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## Fashion and passion: marketing sex to women

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## **Fashion and passion: Marketing sex to women**

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### **Abstract**

Against a backdrop of a 'pornographication' of mainstream media and the emergence of a more heavily sexualized culture, women are increasingly targeted as sexual consumers. In the UK, the success of TV shows like *Sex and the City* and the 'fashion 'n' passion' of sex emporia like Ann Summers suggests that late twentieth century discourses which foregrounded female pleasure have crystallised in a new form of sexual address to women. This article examines how sex products are being marketed for female consumers, focussing on the websites of sex businesses such as Myla, Babes n Horny, Beecourse, taboobo and Ann Summers. It asks how a variety of existing discourses - of fashion, consumerism, bodily pleasure and sexuality - are drawn on in the construction of this new market, how they negotiate the dangers and pleasures of sexuality for women, and what they show about the construction of 'new' female sexualities.

### **Key words**

Sex, address, women, vibrators, lingerie

### **Speaking sex for women**

Against the backdrop of a 'pornographication' of mainstream media<sup>1</sup> and the emergence of a more heavily sexualized culture, women are increasingly targeted as sexual consumers. In the UK, the success of TV shows like *Sex and the City* and the 'fashion and passion'<sup>2</sup> of sex emporia like Ann Summers suggests that late twentieth century discourses which foregrounded female pleasure have crystallised in a new form of sexual address to women. Women's consumption of sexual commodities is regarded as a huge growth area, and erotic products - most notably lingerie and sex toys - are increasingly visible in the West End, the High Street and the virtual world of the Internet

This process is starting to be documented by academics (Juffer 1998, Storr 2003) and has also been taken up with enthusiasm in broadsheet newspapers and women's magazines

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<sup>1</sup> The term is Brian McNair's (1996).

<sup>2</sup> The Ann Summers product range is described by chief executive, Jacqueline Gold, as embodying 'fashion and passion' (Addley, 2003:2).

where it is typically represented as evidence of women's growing sexual confidence and of a more contemporary and progressive view of sexuality. Journalists often relate this to particular media texts or products (*Sex and the City*, the 'Rabbit' vibrator and *Cosmopolitan* magazine), to celebrity (Gwyneth Paltrow or David Beckham seen emerging from sex or lingerie shops), to popular feminism (often signified by the phrase 'sisters doing it for themselves'), and, most commonly perhaps, to fashion. In an article on sex shops for women in *Elle* magazine, for example, the various businesses are described entirely in relation to style and fashion brands. Myla is described as a sex shop 'for the Prada wearer', taboooo is for 'the Diesel generation', Babes n Horny is 'for girls who like a tongue-in-cheek take on fashion' and BeeCourse is seen as providing sex for women with 'John Lewis tastes' (2003:130). In this paper I will examine how sex products are being marketed for female consumers, focussing particularly on the websites of companies targeting women. I will ask how a variety of existing discourses - of fashion, consumerism, bodily pleasure and sexuality - are drawn on in the construction of this new market, how they are used to negotiate the dangers and pleasures of sexuality for women, and what they show about the construction of 'new' female sexualities.

One indication of the ways in which women are increasingly addressed as sexual consumers can be glimpsed in the changing significance of the rabbit. Traditionally a symbol of sexual appetite - albeit in relation to reproduction - the rabbit became a fitting sign of the sexual revolution in the form of the Playboy 'bunny girl' where it signified sexual pleasure, recreation and consumerism for men. More recently, the Rampant Rabbit vibrator has made women's pleasure more visible within popular culture. This appropriation of commodified sexual pleasure for women is particularly apparent in a scene in *Sex and the City* featuring the Rabbit - and the consequent dramatic rise in sales of this sex toy. It appears to me that this moment is typical of a contemporary cultural trend towards representing women's sexual pleasure as fashionable, safe, aesthetically pleasing and feminine. This is made clear in the ecstatic response of Charlotte, the most traditionally feminine, artistically inclined and sexually cautious of the four main characters: 'Look! Oh, it's so cute! Oh, I thought it would be all scary and weird, but it isn't. It's...it's pink! For girls! And look! The little bunny! His little face! Like Peter Rabbit!' (HBO/Warner, 1998)

This reclaiming of the rabbit symbol is also evident on the Ann Summers website which, during Easter 2004, a time of year when rabbits are particularly appropriate,

displayed the Rabbit vibrator alongside an image of a pouting Bunny Girl, thereby referencing the current fashion for women's sexual consumerism in conjunction with playful retro imagery. In this context, the rabbit functions as part of a safe, bright style of address that is becoming associated with the female sexual consumer. On the main Ann Summers homepage, for example, rabbits, bright colours, dressing up and parties signify sex. There is a clear contrast between the style employed here and the 'Ann Summers Uncut' homepage for the same site<sup>3</sup>. Instead of the Rabbit, this depicts a 'Black Prince' vibrator and the emphasis is on a darker sexuality expressed through the use of equipment and practices of bondage. The foregrounding of lingerie, lotions and toys on the first homepage, as opposed to magazines, videos and books on the second is also indicative of the way in which particular products are emerging to signify and develop a safe, accessible, mainstream address to women.

A review of the websites belonging to the businesses referred to in the *Elle* article provides further evidence of this emerging address. Myla, the most conventionally stylish of the brands, demonstrates very clearly how sex is now often packaged for women as a matter of style. Its site draws heavily on the codes of upmarket glossy women's magazines and it is at pains to emphasize its upmarket status. It is 'the first luxury sex brand for women', 'elegant, feminine and deeply seductive', aimed at 'style conscious women' in search of products 'created with luxury and quality in mind.' Lingerie is made from 'the finest silks and laces', massage products are 'blended from pure natural ingredients' and designer sex toys are 'an expression of erotic and tactile desire', designed to 'reflect the fact that women love beautiful objects'. The 'Myla philosophy' emphasizes 'sensuality' which 'flows from within you', and presents sex as 'a private indulgence and the ultimate luxury.'

Although all the sites reviewed by *Elle* construct the 'passion' of sex in relation to 'fashion', they do so in slightly different ways. The Myla brand is elegant and upmarket where Ann Summers is fun and high street. Beecourse is different again; more downmarket than Myla, more traditional than Ann Summers. Like the Myla site, it emphasizes sensuality; its slogan is 'Stimulate your senses', and it proclaims that 'Sensuality is key to fulfilment. Real people with real desires want happiness, fun and fulfilment in their private lives.' However, where

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<sup>3</sup> While it is clear that the first and main entrance to the site displays characteristics associated with an address to female consumers, it is not clear how either entrance to the site is used or indeed intended for use.

Myla draws on the fashion spread codes of the woman's magazine to construct its address, Beecourse refers back to women's media conventions of providing sex advice. On this site, sexual consumerism is equated with the development of sexual knowledge and the need for women to access sexual material 'without feeling ashamed and secretive'. Sexuality is firmly linked to health and to relationships - the site's mission is 'to enable people in relationships to flourish sexually' - and this is underscored by the inclusion of message boards, the provision of sex advice from a doctor and a therapist, and the donations Beecourse makes to Relate and the British Association for Sexual and Relationship Therapy. This kind of presentation simultaneously works to make sex safe and wholesome for women, while maintaining that an interest in sex may be problematic - there is a big emphasis on the shop's discretion and on 'avoiding embarrassment'.

The two remaining sites, for Babes n Horny and tabooboo, display a more obvious relationship to style media, though they are funkier and less traditionally feminine than Myla. For example, tabooboo uses a very spartan form of presentation in which the androgynous figures used to signify gender on toilet doors represent the various categories of products that can be bought through the site. This deliberate downplaying of sexual difference suggests a recreational sensibility focused on 'play' rather than adult sensuality or relationships. Unlike Myla and Beecourse, tabooboo expresses no mission or philosophy and there is far less of an attempt to justify its customers' interest in sex. Babes n Horny is similar in its refusal of a therapeutic discourse. To an even greater extent than tabooboo, the emphasis here is on the design of product ranges. For example, sex toys are 'inspired by Venetian architecture' or characterized by 'baroque curves and bumps'.

**'The good thing about masturbation is that you don't have to get dressed up for it'<sup>4</sup>**

Jane Juffer's analysis of sexually explicit texts for women shows how these frequently construct their address through a claim to an aesthetic value that marks their difference from pornography. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that pornography has traditionally been so emphatically marked as a male genre, and that it has been the subject of a highly visible critique that represents it as actively hostile to women. More generally, longstanding notions of sex as dangerous for women, and of women's passive positioning within sexual representation and practice have made the depiction of sex 'for women'

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<sup>4</sup> Attributed to Truman Capote.

immensely problematic. As Juffer's analysis suggests, the claim to aesthetic value provides one strategy for overcoming this problem. In the instance of marketing sex products to women, style and fashion have become particularly important resources in constructing a safe language for the repackaging of sex as a pleasure for women. The foregrounding of auto-eroticism is also key in this process, as evidenced by the speed with which the Rabbit vibrator has become one of the most visible contemporary signs of active female sexuality. This contemporary and stylish form of auto-eroticism draws on a discourse around masturbation originating in the 1970s and associated with sexual revolution and feminist sexual politics (Cornella, 2003). This discourse has been a prime site for competing notions of an appropriate female sexuality throughout the whole of this period. For example, female masturbation has been articulated both as a form of refusal of patriarchal expectations and as a means of complementing, reviving and sustaining women's relationships with men (Juffer, 1998:79-80). It has also become an important site for expressing more general shifts in the way sex signifies culturally; the vibrator has functioned as a sign of the commodification of sex; as a symbol of sexual addiction; as an example of the way sex may be disassociated from emotion; and as a vital part of the contemporary re-ordering of sexual practice as a combination of fantasy and appliance (Juffer, 1998:87-92). Generally speaking though, its clearest value for women has lain in its ability to legitimize active, female, clitoral sexuality as normal and healthy.

The major shifts in the signification of masturbation can be traced through the meanings attributed to sex aids in modern Western culture. Originally visible only within a medical model where it signified women's hysteria (the vibrator was developed as a medical implement), and later within a domestic discourse (it was subsequently marketed as a household appliance), sex aids have more recently come to be understood in terms of recreation. They have become 'toys' just as sex has lost its significance as a form of reproduction or relationship and become a form of 'play' and 'individual liberation through bodily pleasure' (Juffer, 1998:83). In their most recent incarnation, sex toys have become stylish and the vibrator increasingly signifies as a fashion accessory. As I have argued, this is evident in the way that a linking of the Rabbit vibrator and the style-conscious *Sex and the City* currently works as a kind of shorthand for the boom in women's sexual consumerism, and in the way that the marketing of sex products for women maintains such a strong focus on toys and clothing. Clearly, in this form of presentation, masturbation is something you *do* have to get dressed up for.

Despite the apparent move towards its association with consumerism, female independence and fashion, the vibrator clearly retains some of its former status as a medical appliance, though this is now located in the more contemporary therapeutic context in which sex is understood as a form of self-expression and self-discovery. It also remains to some extent a household appliance, in that its use locates an active female sexuality in the home, linking sex to privacy and domesticity in the heterosexual bedroom. However, as toy and accessory it now also references a more contemporary ideal of femininity associated with style, image and self-fashioning. In addition there is something of a shift in the way its presence has become more public, though this remains a difficult presence to manage and one that needs careful negotiation. Sex toy marketing attempts to resolve this through aestheticization as I have argued.

This shift in which sex is linked to self-pleasure, image and style is more generally evident across a range of media, for example in popular erotic fiction, some erotic dramas on cable TV, couples porn and sex-advice videos, as well as in the marketing of other products such as lingerie. Here, there is a clear appeal to an ideal of sophisticated femininity, an address to women 'as consumers in pursuit of their own pleasures' (Juffer, 1998:147), and an invocation of a 'New Woman' figure; a type of 'narcissistic professional' who stands for female independence, self-fashioning and consumption (Radner, 1995). Some representations also draw on a more recent trend towards the blurring of boundaries between pornographic and mainstream media texts, and on the emergence of a form of 'porn-chic' in which the traditionally despised genre conventions of porn are reinterpreted as stylish and sophisticated. Texts displaying these characteristics tend to be shocking even while they remain within the mainstream; indeed they gain their charge precisely by the disturbance of boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable sexual style and content. The controversial Yves St Laurent *Opium* advert (2000) combined fine art, fashion and soft-core porn codes in this way. Featuring the model, Sophie Dahl, alone and apparently orgasmic, mixing up the representational conventions associated with the pure nude and the disorderly porn star, this image managed to be both aesthetic and explicit, upmarket and vulgar, a high fashion representation of female auto-eroticism. The bricolage of codes used in this way appears to open up individual images to multiple readings, so that while the *Opium* ad was read by some commentators as a tired, old representation of female passivity, others seized on it a very contemporary image of a sexually autonomous, powerful woman (McNair 2002, Attwood 2004).

The significance of this independent and apparently auto-erotic female figure is struggled over elsewhere in popular culture. Some researchers have noted that there has been a move away from older ways of speaking about female sexuality in some contemporary texts, such as soft-core magazines addressed to women. For example, Clarissa Smith describes how *For Women* magazine leaves behind expert discourses centred on 'medicine or morality' in search of a language which emphasizes bodily pleasure (Smith, 1999:183) - a linguistic shift which also underscores the presentation of sex aids as I have described. That sexual pleasure no longer indicates female evil or madness as it did in the medical and moral discourses of the past is clearly a sign of progress. However, other writers have pointed out that experts still dominate much discussion of sex in women's media, and often in a very discouraging way. Petra Boynton, in an analysis of mainstream women's magazines, notes how expert advice frequently marks out good 'proper' sex as vaginal penetration resulting in *male* orgasm. In addition, the conflation of women's sexual pleasure with the fashioning of the body, particularly in terms of its appearance, may work to pressure and constrain women in entirely new ways. Thus, as Boynton notes, the female body is often depicted as a source of sexual discomfort rather than pleasure, particularly for the embarrassment its physical flaws present for women (Boynton, 2003:5-8). An apparent concern with pleasure is often displaced by a preoccupation with appearance and sex advice frequently takes the form of a focus on 'looking as slim as possible during sex'. In this formulation, instead of being a site of pleasure and self-possession, the body becomes merely 'a display item - to be shown in the best poses, lighting, and in the most flattering lingerie' (Boynton, 2003:10).

As I have argued, the conflation of sex, fashion and beauty through a linking of sexual pleasure with women's self-fashioning and appearance may make it easier to address women as sexual agents. It allows for the production of codes that are able to signify a safe and confident form of sexuality and to generate a range of practices that make possible the production of a femininity constructed around a self-possessed auto-eroticism. However, there is a problematic tendency to reproduce this as a form of narcissism that has as much to do with poor self-image as it does with self-pleasure. Forms of body management and presentation may therefore signify for women in contradictory and sometimes confusing ways. This set of contradictions is particularly apparent in the management and reception of mainstream lingerie advertising. As Dee Amy-Chinn argues (2004), research by lingerie companies such as Playtex and Gossard has indicated that for female



consumers, the preferred meanings of sexy underwear are those related to self-confidence, control, empowerment and playfulness – precisely those meanings associated with the production of a self-possessed femininity. The space increasingly taken up by lingerie imagery – most famously in the Wonderbra campaign of 1994 – also indicates a growing public visibility for this relatively risqué form of representation, as does the fashion for the visibility of underwear itself. Yet this imagery also remains controversial. Ironically, as Amy-Chinn indicates, although complaints against advertising of this kind frequently rely on the notion of an ‘anti-sexist’ protest, they are often directed with particular vehemence against images which draw on themes of women’s sexual power; for example those which can be read as expressive of lesbian desire, self-pleasuring or sexual power over men. The use of consumer goods to indicate female sexual pleasure and self-possession has become a key site for a public struggle over this form of expression, as well as providing a set of practices for individual women that are shot through with pleasure and yet fractured with uncertainty and insecurity. As Chinn notes, a campaign for Gossard in Winter 2002/3 using the caption ‘This is just for men’ with the ‘n’ crossed out with lipstick appears to embody something of the struggle over this kind of public representation, and indeed over women’s sexuality: *Who is it for?*

### **The self-made woman**

The struggle over sexual styles and their significance in a sexual address to women is interesting because of the way it exposes changing and competing notions of appropriate sexual taste in relation to both gender and class norms. For example, Charlotte Semler, co-founder of Myla, refers to her brand as ‘the Gucci of sex shops...the polar opposite of Ann Summers’ (in Addley, 2003:2). Julia Gash, owner of Gash, a similarly upmarket sex shop for women, characterizes the Ann Summers brand as having ‘a traditional male agenda, and British postcard humour’ which is more ‘ridiculous’ than ‘sexy’ (in Moore, 2003:22). For these proprietors, the downmarket packaging of sex is associated with men, working class traditions and shoddy goods. The New Woman they hope to address themselves is largely constructed in opposition to these traditions – she is what they are not, her world is feminine, classy and the products she chooses mark her quality. Interestingly, this negotiation of sexual styles is apparent across the range of brands. As Merl Storr shows in her analysis of the Ann Summers range, this (relatively more downmarket) set of products must also be located as ‘classy’ in a way that allows them to be sexy and yet somehow not related to sex if they are to be acceptable to women. Party organizers and their customers see lingerie as ‘nice’ when it is ‘not

about sex' (Storr, 2003:201). Women talk about feeling at home in Ann Summers shops because unlike 'real' sex shops they are 'bright and lit and...no different than walking into Top Shop' (Storr, 2003:212). It is striking that in this repackaging of sex across the range of brands, there is a very clear perception that sex must be made over as nice, bright, and accessible. This is achieved by clearly signifying sexual representations, products and practices as stylish, classy and fashionable.

The wresting back of sex into the realm of style may be seen as a process of domesticating sex by making it familiar and feminine. A similar form of domesticating process is observed by Kathy Myers in her discussion of porn and fashion representations of women's bodies (1987). Although superficially very similar, Myers argues that where the porn body connotes openness for and availability to men, the use of fashion codes works to resignify the female body as emblematic of self-possession, even when naked and on display. In this way the ideal body type in women's media allows women's bodies to signify 'confident, self engrossed narcissism' (Myers, 1987:197). The image of the beautiful, sexy body thus becomes a sign of the confident, feminine self. Hilary Radner also notes how the narcissistic reproduction of femininity through contemporary beauty and fitness regimes can work to marginalize male demands through a focus on independence and consumerism. Rather than performing for a male gaze, self-fashioning may provide women with a culturally approved way of producing themselves *for themselves*. Radner notes that this form of construction 'produces a moment of gloriousness' (1995:xii), an interesting observation when applied to the use of self-fashioning codes in sexual consumerism. It might be argued that in this sphere, the achievement of the self-fashioned, self-possessed body becomes, or replaces, the moment of sexual climax.

Understood in this way, the making over of sex is not primarily or straightforwardly about the accommodation of male sexuality, but about the formulation of women's sexual pleasure as a kind of feminine auto-eroticism. This is a particularly post-modern and neo-liberal construction of sexuality that echoes a broader contemporary preoccupation with the creation of '*the self for itself*' (Simon, 1996:13). It is also a variant of the contemporary construction of sex as a form of recreational pleasure rather than a mechanism of reproduction or relationship. This post-modern take on sex is augmented by an articulation of a post-feminist sexuality in which the key sign is masturbation as a symbol of active female sexuality, combined with the narcissistic and consumerist practices of self-fashioning. In this sense, dressing up and playing by (with) oneself is refigured as a form of

recreation for women and as a way of producing post-femininity. This is not only the 'self for itself' of post-modernism, but a particularly consumerist and narcissistic production of femininity - 'herself for herself' (Radner, 1995:xi) which dignifies the actively sexual woman as a classy and self-sufficient subject. This set of practices is therefore simultaneously a form of play, a mode of consumption and a kind of production. In this contemporary and post-feminist articulation of sexuality, the pleasures of the body and of feminine auto-eroticism are simultaneously a form of hedonistic indulgence, of consumerism, sexual display and self-fashioning.

The form of production in which women become 'self-made' is apparent across contemporary culture, not only in fashion and beauty discourses, but in the increasingly visible and important genre of self-help. As Arlie Hochschild has argued, this genre works to produce a contemporary ideal of a "no-needs modern woman" (in Blackman, 2004:224), a woman who survives without support from others, and who is engaged in the production, regulation and care of her own self. This process of making the self through self-care is particularly apparent in the way a variety of health, therapeutic, sexual, fashion and beauty practices are now loosely linked under the category of 'pampering', an activity generally promoted as a positive form of self-indulgence, pleasure and of holistic self-care in which mind, body and spirit are revived and reworked. The celebration of this set of practices as an important pleasure for women has been criticised by Julie Burchill, precisely on the grounds that it replaces a more authentic set of sexual pleasures. It is 'sex for the sexless' (2000b), a 'sad, shop-bought imitation of the way good sex is supposed to make you feel'. It is also, according to Burchill, a thinly disguised expression of disgust for the untended, ungroomed female body, and a measure of the extent to which real physical indulgence is now pathologized (2000a). In Burchill's view, this aestheticization of sex and the body also works to re-emphasize gender differences around sexual practices, '...a strange idea, and not a little sad - all those twenty- and thirtysomething girls slipping out of aromatherapy baths called things like Sensual and Pamper...while lonely men download cyberporn in their own soft cells' (Burchill, 2000b).

I have argued that the marketing of sex products to women draws on a range of discourses in a way that can be described as post-modern. Sex is constructed as a form of self-pleasure and self-fashioning. There is an emphasis on the individual as the creator of her own significance, status and experience, and on the need to make these culturally visible and meaningful through the manipulation

of appropriate consumer goods. The extent to which sex is constructed for women in relational or recreational terms in this area of consumption is a key point, and one that journalists, academics and individual women continue to struggle over. To what extent are new sexual discourses about the re-inscription of female desire within conventional patriarchal frames of reference and to what extent do they disturb these? Does sexual consumerism ultimately work to reposition women as passive objects of a male gaze or does it - can it - provide the tools women need to fashion something new? These questions are still important, though it is necessary to recognize how processes of self-making may be more significant for some groups of women in terms of the way they produce the self for the self rather than the self for others. In this context, other questions we need to pursue suggest themselves. How can women hold on to the moments of pleasure and self-possession offered through self-fashioning when this also becomes a regime of self-regulation and self-scrutiny? Is it possible to imagine a form of narcissistic and recreational pleasure for women that does not simultaneously turn them into commodities? What kinds of femininities - and women - are excluded from these processes and pleasures? What kinds of emotional and mental states are excluded? What is repressed and disavowed? What kind of price are women prepared to pay for their moments of self-possessed feminine 'gloriousness'? How can we mobilize the second wave feminist concern about the dangers of sex alongside a third wave emphasis on pleasure and an insistence that we should become 'sexual adventuresses who...don't dare to assume that we know what "female sexuality" is all about' (Stoller, 1999:84)? To what extent should we celebrate the admittedly limited vision of female empowerment apparent in the way sex is currently sold to women in contemporary culture?

In the selling of sex products to women, sexual openness, individual empowerment, an entitlement to pleasure and 'consumer choice' have become the key terms used to delineate the post-feminist sexual ideal (Storr, 2003:32). These are the terms increasingly used elsewhere in contemporary articulations of women's sexuality too; in women's porn and fashion, in the figures of Madonna and Carrie Bradshaw, in the development of 'porno-chic' (McNair, 2002:64) and 'Wonderbra "sexiness"' (Sonnet, 1999:170). In her discussion of erotic fiction for women, Esther Sonnet notes how this depends on a re-articulation of 'feminist aims' through the publishers' insistence on 'female authorship, the reader's right to pleasure, and "healthy" female sexuality' (Sonnet, 1999:173). Stylistically, feminism is 'spoken' in a very feminine voice - the covers of erotic novels work with a pre-existing language of femininity that emphasizes 'the

importance of clothing, fabrics, accessories, make-up and theatrical staging of sexual encounters' (Sonnet, 1999:182). A similar process is at work elsewhere in the marketing of sex to women and, as with erotic fiction, we are still arguing about how to interpret these kinds of characteristics, trying to decide whether they are merely the latest form of women's objectification or whether, in the post-feminist context, they mean something else entirely. I want to suggest that Sonnet's term, 'theatrical staging', is particularly helpful here in signifying the difficulties of representing female sexuality, and to point up the appropriateness of lingerie and accessories as a post-feminist sign for this. As Valerie Steele notes, underwear signifies ambiguously; the wearer is 'simultaneously dressed and undressed' (Steele, 1996:116); her costume signifies concealment, curiosity and exposure and acts as 'a prelude to sexual intimacy' (1996:118). There is a sense in which the particular formulation of female sexuality currently favoured by companies who want to sell sex to women is similarly in an 'intermediate' state - somewhere between the acceptable and the forbidden, the fully dressed and the naked, trying it on for size. That this focuses so heavily on toys and dressing up also serves to suggest the tentative, girlish nature of the enterprise - a formulation of femininity that relies quite explicitly on masquerade, on trying on the clothes of an adult female sexuality which remains disembodied, not-yet-imagined or experienced.

The intermediacy of a post-feminist construction of sexuality is also apparent in the kinds of pleasures that Merl Storr argues are made available to women through sexual consumerism. These involve 'feeling sexy', a state which precariously attempts to balance a sexuality which is both 'desiring and being desirable' (2003:92). Politically of course, this may amount to little more than a state of 'feeling empowered' (2003:31). This uncertainty about the extent to which contemporary expressions of female sexuality represent an appropriation of existing androcentric models or instead, a break with those models, is also a measure of our insecure state. That the marketing of sex products foregrounds vibrators and lingerie so heavily may suggest a whole range of things; a continuing dependence on male models of sexuality which use orgasm and female display as their key indicators; the contemporary importance of the notion of sex as 'play'; the appropriation and re-articulation of sex as a feminine practice; the celebration of auto-eroticism; a shift towards a more diffuse set of sensual pleasures as 'sex'. It is important not to rule out the potential for progressive change in these articulations, even while we note the more familiar indicators of a patriarchal understanding of women's bodies and their pleasures.

## **Investigating sexual consumerism**

As I have shown, a brief look at some of the websites where sexual products are sold to women demonstrates that there is a recurring set of elements which can be taken as indicative of a post-feminist address to women as mainstream sexual consumers. In particular, it is notable that the overwhelming emphasis is on sex toys and lingerie. Only Ann Summers sells videos and magazines, the other sites are media-free. Sex for women is sold as a set of fashion and design items, rather than as a set of media representations. Clearly, pornography remains a problem in addressing women as sexual consumers.

Across the sites there is a notable attempt to distance sexual products from the representation of sex as 'dirty'; particular styles include sex as a 'naughty laugh' (Gold in Addley, 2003:2), grown up and sophisticated femininity, or a more youthful, funky androgyny. It is possible to situate these styles in relation to brands such as fashion labels or to popular genres such as women's magazines, fashion journalism and sex advice. The funkier and more youthful the style, the less attempt there is at justification or reassurance, which may suggest that the marketing of products to younger women depends on an understanding that sex is cool and on an acceptance of women's sexual pleasure. However, it is interesting that the sites employing this style tend towards a form of androgyny that could be interpreted as sanitizing sex - 'stick figures' rather than real bodies, references to design rather than sex. Humour, combined with a cool stance and a focus on style are key here. Another discourse drawn on in the sites, particularly Beecourse, is an educational one that emphasizes the development of sexual knowledge as an expression of health and wholesomeness. This is entirely consistent with an existing masturbation discourse which has underpinned much contemporary sex advice and erotica aimed at women and couples. Taken together, all these discourses around sexual health, stylishness, sophistication and self-care are indicative of a broader process in which a whole range of cultural practices are currently emerging as a site for women's sexual self-fashioning.

The styles used in the websites are consistent with the contemporary presentation of female sexuality and women's sexual consumerism in the press, women's magazines and advertising, and in its management through public events such as 'sex parties' for women. For example, a women's party hosted by sex-shop proprietor, Julia Gash, and described in the Observer (Moore, 2003:22), situates sex toys within a range of contemporary feminine products and

practices - hair extensions, make-up, reiki, nail art, head massage, tarot, life coaching; these offering 'every service women seem to need in the 21<sup>st</sup> century'. Sexual pleasure is re-contextualized in relation to the pleasures of fashion, design, pampering and self-help. Sex becomes something new.

There are a number of ways of taking this discussion forward. One might extend the focus on the discourses used to construct what sex *is*, what it becomes in contemporary cultures. Here, for example, female sexuality appears to function as a form of self-imaging, a type of self-pleasuring that is both inner and outer directed. It is clearly bound up with the consumption of commodities. It is a kind of auto-eroticism. It is a response to sexism and to second-wave feminism. It is a form of health and self-development. For some critics, what is happening here is a process in which sex is being 'de-sexualized' in order to construct an address to women. Petra Boynton, for example, describes the new women's sex shops as 'not sexual...not about desire'. She argues that what these developments indicate is that 'We still can't participate for the same reason men do - just because we like it' (in Moore, 2003:22). It would be useful to investigate how constructions of sex for women compare to the ways in which sex is materialised for men, and to what extent the projection of an independent, narcissistic and hedonistic sexuality relates to structures of gender.

Another avenue for investigation lies in the examination of questions of taste and pleasure. It is clear that the construction of femininity in the marketing of sex products depends just as much on class as it does on gender, and the distance between Myla and Ann Summers 'philosophies' is as interesting as the ground they share. The kinds of pleasures invoked by their modes of address would make an interesting study - how 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, about the ways in which bodies and their pleasures are constructed and differentiated? How do these two forms of pleasure relate to the more funky and cool pleasures of designer sex sites like Babes N Horny? How in turn are all these forms related to the multiplication of lifestyles in consumer culture?

Finally, it would be instructive to ask how the marketing of sex products might be envisaged as a form of dialogue between and about women and female sexuality. As our culture becomes increasingly sexualized, sexual discourse becomes more visible. As Janice Winship notes, this sexualization has frequently tended to operate through

forms of 'in-your-face advertising' aimed at affluent young women (Winship, 2000:42-43). Where sexual imagery such as the 'Hello boys' and 'Opium' campaigns may have operated within women's media as a form of 'private dialogue' with women, their movement to billboards in the outdoors, in public space, rendered this dialogue rather more public (Winship, 2000:41-43). The significance of the imagery was inflected by this change of context, making sexual discourse much more visibly a form of public discourse - a movement that makes it much more important that women take part in it. Early in 2004, tabooboo opened up a concession in Selfridges store, selling love eggs and anal beads from a vending machine for a fiver. As the marketing of sex products continues to flourish and becomes part of the public dialogue about sexuality, it will be increasingly necessary for women to be involved in the conversation about what they want and who it is really all for.



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