



Erotic retailing in the UK (1963-2003)

The view from the marketing mix

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to trace the changes in the retail outlets that supply erotic products and toys. It explores changes in attitude towards these products over the four decades under review.

Design/methodology/approach – The marketing mix (the 4Ps of marketing) is the lens through which the past and contemporary retail environment for such erotic products is examined.

Findings – What emerges from the story of the journey from backstreet to online is the change in attitude towards both shops and products, and the development of shops selling sexually-arousing products to women, a trend unique to the last decades of the twentieth century.

Originality/value – The combination of an historical approach and the theoretical concept of the marketing mix provides a fresh view of the under-researched area of erotic retailing.

Keywords Retailing, Marketing, Sexuality, History

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Erotic retailing is concerned with products and images that are sexually arousing, but not pornographic. The commercial opportunities for erotic retailing derive, in part, from the influence of earlier fashion trends, themselves derived from a revised feminist appraisal of sexuality in the 1960s and 1970s, punk in the 1970s, and the sports styles of the 1980s (Ehrenreich *et al.*, 1987; Evans and Thornton, 1989). From a broader sociological standpoint, the expansion of erotic retailing can thus be understood as an aspect of greater individualism, of identity or many identities, and of representation over reality (McNair, 1996).

The starting date of this review, 1963, was marked by the Beatle's first LP, and the publication of Frieden's (1963) book, *The Feminine Mystique*, which inspired the beginning of the Women's Liberation Movement through its attack on what Frieden labelled the cult of domesticity, which, she alleged, had reduced the independence and liberties gained by women during World War II, and had encouraged their return to the kitchen. By the end date, 2003, the definition of the erotic retailer causes us to rethink our approach to the contemporary retail environment.

The rest of the paper contains three main sections. The first discusses the historical development of sex shops, including the new sex shops and their neighbourhoods and electronic erotic retailing, through the lens of the marketing mix. The second section reviews the sex products being marketed – underwear, sex toys and items for



fetishism. In the third and final section, the threads of the argument are drawn together.

The history of sex shops through the lens of the marketing mix

According to Rafiq and Ahmed (1995) and McCarthy (1960) initially defined the elements in the marketing mix, the 4Ps, as the controllable variables that an organisation can co-ordinate to satisfy its target market. As such, they formed the various means for competition (Grönroos, 1997) to optimise the profit function through resource allocation. The four “Ps” of the marketing mix – product, place, promotion and price – are briefly described as follows (Copley, 2004):

- *Product.* The item or service being marketed, through its features, quality, benefits and quantities.
- *Price.* This includes the price of the item and product assortments and lines, price changes and payment methods.
- *Place.* The location where the product or service is available to the customer, including distribution channels.
- *Promotion.* Market communication is achieved by personal selling, advertising, direct marketing, public relations (PR), sales promotion and sponsorship.

Since 1960, the model has broadened beyond its origins in economic theory to encompass aspects of sociology and cognitive psychology (Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2005). Indeed, criticism of the 4Ps has centred on its inception in the production and supply context of the 1950s, and its appropriateness to later twentieth century marketing functions. Consequently, it has been extended with a further 3Ps of participants, process and physical evidence (Booms and Bitner, 1981), and an eighth P for personalisation, to reflect a services marketing orientation (Goldsmith, 1999). The growing importance of the political environment led Kotler (1984) to propose two additional Ps of political power and PR to the marketing mix. As marketing’s focus has moved to consumers and consumption, so it has arguably broadened into an integrated and networked approach to organisational resources (Brownlie and Saren, 1992). This has accompanied the decline of mass markets and growth of specialisation, supported by database management and customer relationship marketing principles, which evolved into the one-to-one marketing opportunities developed on the internet.

In spite of its deficiencies, the 4Ps remain a staple of the marketing mix. The subsequent Ps have yet to overcome a consensus about their eligibility and agreement over their practical application. Consequently, this research examines the 4Ps in a highly segmented market, the retailing of erotic underwear and toys for women that emerged at the end of the last century, in part a consequence of the “pornographication” of society and consumption (McNair, 2002). This market can be termed erotic retailing, one characterised by fashionable products and high service levels. In this context, it is important that firms are able to design and direct their activities according to the needs and desires of customers (Grönroos, 1997) as interactive resources, supported by – but not as separate elements – physical evidence and personnel.

Normally, product is considered first as the basic resource in the exchange process. However, place is a strongly integrative element. The small scale, highly localised

outlets appear to be important sources of knowledge, useful for product development and value creation (Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2005). The physical evidence dimension also finds strong support in the place, as the retailers emphasise the store environment, its colours, themes, lighting, and layout. The history of sex shops is discussed below within this context to demonstrate the development of the marketing concept.

Place

Beginnings and antecedents. A small number of shops, provided the main experience of erotic retailing in the early 1950s, and these sold pornographic material to men. Only five pornographic bookshops were acknowledged by the police in London's Soho in 1955, stocking mostly upmarket and expensive imports of books and poor quality film (Manchester, 1986). Store numbers grew in the 1960s due to the increasing affluence of prospective customers, social changes and more liberal attitudes towards private morality, starting in 1959 with the Obscene Publications Act. The laissez faire attitude of the metropolitan police to outlets selling pornography assisted this process.

The merchandise content changed during the 1960s after the Danes abolished prohibition on pornography. This was followed by the Swedes in the 1970s. Consequently, there was a big increase in shop numbers and a redefinition, too, of the shops as sex shops that reflected the broadening of their product ranges.

The first Ann Summers shop opened in London in 1970, and the second in Bristol. (The second would have been in Birmingham except for strong opposition from council and church groups). Lewisham and Manchester followed in 1971. The initial concept was to create a sex supermarket based on the German Beate Uhse stores, and selling a variety of "faintly illicit" marital aids, but also exotic lingerie, and contraceptives (*The Guardian*, 2003). The customers were mainly male, buying for their partners or themselves. Film booths showing erotic films were a successful element of these shops. Gold (1995), daughter of one of the owners and subsequently Chief Executive, found the early shops very seedy, ascribing her reaction to the environment rather than the product.

David Sullivan opened shops under the Private Shops name (from 1977 onwards through his company, Conegate) aiming for a store in every town with a population of more than 100,000 (Manchester, 1986). Sullivan achieved a rapid rise in numbers of his shops from 20 in 1980 to 120 in 1982. Locations were indiscriminate, in one case next to a register office, and Conegate often went to some trouble to disguise its purpose.

Sexually-oriented material could be openly displayed and often formed a front for more explicit material in the back of the shop. The design of such material was crude or anonymous, any graphic illustration dated, often portraying a male view of the female body as a grotesque "pin up" image.

In the UK, the licensing of sex shops was introduced in 1982, drawing a significant line between the shops selling "hard core" or pornographic material, and those selling sex toys and erotic "soft porn", with defined areas for adults only.

Traditional men's licensed sex shops, typified by the private shops chain of stores, still provide hardcore material in the back streets of London and provincial towns. Their easily-recognisable "design style" is one of blacked-out windows, and minimal shop front graphics. Even so, there are rarely more than two to three stores as such, and no other concentration of specialist erotic retailing comparable to London's Soho,

which remains a uniquely-themed neighbourhood, despite efforts to rebrand it, and periodical attempts by local government to clean it up. During the 1990s, male erotic entertainment has been less concerned with retailing and more concerned with entertainment. Lap dancing clubs have proliferated, expanding from 3 to 38 clubs in London between 1997 and 1999, and extending throughout the country by the end of the decade (Doward, 1999). The place of the marketing mix has changed from product-driven to customer-oriented, in which the physical environment is an integral part of the experience.

New places – erotic stores for women. The environmental theme is evident in the development of the new retailing of erotic products to women. This followed changes to the feminist agenda of the 1970s and coincided with the redefining of female sexuality and gaze during the 1980s and 1990s (Nussbaum, 1995). Until the 1990s, Ann Summers shops and parties dominated the retailing of erotic merchandise for women. This is not to say that they were the only shops, but that the others tended to be stand-alone designer-owned shops. The leading shop for punk was Vivienne Westwood's in Kings Road, Chelsea, which went under many names but most famously in 1974, *Sex*. It reproduced the secrecy of the "sex shop", its window blanked out, but with a little hole to peep in at porn T-shirts, and rubber wear under an ironic sex fascia. Erotic lingerie could be bought from Janet Reger's workshop in Paddington and her shop in Beauchamp Place in London during the 1970s. However, the opportunity for women to look at more explicit clothing, sex aids (by the mid-1990s, renamed sex toys) and sexy novelties was extremely limited.

In this respect, Ann Summers has been an object of curiosity for over 30 years. The first shop opened in Marylebone in London and sold exotic lingerie, contraceptives and sex aids. This was at variance to the parties which were launched by Jacqueline Gold herself ten years later, and which focused from the outset on pretty, but sexy, underwear. Women were recruited to organise private parties in their homes from which to sell Ann Summers products to other predominantly lower class women. Gold (1995, p. 25) commented that:

... my friends were all saying we want to be able to buy sexy underwear, but we don't want to go into a sex shop.

This formula worked extremely well so that, by 2003, women made up 70 per cent of the company's customers, compared to 10 per cent when Gold took over (Adley, 2003). Some criticism still exists that Ann Summers is aimed at a female market, but still sells male-orientated products.

The front of the store displayed underwear and suggestive accessories, while the more explicit material, including books and videos, were in a restricted area to the rear of the shop. The window displays were attractive, and the design of the stores bright and clean, the antithesis of the sleazy "book shops" of the 1960s, and the early sex shops of the 1970s. The change in style, since the 1980s, is evident in the catalogues. The 1983 catalogue shows models in "come and get it" poses, very much in a soft porn style. However by 1995, the white underwear and fur coats had been replaced by a more sophisticated look, sultry black basques, strings and knickers. This approach to product-planning with a female-friendly store environment and layouts, led to the roll-out of Ann Summers stores in the early 2000s into primary retail locations throughout the UK.

This clarity of store design was shared in 2002 by the, albeit short-lived, arrival in the UK of Beata Uhse. Although the German stores have an explicit design and pornographic merchandise content, their first store in suburban Sutton in Surrey recreated the style of a Knickerbox style specialist underwear shop. Windows featured a limited range of contemporary, erotic underwear and large, suggestive posters (of fruit) with few references to sex products. Inside, the clothing is displayed off standardised units, which become more specialised until false fur and leather finally give way to sex toys which are discretely, almost apologetically, hidden in a rear alcove. Another new chain of shops, Harmony, suggests a more designed approach from the outside, using a bright red theme, although the interior design and merchandise are designed for traditional male customers.

This stands in contrast to an altogether different type of erotic retailer that appeared earlier in the 1990s. In 1992, Katherine Hoyle[1] and Sophie Walters set up Sh!, which is primarily a shop for women, but men are allowed in, if accompanied by a woman. In this environment “women are supposed to inspire lust rather than experience it” (Malina and Schmidt, 1997, p. 353). Therefore, the emergence of concept shops such as US-based Good Vibrations, and its UK counterpart Sh!, are challenges to the traditional notion of sex shops as male domains. Sex shops targeted exclusively at women can be seen as a new and ground-breaking phenomenon. The new female focus on sex shops has altered both the design of shops and the products they sell. Described as a women’s erotic emporium, the new-style store offers sex toys and accessories in a relaxed and unpretentious environment, where staff are happy to offer advice over a cup of tea. The emphasis is on fun and enjoyment of safe sex, reflected in the presentation of the products.

The exterior of the original Sh! shop does not reflect the pleasant bright interior, painted black and without windows, the only clue as to the nature of the store is the pink sign placed prominently on the pavement outside. It is situated in a back street in Hoxton, in the east end of London, an area reminiscent of early shabby sex shop locations, but one that is rapidly being “gentrified” by speculative developers. The store itself has moved to premises opposite the original building, with a more open glazed frontage, although the windows are not open to the street. The interior design of the shop reflects the company’s relaxed approach philosophy. The impression is of a bazaar or market where the brightly-coloured goods are displayed randomly about the room, with little attention to modern design or hard sell display. The interior is designed to promote customer interaction, the creation of a “female playspace”, combining staff, customers and environment (Malina and Schmidt, 1997). Although Sh! records that it has been frequently asked about franchising its operations, it has been reluctant to lose control. Nevertheless, the store format is replicable, and it is surprising that many more imitators have not appeared.

During the 1990s, exotic underwear retailers appeared and seemingly flourished in the more fashionable areas of London and the provinces. The porno-chic, design-led retailer, appealing to an affluent customer, has extended its erotic remit. Agent Provocateur opened in 1994 in the re-vitalised central London location of Soho, and aimed to create high quality lingerie with “creative flair to stimulate, enchant and arouse both wearers and their partners” (Agent Provocateur, 2003). The company projected an image that it catered for aggressive, self-confident women, unafraid of their sexuality.

Coco de Mer opened in 2001 in London's Covent Garden. Owned and designed by Sam Roddick, Anita Roddick's son, the shop has the feel of a Victorian domestic interior. The shop, like many others, initially appears to be a lingerie shop. Dark red walls and nineteenth century props, including a chastity belt, set the scene. The environment suggests fun and period naughtiness, reminiscent of the fictional exploits of Tom Jones or Fanny Hill, and is well-suited to its location close to the Opera House and Covent Garden Market. The centre of the store displays some sex toys and erotic jewellery in a glass case that functions as a counter and cash point; the more explicit products are sold towards the rear of the shop.

In contrast to Coco de Mer, Myla, established in the same year in London's Notting Hill, is housed in a modern minimalist store. The exterior is largely glass, displaying high-quality lingerie in open-backed windows. The colour scheme is grey and white, and apart from the security lock on the door, could be merely an expensive underwear store. The products have found more mainstream outlets too. Myla gained a concession in Selfridges within weeks of opening in West London, and the "Bone" vibrator was featured in both Selfridges's and Liberty's Christmas window displays in 2002. During May 2003, as part of their month long "Body" promotion, Selfridges opened an over-18s basement, featuring outlets such as Sh!, Myla and designer, Shiri Zin. Tattooing and piercing, which increasingly appear as peripheral services to erotic retailing, were also represented, and are now a permanent feature in Selfridge's London store.

Mirroring the success of the cosmopolitan erotic retailers, less exotic outlets have opened in the provinces. Tickled, was established in Brighton in 2002 in a former beauty salon, and was opened following a successful web site enterprise. Lingerie displays are the most prominent, while erotic literature and sex toys are in an "18 only" area. Gash was set up in Sheffield in the same year, offering products to do with sexuality, in a store environment that is "contemporary cool", with oyster walls and silver ceilings (Moore, 2003).

Unique, personal products and services are particularly suited to e-retailing. Not surprisingly, online sex shops selling to women have expanded to offer marginally differentiated ranges and services. Typically, the products are organised around sex toys and accessories, books, videos, clothing and advisory sections. These last two categories frequently define the type of site, with clothing creating a more commercial, sex shop environment, and more extensive advisory headings indicating a didactic intention. In keeping with e-retailing, sex toys and accessories form an extensive part of the online product range, and tend to be products that fit easily through the letter-box. The exact number trading in the UK can only be estimated, but the following typify the market: the educators, traditional sex shops online, designer shops, and mixed online and physical retailing.

Product

Erotic products.

Lingerie. The changing designs of women's lingerie can be seen to run parallel to the development of erotic retailing, the attitudes of women towards sex shops, and the attitude of erotic retailers towards their customers. Its fascination arises in that, in the normal course of events, underwear is not worn to be on show or displayed. There is a double meaning of underwear; it covers up and acts as a sexual signal or substitute for beauty of the body or (for fetishists) becomes the sexual object itself. The selling of

erotic merchandise has provided greater ambiguity and diversity to mysterious and compelling places, and concealment of desires. The use of colour and material have become progressively sophisticated, aiding narcissistic pleasure and intimate gaze (Cox, 2000).

In the 1960s, feminists condemned the “false femininity” constructed by dress, fashion and cosmetics, and so liberation and search of authentic self meant taking “femininity” off (Evans and Thornton, 1989). The beginnings of an escape from the male domination of underwear designed for the male gaze and objectification of women can be found in the self-expression evident in the design of the 1964 “no bra” bra that continued a “no look” into the next decade (Benson and Esten, 1996). Restraining garments were rejected; a trend defined by the street rather than the salon, and one which continental designers at least saw as androgynous (Bertherat and de Halleux, 1996).

By the 1980s, lingerie had made its comeback, and for the first time, was designed to be on display. More exotic bras, corsetry and a return to silk and embroidery was designed to seduce, for self-pleasure (Bertherat and de Halleux, 1996). Under the influence of the 1970s punk fashion, “tarty” design and fetishist features became acceptable. Dance and sportswear, too, became significant influences on minimal and technical design. These developments led to three critical directions in the creation of erotic lingerie and its acceptance by consumers – Reger’s sensual style, punk, and sportswear.

In the UK, Janet Reger had a significant role to play in the development of fantasy dressing and the use of high quality materials and manufacture. Although she had been designing radical co-ordinates from the early 1950s, it was in the 1960s that she achieved commercial success. Dressing for sex was typified in Janet Reger’s 1977 catalogue, which depicted sexy lingerie as part of the fantasy courtesan’s syndrome of the sexy executive (Cox, 2000).

Punk first appeared in 1976 as anti-fashion, sado-masochistic gear, creating a difficult-to-follow, extreme fashion, never escaping its “pervy” reputation (Polhemus, 1996). Punk was tough, menacing, and featured belts, straps, and chains, thus containing connotations of the forbidden. It stood as a challenge to high fashion through its appropriation of flashy, cheap, tacky fluorescent colours. Because of its eclectic use of the artificial and disposable, punk had a particular enthusiasm for rubber and PVC, fishnets, plastic stilettos, and dyed hair. Deliberate amateurishness developed a rich eclecticism of “bricolage”.

Punk combined images of prostitution and fetishism, and confused sexual messages afforded by mass fashion. In other words, punk confounded and manipulated sexual clichés. Furthermore, it ambiguously exploited the pornographic discourse in a manner that at the time was seen as “unnerving”. But punk’s “sexy” fashion for women as “oppositional” could be, and was, absorbed and converted. The vocabulary of sexual rebellion could be returned to sexual conformity – by 1979 Nat West used a red leather-clad “bad” girl in a series of advertisements (*The Sunday Times*, 1978).

The “sports and exercise” phenomenon of the early 1980s (Benson and Esten, 1996) created a third trend in erotic design. It allowed a more mainstream acceptance of minimal dressing under and around which a body could be shown off. Aerobics created a body to be sure of, a firm body from the inside. Consequently, long legs, stomachs and limbs could be emphasised (Bertherat and de Halleux, 1996). Moore (1989)

demonstrates how leotards quickly became more exciting and stylish in terms of higher leg cut, lower necklines, new colours and materials. Dancewear designs, based on fashion and comfort by the end of the 1980s, would lead the way to a wider acceptance of the G-string in the 1990s, and more widely, black as a respectable colour for underwear.

The 1990s were characterized by confident post-feminist attitudes as women turned their gaze on their own sexuality, its imagery and discourses. Fear of AIDS receded, and intimacy and personal contact became acceptable. In this context, lingerie moved out of the bedroom (Cox, 2000) and the media provided many opportunities for a “striptease culture” to develop (McNair, 2002). Design-led competition led to improvements in design, especially in comfort, smooth, futuristic and pneumatic styling (Cox, 2000). A little “nipple showing” came to be accepted in mainstream fashion, as did a lot of “brand showing”, especially Calvin Klein, which provided another way of using underwear to promote self-image as well as to focus attention on erotic areas of the body below the waistband.

By 1995, lingerie embraced porn-chic and S + M, with fetish garments from leather, rubber and PVC taken from the catwalks. Lingerie’s fabrics came to mirror the feel of idealised flesh, and provide private pleasures. Hedonism could be enjoyed at an earthier level too. Jacqueline Gold said of Ann Summers, “We are more than a lingerie shop. It’s more of a naughty laugh than anything seedy, but it’s also more fun than a normal lingerie store” (Adley, 2003, p. 2). Women, it was discovered, wanted to “feel nice underneath . . . to feel sexy too” (Wavell, 1993, p. 4), to enjoy a luxurious treat suggestive of an elusive erotic golden age (Storr, 2003; Wilson-Kovacs, 2001).

Sex toys. Product development in this market has not been exclusively focussed on underwear. Sex toys, primarily vibrators, have undergone a transformation both in terms of form and function. Originating in the nineteenth century as a medical cure for so-called female hysteria (namely, the experience of orgasm) by the beginning of the twentieth century, a variety of vibrating and massaging machines – including portable models – was being produced commercially. Beauty parlours exploited the new business opportunity to treat hysteria, despite the criticism of physicians who claimed that the equipment used was capable of little more than “titillating” the tissues (Maines, 1999). By 1918, the Sears Roebuck electrical goods catalogue alone advertised six models of vibrator. Such products were advertised as massage devices, their design resembling the domestic products that were illustrated alongside them.

However, the 1920s saw a decline in the medical use of vibrators as Freudian psychoanalysis provided an alternative explanation of hysteria, and they disappeared from respectable publications in the US from the 1930s until the 1970s (Maines, 1999). But they were certainly available; in Germany, Beate Uhse had been selling marital aids and erotic literature since the end of the Second World War.

The old male-dominated designs, beige plastic vibrators, are now appearing on market stalls alongside other out-of-date goods. Designs in the 1990s began to move on from fake phalluses, powered by noisy motors. By the mid-1990s, the sex “aid” became sex “toy”. Female customers are no longer content to buy cold, plastic phallic devices, and these have been replaced by brightly-coloured silicone dildos and vibrators designed for comfort and amusement, rather than merely imitating a phallic shape. The most successful has been the Rampant Rabbit, promoted in the television programme *Sex and the City*, and which Ann Summers alone claims to have sold over

one million. Its enthusiastic endorsement by *Good Housekeeping* in 2003 confirms its place in the mainstream of contemporary awareness, and arguably gives it an iconic design status.

Smaller shapes, different colours, materials and attachments have come to provide a wide range of experiences (Cox, 2003). However, designer sex toys follow their own design process and interpretation of form and function, escaping the parody of the dismembered male organ. Whilst the introduction of colours had provided the most obvious break with reality, new products demonstrate greater abstraction, focusing on the functionality and reinforcing the individual style sense of the owner.

By 2002, the designer vibrator arrived. Semler and Hampson, owners of Myla commissioned habitat designer Tom Dixon to design vibrators for the company. The “Bone”, which has been described as resembling a shoehorn, is carved from black mountain crystal. Myla’s other series of exotic sex toys were designed by Marc Newson and sculptors Mari Ruth Oda and Tara Cottan, and resemble large seed pods or cream buns. Crystal and silver dildos designed by Shiri Zinn, a graduate of St Martin’s School of Art, are aimed at the celebrity market, and sell on commission from £2,000 (Moore, 2003). Products are designed in glass, perspex and silicone, as well as more conventional materials, and shapes are more abstract, as designers address issues of functionality and playfulness. Such abstract designs and expensive materials broaden the market for these personal objects as presents.

Fetish products. Personal pleasure could be found in other ways. Fetishism concerns sexual arousal or gratification through an erotic attachment to inanimate objects or asexual body parts (Ellen, 1988). Where sexuality is used to give fashion meaning, clothes function as a mild form of fetishism (Gamman and Makinen, 1994). Kunzle (1982), in his study of fashion and fetishism, highlights the practice of tight – lacing in the nineteenth century, and the pleasures to be had from other forms of constriction such as tight boots. He quotes correspondence from the family doctor of the “exquisite sensation of pleasurable excitement” (p. 63) while riding in tightly-laced corsets to demonstrate that women were clearly not merely tight-lacing to please men but to please themselves. By the 1960s, fashion magazines enabled readers to participate in vagaries of fashion (Benson and Esten, 1996). But the opportunity to buy corsets extended during the 1980s, bringing with it a postmodern use of historical imagery to make play with traditional values of sexual subjection.

By the 1990s, this notion of fetishism became a significant part of clubland, for example, the “rubber nipple club”, and an appropriation of all that is “weird and wonderful” (and recyclable) in western culture. PVC and leather merchandise increased as S + M could now be proudly flaunted. Fetishism was even said to have been institutionalised, representing estrangement or liberation from the real world (Polhemus, 1996). Even baby spice claimed to like PVC knickers (Clarke, 1997). The soft red and yellow leather harnesses found in Sh! answer the demands of women wanting designs that are comfortable and fun. Fantasy clothing, such as maids’ outfits, still find a limited place at Ann Summers shops and parties.

Promotion

The promotion elements of the erotic retailing marketing mix provide insights into the communication of the companies’ objectives. Media commentary has been intense, creating a high profile role for PR. Press coverage has focused on two

aspects – product design and the marketing concept of the retailers, and also on a broader discussion of sexual mores and motivations for buying. Janet Reger's style appealed to the celebrity world of the 1960s, fashion journalists and popular stars including Bianca Jagger and Angie Bowie, searching out "a cornucopia of pretty, feminine lingerie" (Reger and Flack, 1991, p. 49). Sales at Ann Summers during the 1990s demonstrate the strong influence that cinema has had on erotic fashion. Satin and leather thong sales leapt in Glasgow following the screening of the film *The Full Monty* (Clarke, 1997) whilst the films *Moulin Rouge* and *Eyes Wide Shut* had the same effect on sales of basques and lacy bras in Belfast (Calder, 2001). The owner-managers themselves provide excellent PR through their creative and entrepreneurial involvement in the businesses. A major fashion theme for 1995 combined glamour with soft porn. In this context, Agent Provocateur proclaimed its new range at London Fashion Week with the "More S + M, less M&S" slogan.

The visibility of stores, new store openings in prime trading locations, and their acceptance in society has formed a separate theme in the media. The ensuing discussion successfully raised awareness of Ann Summers, notably in the case of its Dublin city centre store opening. That journalists can combine interview with observation of the stores and products themselves, provides an extensive variety of insights into, and observations of, sex.

The retail marketing positioning of the products and the stores, however, does not lend itself to communications strategies in which advertising, sales promotion, or sponsorship play a significant part. An emphasis on low-cost promotional activities is shared with other retail SME operations in an early stage of development. A limited number of shops, competition for resource allocation, and negligible promotional budgets constrain higher cost promotions, advertising in particular. Sales promotion is limited to loyalty schemes, seasonal price reduction and, to a small extent, multi-buy discounting, which reflect the highly-segmented market and type of product sold. Personal selling is advisory for fitting, and guidance for usage. The internet offers similar promotional opportunities as a low-involvement showcase for products but one which also dispenses discreet advice and information about new and sale line products. It is a valuable medium too, for direct marketing through its online membership schemes. The Agent Provocateur AP Club occupies a distinct location within its web site, and e-mail facilities.

Price

Price is determined by interactions between retailer and customer. It is embedded in the structure of its producer and user sides (Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2005). The producer side of erotic lingerie is characterised by specialised production in relatively small quantities, to exclusive designs. Although the products are not promoted as exclusive designs, the Ann Summers ranges nevertheless share a luxurious image with the smaller retailers, and are perceived to be expensive by its customers (Storr, 2003). The sex toys and accessories have a dual supply chain of mass-produced goods, sourced from the far east, and designer merchandise, made in a small scale and with a tendency to European production.

Erotic retail pricing is best understood from a market pricing perspective. Prices are high in a market where comparison shopping for underwear refers to other designer brands and luxury merchandise, sustained by high perceived consumer value. The sex

toys at Coco de Mer form only a small percentage of the product range, but are distinguished by their design and price, from £5 to £1,600. In keeping with Coco de Mer, Myla prices range from £149 to £2,500. Cost does not appear to be important to Myla customers. "In fact, the more expensive the better, since this is what defines and elevates it, what wipes away the sleaze" (Moore, 2003, p. 22). Outside central London, prices from around £25 are more accessible to a wider market. The concept of reference pricing is difficult to apply to sex toys because of their specialised distribution and in-store merchandising which emphasise product features over price. Online comparison shopping does not provide any discounting or promotional activity which contributes to the relatively stable price structures and competitive environment. Such high prices are needed to produce revenue to cover the high cost base of their prime locations, and product and staffing levels, but value is created by the interactivity of the resources in the marketing mix. In other words, benefits are created through the exclusive or central choice of location, the design of the shop interior and web site, the product design and quality, and the high levels of service and personal communication.

Conclusion

The gradual breaking down, through the media, of taboos associated with sex and pleasure has helped to create a new market of affluent women wanting retail outlets where sex toys, lingerie and erotic material could be purchased over the counter. It was becoming clear that women especially wanted to be able to shop in places where they felt confident and were able to ask questions without the restraint imposed by a public space. It is now possible not only to look at erotic underwear, but also to touch and wear many designs and colours, in environments which encourage interactivity. Increasingly, sex toys also provide an experiential role. Design has played an essential part of this process. Re-assessment of the function of sex toys and new product designs have changed attitudes to sexual pleasures and the nature of erotic retailing. For women, the application of new store design concepts has turned an area previously perceived as sleazy into one that is both acceptable and desirable. These exclusive product designs and store concepts support the generally high price points found in this market.

The ease of women looking at women, not dressing up for men, and for all women to feel sexy, is the achievement of these specialist shops, and their influence on more mainstream stores selling underwear as part of a wider product assortment. The promotion of eroticism in the marketing mix has relied on the visual cues of product and place, their connotations and media interest in "selling sex". Attractive shop windows and the displays of merchandise can be used ironically or not, laughed at publicly, and taken seriously in private. The media have relentlessly excited interest in erotic retailing, whilst simultaneously repressing it. At least, the automatic association of "naughty" and "sex shop" does seem to have diminished in the media in recent years, and the appearance of designer sex toys has enabled them to be discussed more seriously.

The new women's erotic retailing appears to be growing rapidly enough to suggest that intimate enjoyment and sexual pleasure are there to be experienced rather than passively gazed at. Such experiential environments support arguments for the integrated planning of variables in the marketing mix. Moreover, they affirm the need for retail marketers to seek sources of value from outside the firm. This can be

demonstrated in the value derived from the media's interest in sex, through marketing communications and new product planning, through accessible primary store locations, concessions and promotions. Such transference of ideas, images and products has made eroticism visible in the wider retail environment, and has enabled it to become an acceptable part of the retail marketing mix.

Note

1. Information from an interview with Hoyle and Walters, held on the premises of Shl on 3rd December 2002.

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