13. During an interview with Ben Wales, Sales Director of Vido Distribution, this phrase was used repeatedly to describe customers who are prepared to regularly spend upwards of £75 on an item. When asked to explain further, he described young (in outlook more than actual age) and affluent couples whose interests in sex went beyond orgasm and into the realms of self-discovery.
14. All the boutiques discussed here run websites.
15. The idea of hygiene is carried in many of these toys – transparency gives the ability to ‘see’ dirt and germs.

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