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Pornography and Erotica: Definitions and Prevalence

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Abstract

In this paper, we offer some observations regarding the sex industry, in particular the pornography and erotica sectors. Marketing literature observing pornography and erotica is scant. We find that following exponential growth of the sex industry (given use of the Internet) an evaluation of consumer behaviour and marketing practices is justified. In order to begin a study of these industry sectors, we find it necessary to define both pornography and erotica. Following the development of definitions, we consider these industries from a marketing perspective in the hope that we may encourage research into these areas.

Introduction: The Significance of the Sex Industry

Two recent newspaper articles have caught our attention. The first related the activities of a New York charitable organisation's accountant who used his foundation's credit and cheque facilities in part to pay \$11,000 to a dominatrix in Columbus, Ohio (Associated Press, 2006). He had found the lady concerned - of course - through the Internet. The second piece reported on the auction in Paris of the 1,200 item collection of the Gérard Nordmann Library (Aslet, 2006). This collection of erotica dating from the sixteenth century to the present was auctioned by Christie's and apparently rivals that of the Vatican. What these articles have in common is that they each show the fascination that human sexuality provides at both the individual and macrosocial levels. An entire industry has developed in order to entertain people and cater to their interests in sexual activity and expression.

The sex industry - with all its many facets - generates enormous profits. In one of its more benign forms, it is estimated that by 2009 adult content distributed by mobile phone will have a total value of \$2.1 billion (Holden, 2005). At its most malevolent, we know that it accounts for nearly three quarters of a million women and children being moved across international borders annually as slaves to a sex industry worth upwards of \$4 billion per year (Office of the Attorney General, 2006; Southwell, 2002).

It has been estimated that the global sex industry generates between \$30 billion and \$50 billion per annum in sales (Hughes, 2000). In 1983, this segment was estimated to produce annual revenue of \$8 billion in the United States alone (Cowan et al., 1988; Pornography Resource Center, 1984). By the turn of the century this at least doubled (Lane, 2000). In terms of distribution and penetration, the American industry produced 10,000 feature films in 1999 (Slade, 2001), and constitutes about 14% of the video rental and sales business, as well as more than half of the pay-per-view hotel video market (Economist, 1997). Americans spend in excess of \$4 billion per annum on pornographic and erotic videos and DVDs (Egan, 2000). With regards to novels, 26 erotica titles had sales of more than 11,000 copies each in 2005 (Patrick, 2006), prompting some of the big romance novel publishers to now diversify into this area (Dang, 2006). In 1996 on the World Wide Web there were 5,000 commercial pornography/erotica sites operating in the USA, and by 1999 there were 30,000, generating

between \$150 and \$200 million per annum for the most successful (Morias, Nelson and LaFranco, 1999). It is alleged that 43% of Internet traffic goes to a sexually explicit site (Tedesco, 1998). In fact, these sites apparently represent the most frequently visited online, particularly for young males aged 15 to 25 who use the Internet as their primary source of pornography (Häggström-Nordin, Hansson and Tyden, 2005; Wallmyr and Welin, 2006).

The size of this industry and the speed at which it has developed is remarkable. Equally remarkable is that, despite its growth, academics in the business disciplines (including marketing) have been slow to respond with examination and investigation of the industry. Pornography and erotica are almost always discussed in terms of being harmful (Attwood, 2002). Because of this, there has been a commonly extreme and hysterical reaction to discussion of the topic (in particular where it relates to children) which makes reasoned discussion and research difficult (Bauserman, 2003; Jenkins, 2001). Equally, this may make publication of such work difficult from an editorial perspective. We begin important work on this topic by offering definitions of pornography and erotica, before proceeding to an overview of key marketing strengths of these sectors.

Defining Pornography and Erotica

There is general agreement across disciplines that there are difficulties in defining pornography and erotica (Cameron, 2005; Rea, 2001; Slade, 2001). One needs only to consider Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's attempt to define pornography in 1964 with the phrase, "I know it when I see it" (cf. Gewirtz, 1996) to illustrate the point. The word pornography has been used as a generally disparaging descriptor for many objects in human history including, for example: frescoes, statues, texts (including Shakespeare) and other media (Attwood, 2002; Kendrick, 1987). Interestingly, when these things are described as pornographic, they tend not to be described as erotic also. This suggests that the two concepts may be different conceptually, rather than being at different points on a continuum.

One difficulty that occurs when trying to define pornography is that any acknowledgement of moral or artistic sensibilities is necessarily bound by social values. To distinguish pornography from some other product or expression requires the definition to be placed within the changing contexts of society as a whole (Attwood, 2002). Because of this, we should consider that a cultural or sub-cultural deeming of what is pornographic does more to identify cultural or sub-cultural values and norms than it does pornography or erotica (cf. Attwood, 2002; Kendrick, 1987; Kipnis, 1999; Lumby, 1997). This leads us to observe that it may well be that what constitutes pornography and erotica varies not only between groups, but also between individuals within a group. It is also likely to vary with the passing of time - what was considered pornographic perhaps in the early 1900s may now be considered erotic, or even slightly foolish.

Most legal definitions of obscenity (including pornography) relate to the use of the material and its intended purpose on the part of its creator. Social science research however has tended toward the content basis of the material in question (Fisher and Barak, 1991). Li (2000) for example defines pornography as "material that presents sexual content of some sort with the intent of being arousing". Each of these positions suggests a universal - or at least cultural - norm. Hence, one can find listed categories of pornography: violent, depicting and endorsing sexual violence and coercion, usually but not solely against women (Donnerstein and Berkowitz, 1981; Fisher and Barak, 1989); degrading, in which the material debases and dehumanises without the use of violence (Zillmann and Bryant, 1984); and (as a sub-element

of pornography) erotica, presenting non-violent, non-degrading, consensual sex (Fisher and Barak, 1989, 1991). Note that these definitions all suggest the portrayal of sexual activity. We do not believe this to be a necessary pre-condition of either pornography or erotica. In fact, in the case of erotica, we would argue that simple or implied nudity could be a sufficient condition to enter the category, though not in all cases. Further, it has been disputed that pornography always exists given the specific agenda of the creator to intend the material to be erotic or pornographic. In the case of child pornography, research conducted has revealed that pictures may range from “accidental pictures involving either no overt erotic content, or minimal content...” (Taylor, Holland and Quayle, 2001, p.100). The users, in that specific case, see erotica where none has been intended, or indeed produced. It is recognised then that a viewer or user may perceive sexuality to be expressed in material being communicated, whether or not sexually explicit material has been presented (Oswell, 2006).

This brings socialised perceptions to the foreground again. Further to the above discussion of culture and sub-cultures, we acknowledge gendered perceptions and class-based differences in perception and use of pornography (Berkowitz, 2006; Lo and Wei, 2002; Træen, Spitznogle and Beverfjord, 2004). Approaching pornography particularly from a marketing context we find it imperative to consider the consumer perspective in product purchase and use. The definition proposed later in this paper, however, is from a practitioner-based, rather than a consumer perspective.

This brings us to the problem of how to discern between different qualities of the communication of sexuality and nudity. Eck (2001) argues that there are four essential areas in which these can be expressed: art, pornography/erotica, information and marketing communications. We suggest that there are in fact five: art (as in literature, the visual and performing arts or electronic arts), intentional pornography, intentional erotica (both of these categories being electronic, photographic or literature based), information (as in medical texts) and marketing communications. The reason that we separate out intentional pornography and erotica is that any of the other forms of communication may well be either pornographic or erotic to different individuals, whether or not they were so intended by the creator.

Confusion as to whether material is pornographic, erotic or artistic occurs when the boundaries between art and erotica are blurred, creating difficulty for the individual in classifying images they might see. As noted previously, this may be the result of gender, class, or the socialisation of norms or values. Alternatively, it may be a function of the “framing effect” whereby context usually allows us to accurately perceive the message or activity being depicted. Essentially, the frame - not its content - provides the meaning (Davis, 1983; Zerubavel, 1991). For example, the photo of a nude and pregnant Demi Moore on the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine caused debate, principally because of its location, not its merits (Eck, 2001). Following from this, it is logical to suggest that norms of pornography and erotica are difficult to establish based on content alone and that context is a vital ingredient of any definition.

Interestingly, it is a philosopher who has provided one of the more comprehensive definitions of pornography. Rea (2001) argues that for an object to be pornographic, it must be 1) a communication material wherein its user desires to be sexually aroused or gratified by the object, 2) it must be devoid of intimacy or any other purpose in its use and, 3) it must be reasonable (on the part of its creator) to believe the object could be used for arousal or gratification by an audience. This definition is consistent with those offered by Soble (1985),

Narveson (1993), and Olen, Barry and Van Camp (2005). It is in contrast with others that involve, for example, a profit motive (Huer, 1987), lack of artistic value (Berger, 1977), sexual objectification (McElroy, 1995; Smith and Waisberg, 1985), or degradation (Longino, 1980).

Rea's definition is of pornography only and, we argue, erotica and pornography are different constructs. We suggest that the key lies in Rea's second requirement, that of intimacy. Pornography, according to this requirement, is viewed and used alone, not in company with others. This notion was supported by Rolph as early as 1961 who suggested pornography is "a lonely indulgence" (p.103). It seems to us that material which could be viewed as pornographic when used alone, would acquire a different meaning when viewed in company. To illustrate, we refer to some participant observation research by Frank (2003). This researcher worked as a nude dancer in a striptease establishment and conducted depth interviews with patrons. Her findings indicated that the primary motivations for attendance at the facility involved expressing one's masculinity and relaxation. Sexual gratification - through intercourse or masturbation - was not a motivating factor. Instead, the displayed performances were part of an intimacy generating experience between males. The performances might have been erotic but not, using Rea's definition, pornographic.

Likewise, Kovetz's (2006) discussion of pornography and erotica, and specifically women's erotic fiction, lends support to a distinction between the pornography and erotica constructs. She claims, "The line between erotica and porn isn't thin or fragile... Erotica is to pornography as a portrait is to a cartoon" (p.74). Kovetz distinguishes between the two along the same dimension which we propose - that of intimacy. She claims that while erotica humanises sex, pornography dehumanises it.

A further and more prosaic definition of pornography also conforms to that of Rea, describing it as "...an aphrodisiac, that is, food for the sexual fantasy of persons - mostly males - who like to masturbate..." (Kutchinsky, 1991, p.62). This definition places the purpose of the user of the material at the core of what constitutes pornography, and allows for the material to be of a type that other individuals would find neither erotic nor pornographic. It certainly emphasises the intimacy contention.

From the foregoing discussion we offer the following definitions of intentional pornography and erotica:

Intentional pornography is a communication material provided for the purpose of sexually arousing or gratifying a user in isolation from others.

Intentional erotica is a communication material provided for the purpose of arousing or titillating individuals who will consume it in company.

We acknowledge that many things may be pornographic or erotic that were never intended to be so. What we are discussing in this paper is where the business intends the material to serve a specific function.

From a Marketing Perspective

It follows from the previous discussion that businesses involved in intentional pornography and erotica to derive profit are in different industries, even though they may well be the same

businesses operating in different sectors. The major areas of marketing interest in their operations are in the means of selecting and targeting consumers, in distribution and promotions. When we realise a product used as pornographic by an individual may also be used by a couple as an item of erotica, we recognise the potential complexity involved in reaching consumers. It is plausible to assume that what one group may regard as an obscene purpose (or product), for another will be regarded as a harmless amusement. Overlap in promotions, or attempts to differentiate along particular lines, may have the potential consequence of alienating an otherwise profitable market segment. There is no indication that pornographers and producers of erotica have encountered difficulties in reaching viable segments, on the contrary, continued growth in sales and viewing would indicate the opposite.

Surprisingly, the pornography and erotica industries have much to teach us about effective marketing. As well as their proficiency in effective targeting, the erotica and pornography industries are particularly adept at distribution. By 1997 pornography accounted for 1.5% of all telephone traffic with an annual turnover of around \$2 billion (Economist, 1997). Because of revenue sharing between country of origin and a call's destination, in the first half of the 1990's Guyana saw a compound annual growth rate of incoming calls that turned into an income of \$130 million, or 40% of that country's GDP (Economist, 1997). As well as growing telephone technologies, these industries took a major role in the development of the Internet including cyber-payment, affiliate programs and streaming video (Perdue, 2000). In fact, most modern communications media - including call centres; the mobile phone for voice, text and pictures; cheap and rapid printing; post cards - were all either tried first or sometimes developed by adult entertainment businesses (Cameron, 2005; Economist, 1997; Schwartz, 2004). Such businesses have also managed to effectively battle piracy (Schwartz, 2004) through recognition that cheap availability is the key to success, and the subsequent development of appropriate pricing strategies. This is something that Hollywood continues to fight (Anonymous, 1996; Pang, 2004).

For Hollywood in particular there may be lessons to be learnt. Unlike in the case of the traditional film business, the pornography and erotica sectors are characterised by few and low barriers to entry, lower costs associated with special effects and stars, near perfect competition and paradoxically, cooperation between rivals, particularly on the internet (Cameron, 2005). But yet despite heavy competition, instability, restrictions in terms advertising and promotion, legal constraints, smaller target markets and other challenges that arise due to the nature of their business, the pornography and erotica industries continue to enjoy success. They are now recognised as an increasingly significant and integral part of the economy (Gall, 2007; Lane, 2000).

Conclusion

This paper highlights the significance of the sex industry in general, and of the pornography and erotica sectors specifically. We draw academic attention to these areas and lay the groundwork for study with the development of definitions for intentional pornography and erotica. We highlight the strengths these sectors demonstrate with regards to marketing activity and strategy in the hope that our colleagues may recognise these areas as worthy of investigation. Currently, nowhere in the marketing literature pertaining to innovation do we see any examination of these industries as innovators. Such examination however will have important theoretical and managerial implications for researchers, marketing managers, public policy officials, educators, their students, and society at large.

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