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Consuming Sexuality: A Case Study in Identity Marketing

Jonathan E. Schroeder, University of Rhode Island

Sexuality — behavior, identity, socialization, ritual — is rarely discussed in consumer research. Despite its role in consumer’s lives and fantasized lives, sex remains “in the closet” within mainstream marketing research. It is as if such a powerful, primitive force is too threatening for information processing models, which relegate sex to “hedonic valence,” “peripheral cues,” or that great catch-all term, “error variance.” Sex appeal seems to suffice as a stimulus variable for advertising response research, and occasionally sex, male or female, is invoked when researchers need a quick bivariate comparison to bolster their statistical findings. Obviously, sex, sex appeal, sexual fantasies, sexual longing, and sexual dysfunction are critical issues in the lives—or fantasy lives—of most consumers.

This paper discusses how we consume sexuality through product and lifestyle choices, via an analysis of how sex-related products are marketed in retail environments. Discussion will focus on how marketing engages with sexuality as a prescriptive, normative, and ultimately restrictive agent. The sexuality present in most modern marketing campaigns is heterosexuality, the unreconstructed male version. Furthermore, sex is honored as a “natural” process — what could be more natural? However, it is critical to realize that sexual identity is constructed: “the idea of one’s own sexual identity must be re-created, over and over again, in action and sensation — in doing things that make one feel really male or really female and not in doing things that leave room for doubt” (Stoltenberg 1989, p. 11).

The first section looks at sexuality and marketing, sketching how these two potent forces interact and meet in the modern marketplace. Next, lifestyle marketing is discussed to frame the assumed relationships between behavior, lifestyle, and marketing. Two retail stores that specialize in sexually oriented products provide sites for analysis and discussion. The paper closes with an integration of sexuality and gender into a taxonomy of consumption practices, reflecting current thinking in gender theory in an attempt to bring sexuality into the realm of experience that consumer researchers deal with. An underlying premise is that entrenched sex roles and sexual relations are problematic, and that sexuality is not well served by mainstream marketing efforts. In the words of philosopher Sandra Bartky: “the subordination of women by men is pervasive, that it orders the relationship of the sexes in every area of life, that a sexual politics of domination is as much in evidence in the private spheres of the family, ordinary social life, and sexuality as in the traditionally public spheres of government and the economy” (1990, p. 45). Furthermore, the analysis assumes that sexual identity is constructed and maintained through behavior, including consumption, and is influenced by cultural forces such as advertising imagery, product availability, and market segmentation strategies.

Marketing and Sexuality

The whole point of communicating about this human erotic possibility is that people be whole people to one another — not parts, not things, not objects, not consumables (Stoltenberg 1989, p. 113)
Marketing invokes sex in at least three distinct ways, often all in the same campaign. Each of these strategies informs with and interacts with the other to constitute a major underlying theme of contemporary advertising campaigns (e.g., Schroeder and Borgerson 1998). First, many firms associate use of their product with sexual attractiveness. Fragrance ads exemplify this approach (Stern and Schroeder 1994; Schroeder 1998). “Use Chanel No. 5 and become alluring” is the basic message of ads in this category. Related strategies include the use of sexually tinged adjectives to describe products, as in “sensuously curved” candlesticks, or “we’re ready, willing, and able” to clean carpets. Second, sexual themes are used to capture consumer attention, often in bizarre and product-unrelated ways (see Lippert 1996). Often, this is achieved through punning, innuendo, and leering references to sexual activity and sexual “performance.” Thus, we see ads for hardware that refer to key attributes like “well-built” and “tools.” Third, products are designed to achieve the ultimate sexual experience. All manner of items seem to be necessary for that perfect encounter, including weekend hotel retreats, the right brand of champagne, or the perfect camisole. In addition, many products are made to be worn, applied, inserted, or somehow consumed during sexual activity, broadly defined.¹

Despite its overwhelming presence in marketing campaigns, there is an amazing absence of research on sexuality and sexual practices within consumer research (cf. Gould 1991). Furthermore, research on “sex appeal” often refers to the use of women in marketing campaigns. Ironic, then, that sexuality provides many underlying metaphors for the practice of marketing. Analysts stress market penetration in order to dominate. We speak of relationship marketing, seducing the customers, who have a romance with a product. Marketing strategy includes thrusting, consummating deals, and so forth (see Bristor and Fischer 1993). Apart from these guiding metaphors, sexual interaction is also big business. Sexually explicit media, including pornography, is a billion dollar a year market. Many products are bought solely for their—often tentative and pathetic—promise of sexual possibilities. Increasingly, sexual identity is tapped as a lifestyle segmentation variable (cf. Solomon 1995). Thus, there are several gay themed magazines available at many newsstands, such as “Out,” “Genre,” and “Curve.” Furthermore, “deviant” sexuality—from bondage to S and M role playing—appears often in mainstream R rated movies, such as Basic Instinct, 9 1/2 Weeks, and Exit to Eden.² Sexual identity has enough economic ramifications that it fits easily into lifestyle marketing.

Sexual identity refers to one’s identification as a male or female; heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual. Sexual satisfaction is an integral theme in many, many advertising campaigns and product promotions from dish detergents to compact disk players. The business side of sex is driving much World Wide Web growth, and the worldwide commerce and exploitation of sex is booming (“Cybersex” 1997). Sexuality is a critical part of identity, and organizes how consumers view themselves. Marketing, in linking products, services, and lifestyles to the good life, learned early to insinuate and hint at sexual matters. For example, in the 1920s Lysol executives knew that many women used Lysol “douches” for birth control purposes. Lysol’s advertising responded to this “consumer need” by subtly referring to this surreptitious — and largely ineffective — practice through advertising phrases such as “feminine hygiene” and the “facts of life” (Marchand 1985). Somewhat surprisingly, and perhaps disconcertingly, sex, even “biological” sex, does not constitute an objective variable. We are each born with differing capacities, hormonal levels, genital variations, reproductive potentials, and parental expectancies. We become male or female, with notable exceptions, through socialization and indoctrination (e.g., Fausto-Sterling 1995). We exist in a world that is divided up into two sexes, bifurcating biological, personal, social, and cultural reality. A “man” and a “woman” are culturally
created entities, correspondingly roughly, but not perfectly, to the type of sexual genitalia one possesses (Ortner 1996). It is useful to note that at birth, between five and ten percent of babies have undifferentiated genitalia, which is usually quickly "corrected" by surgical intervention (Hubbard 1989). Sexual identity, which is centered around this manichaean world of male/female difference, is shaped through socialization practices of parenting, peer interaction, and, of course, marketing. Products are designed for girls or boys from the first breath, and sexual segmentation is understood by consumers as young as two and three (Pennell 1994). This phenomenon will only be accelerated by the growing social acceptance of labeling sex in utero through ultrasound technology.

Lifestyle Marketing

According to one popular consumer behavior text, lifestyle marketing "recognizes that people sort themselves into groups on the basis of the things they like to do, how they like to spend their leisure time, and how they choose to spend their disposable income" (Solomon 1995). In marketing vernacular what this implies is differential product choice: "consumers often choose products, services, and activities because they are associated with a certain lifestyle" (Solomon 1995). For our purposes, lifestyle includes sexual lifestyle—who one does it with, where, how often, with what, and so forth. Although heterosexuality may appear uniform and "natural," there is great variation among those who consider themselves heterosexual in terms of preferences, frequency, and appearance. Estimates vary widely as to what percent of the population is not heterosexual, but suffice it to say that it is a significant, real number that represents a portion of the sexual variability to be found today. Marketing engages with sexual identity, sexual practices, sexual fantasies, and sexual consumption in ways that are both liberating and restricting. This essay is an attempt to describe how, via an analysis of two sexually-oriented stores that pursue quite different and distinct markets.

Noir Leather sells leather clothing, sexual toys, bondage equipment, and "gothic" jewelry and accessories. Much of their merchandise is fashion oriented, but their main market are people who, in some form or another, engage in "any mutually pleasurable activity between consenting adults that involves dominant and submissive role playing, physical restraint, or erotic (i.e. pleasurable) pain" (Califa 1993, p. 6). Activities represented range from spontaneously tying one's partner up with a necktie to elaborate scenarios complete with specialized equipment. These practices are not necessarily about pain and domination: "sadomasochism is ritual or theater in which the going-ons are entirely under the control of the actors; the participants are no more likely to want to engage in real acts of domination or submission than are the less sexually adventurous" (Bartky 1990, p. 48). Long misunderstood in popular discourse, sadomasochism (S and M), or bondage and discipline, is practiced by a substantial segment of the population, both heterosexual and homosexual (Califa 1993). Bondage is a staple theme in adventure stories, Westerns, and comic books — how many times did Batman and Robin get tied up, together in their tights and masks?? S and M imagery is popular in fashion advertising of firms like Versace, Guess, and Kikis, and designers such as Jean-Paul Gaultier, Thierry Mugler, and Anna Sui. Although still taboo and considered deviant, the alternative lifestyle represented by "fetish," "leather" or "S and M" has crept into mainstream media. San Francisco boasts many retail outlets, ranging from the hard-core Taste of Leather to the curiously upscale and somewhat disappointingly bright and cheery Good Vibrations, where the staff will be happy to discuss the merits of silicone vs. rubber dildos (dildoes? dildi?), or demonstrate the proper spanking technique with a $69.95 pleasure paddle.
Although tempered somewhat by the success of the Victoria's Secret chain of "classy" lingerie, there is still a lingering prurient exoticism about most lingerie stores. Lingerie is gendered female: it represents an icon of heterosexuality. Only at great social cost do men wear lingerie. It is interesting to note that the sportscaster Marv Albert was much more roundly condemned for wearing "women's underwear" than for hitting, biting, and throwing his girlfriend against a wall. Lingerie is something women are supposed to wear for men, to please them, to look sexy and superfeminine. A woman dressed in a black garter belt and stockings is marked as a sexual object for the male gaze. As such, lingerie represents a lifestyle of heterosexual conformity. Ravissant, a mainstream store in a typical, small town mall, is a lingerie store, and much, much more. What strikes me about the store is its reinforcement of conventional sex roles: it is a gag gift store that sublimates its sexual nature through humor. This stands in marked contrast to Noir Leather which takes itself very seriously.

To discuss how sexuality is marketed and packaged for consumption, I turn my attention to these two retail establishments that deal in diverse items. In doing so, my intention is to "flesh out" some issues of how sexuality, gender, and fantasy are consumed. Thus, this case approach is a "hands-on" analysis of contemporary consumption practices that touch on central issues of gender, sexuality, and consumer behavior. Sexual behavior is extremely ritualized, and heavily influenced by the images of marketing. I will first describe the two stores, then analyze their marketing practice, then move on to discuss issues of the body, identity, and consumption.

A Tale of Two Cities

Royal Oak is a predominantly white suburb north of Detroit which enjoys a thriving, lively downtown district with many successful trend-driven restaurants such as Mongolian Barbecue and Memphis Rib Joint. Royal Oak is solidly middle-class, with an infusion of young, hip, urbanites that have made it a hotspot in the Greater Detroit area. The retail district organizes many special events throughout the year, and stays open late each Thursday for "midnight madness." Although there are still a few old style "ethnic" markets, such as the Cedar Market, a Lebanese grocery store, most have given way to specialty stores such as Incognito, which sells club wear for the junior set, and Brazil, a cappuccino café. There are also a few gay oriented stores, as well as one that sells nothing but condoms. The area resembles a Midwestern Greenwich Village, I think, and is a pleasant place to hang out and shop. Noir Leather has been in business for about twenty years, and brings people to Royal Oak from throughout Michigan. It has a small mail-order business and, of course, a website, as well as Vintage Noir, a used store, around the corner.

Nestled at the edge of Lake Michigan's beautiful and pristine Grand Traverse Bay, Traverse City is the fastest growing city in Michigan. To many of us who have enjoyed TC, as it is called, this is a mixed blessing, as the growth is largely unplanned and is destroying much of the small resort town charm of the entire region. Traverse City is "up north" to downstate Michigan natives, where vacationers flock for lake-driven leisure. Cherryland Mall, built in the 1970s, was the first large scale shopping complex to hit the area. Unfortunately, the bigger, better, and most critically, newer Grand Traverse Mall was built several years ago and has lured many Cherryland customers and stores to its more upscale wares. Cherryland Mall struggles on, however, and one of its long standing businesses is Ravissant Fashions, an emporium catering to the thirteen year old boy in all of us.
Unlike Ravissant Fashions, Noir Leather has had its share of protests and complaints. The city of Royal Oak has policed their display windows, prompting a first amendment suit, community groups have organized protests, and church groups have picketed the store. Of course, this has only led to more notoriety for the store, and it remains a popular destination for both customers and curious sightseers. During busy times, Noir often charges admission, which will be refunded with purchase. Since many items in the stores are comparable, and Ravissant is located within a much more conservative and managed environment, I thought the community’s reaction to Noir is meaningful. Interestingly, a store not far from Noir Leather, Lover’s Lane, is quite similar to Ravissant in its overall image—it specializes in clothes for “dancers” (not ballroom dancers). Lover’s Lane has not been the objects of any protests, to my knowledge. I believe that Noir’s emphasis on the male potential as a sexual object, as well as its image of gay and transgressive sexuality, and the fact that it does not necessarily fit into stereotyped gender roles all played a role in community protest. Ravissant clearly targets heterosexual consumers. Noir Leather is serious about sex, unlike Ravissant, its items are meant to be worn and/or used (see figure 1).

Ravissant stocks items such as “Man-t-hose,” pantyhose for men with a third, small “leg” for, well you can guess. Clearly these are not meant to be worn, and they deny the sensual feel of hosiery—which, after all, men wore up until 100 years ago—and sublimate male desire for sensual things. There are lots of items for sucking—nipple bottle and can tops, penis pacifiers, penis lollipops, and even penis pasta—all so-called “gag” gifts, but these are not meant for consumption, it’s only a joke, right? None of these items truly celebrate the erotics of the mouth, or get near sucking as a sexual act and sexual fantasy. Board games like Sex-opoly and Strip Scrabble® are marketed next to that item on everyone’s list—crotchless panties. Crotchless panties play into presumed male heterosexual fantasies of female availability, I suppose, but upon reflection, they seem silly. The phallic products are clearly marketed toward women in an aggressive, in-your-face way that reinforces female submission. In contrast, the helpful, somewhat bored Noir Leather staff politely informed me of my clammy-handed research, that many of their items are favored and used by men, especially the most phallic looking gags which penetrate deep into the mouth. These are not specifically gay or straight items, but play a conspicuous (but quiet) role in bondage and submission practices.

One item that is marketed toward both men and women in Ravissant are the ubiquitous, and thoroughly unappetizing to this observer, “edible” underwear, known everywhere as edible undies. Available in an array of flavors, strawberry, banana, chocolate, and trail mix (I made that one up), edible undies are right for many gift occasions, bridal showers, bachelor parties, 40th birthday parties, and so forth. I asked the clerk if she had tried any — she laughed rather more boisterously, and said no, but she had heard they tasted great. I passed. I do recommend some new flavors, such as Twinkies or Organic Goat Cheese. Edible underwear typifies the product selection at Ravissant. Meant to be funny and titillating, nonetheless, they manage to sublimate sexual desire, fantasy, and role-playing. They represent only a token item in the heterosexual lifestyle — most are bought for bachelor and bachelorette parties, I was informed. Furthermore, they require only a modicum of imagination, and refuse to place a value on the role that orality plays in sexual activity. Ravissant manages to evoke a few stereotyped fantasies, but in its refusal to take its customers true sexual desires seriously, it fails to be sensual, sexual, or satisfying. As one observer remarked about how sexuality is marketed: “in sex, as in other things, we have liberated fantasy but killed imagination” (Berry 1993).
Figure 1
Consuming Sexuality: A Tale of Two Cities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>NOIR LEATHER</th>
<th>RAVISSANT FASHIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Royal Oak, Michigan</td>
<td>Downtown Storefront (next to Lebanese Market)</td>
<td>Traverse City, Michigan Cherryland Mall (next to Penney’s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>Gothic looking men and women pierced, androgynous, sexuality difficult to classify</td>
<td>Fading cheerleaders—heterosexual appearing women in their 20s and 30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical item</td>
<td>Leather gag for consensual bondage and submission</td>
<td>Gag gift for bachelor parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s wear</td>
<td>Leather corset</td>
<td>Satin teddy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men’s wear</td>
<td>Leather jock</td>
<td>Boxers with kisses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender neutral items</td>
<td>Cuffs, T-shirts, leather wear, shoes, jewelry</td>
<td>Edible underwear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trademark</td>
<td>Stylized druid design</td>
<td>Stylized female stripper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot seller</td>
<td>Manacles</td>
<td>Man-t-hose (pantyhose for men)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community response</td>
<td>Periodic protests</td>
<td>Pronounced apathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target market</td>
<td>Alternative sexual lifestyles</td>
<td>Traditional heterosexual lifestyles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atmosphere</td>
<td>Serious, a bit intimidating</td>
<td>Silly, a bit embarrassing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store policies</td>
<td>Plugs, cock rings, and latex items not returnable</td>
<td>One size fits all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender messages</td>
<td>Mixed; many possibilities</td>
<td>Strip for your man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>Exploration, variation, deviation</td>
<td>Titillation, sublimation, objectification</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Packaging plays a major role in Ravissant’s marketing. Most of their products are packaged like more common consumer goods—in shrink-wrapped, brightly colored, and clearly labeled boxes. These provide gender cues, instructions for use, and serve to guide the bewildered consumer. In doing so, however, the packaging limits the product’s possible uses, or which gender it is meant for. Moreover, the imagery usually reinforces
sex role stereotypes—women’s lips adorn many packages, signaling male desire. Noir Leather displays very few items in packaging. The clothing is out on racks, and the sex toys are displayed in glass cases, without boxes or shrink-wrap. Thus, one either must know what the items are for, ask a clerk, or make educated guesses. Certainly, many undoubtedly embody sex role stereotypes in their use of Noir’s goods. Nevertheless, the absence of packaging, I believe marks a space for imagining other, not specially sex-role stereotyped behavior. Customers have the opportunity at least to self-articulate roles and re-define erotic potential. Consumption serves as a constructive force for sexual identity, as it is a process through which we interact with the world (Holt 1995). Therefore, what we consume partially constructs our sexual identity. Heterosexuality, like homosexuality, is constantly constructed through gender related behavior (e.g., Butler 1990, Foucault 1978; Goffman 1959). When we shop in an environment like Ravissant, we consume stereotyped sex-role identities. Stores like Noir Leather provide choices that are ambiguous, and items that challenge sex role norms. This is not to imply that exploring sexual practices with Noir Leather goods is a necessary condition for changing sex roles, but it surely represents an alternative.

Aside from focusing on two radically different target markets and retail strategies to reach them, I want to use these stores to discuss the role that sexual identity plays in the life of the consumer. I intend to interrogate why these stores, which may appear similar, are so different. The intersections of gender, sexuality, and marketing are fraught with significance for understanding the role consumption plays in our lives. As one observer remarked: “we buy into a gender in the same way we buy into a style. It makes no difference if we choose unisex or an ultra-feminine image, the act of buying is affirmed and the definition of gender as commodity is maintained” (Willis 1991, p. 23). What roles we choose, what roles are available to us, and how we envision our fantasy life are critical questions that consumer researchers might grapple with. This endeavor may require changing the white sheets of scientific based choice research, and pondering what turns us on, why, and how we purchase our sexual persona.

Playing Gender

Gender ... means knowledge about sexual difference. I use knowledge, following Foucault, to mean the understanding produced by cultures and societies of human relationships, in the case of those between men and women. Such knowledge is not absolute or true, but always relative (Scott 1988, p. 2)

Gender is a social concept referring to psychologically, sociologically, or culturally rooted traits, attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral tendencies. Because gender is a pervasive filter through which individuals experience their social world, consumption activities are fundamentally gendered (Bristor and Fischer 1993, p. 519)

Gender remains one of the most fertile areas of scholarship in many fields. Thinking about the body as something that is largely constructed has profoundly influenced the discourse on gender, and opened up new paths between social science, medicine, and the humanities (see, for example, Hubbard 1989; Fausto-Sterling 1992; Foucault 1978; Ortner 1996; Scott 1988). However, consumer researchers have largely ignored these developments, as one review pointed out: “the strong silence in the field of consumer behavior concerning the body (despite the historical role the body has played in marketing practice) is contrasted by the impressive force with which it consumes the attention of scholars in various other
fields" (Joy and Venkatesh 1994, p. 338). Often the body is referred to in research on beauty, fashion, or aging, but it is rarely the central object of study (cf. Joy and Venkatesh 1994; Pennell 1994; Thompson and Haytko 1997).

Holt’s taxonomy of consumption practices, though male-centered, is a useful way to think about how consumers consume sexuality. He extended previous work on metaphorical approaches to consumption in describing four processes that capture why people consume: classification, integration, experience, and play. Certainly, sexual behavior and practices can be understood within these broad categories. Gender is a primary source of classification—it is often uncomfortable not to know someone’s gender or sexual preference. Many of the items that Noir Leather stocks are icons of different sexuality—we classify people by what they wear, thus, someone who wears leather pants is “in” to motorcycles, a studded leather dog collar marks someone as somewhat “deviant”—or at least wanting to appear that way (see Schouten and McAlexander 1993). Integration is a way of making sense of our environment through connecting new information and experience to existing knowledge. Learning about gender and sexuality often is marked by consumption rituals such as buying a first tampon, razor, condom, or birth control pill. In this regard, a store like Ravissant offers little that is new or challenging. Most of its items, once again, are “gag” gifts that reinforce sex role stereotypes. Their vibrators are marketed toward females as a sort of penis-substitute—nothing in the store does much to threaten heterosexual norms. Noir Leather, in contrast, showcases a myriad of diverse and puzzling articles that take some time and inclination (not to mention a high embarrassment threshold) to figure out. Many items are meant for males or females—submissive or dominant, straight or gay. The store is too complex to reduce to one sexuality, although many sightseeing visitors seem to narrow it down to “this is weird!”

Consumer experience is what happens when people use, consume, wear, or apply the things they buy. Because Ravissant’s products are not really meant for consumption—I doubt very much that many men are enjoying the all day support of their Man-t-hose—they have little chance to experience much of anything. Noir’s products seem to disrupt our notions of experience—many seem to be designed for something other than pleasure, and yet they are part of a sexual lifestyle that insists that gratification can be obtained in many ways. Play seems to be a good match to sexual matters, and both stores seem to cater to this aspect of consumer experience. Through play, customers might transform gender-specific items to accommodate diversity in sex roles. Much of Noir Leather products seem to be designed to do this, few of Ravissant’s do. The aesthetic rationale for Ravissant’s line of merchandise seems to be one of mockery, or jeering. Nothing seems to celebrate men’s bodies, or connection between partners. The lingerie appears to be designed from the latest issue of “Playboy” or “Penthouse,” it seems to have little to do with what individual women might want to enhance their mood, appearance, or feelings of attractiveness. In addition, there are no items that celebrate the male body as erotic, sensitive, luxurious, powerful, attractive—all the features it shares with the female body.

I am not claiming that Noir Leather and other stores like it are devoid of stereotyped goods, or that leather is somehow liberating in the abstract. There are also many issues that S and M activities—heterosexual, gay, lesbian—bring up that are not particularly liberating or challenging to the sexual status quo. However, I believe that Noir Leather provides avenues for men to take their sexuality and the male body seriously. Also, many products might allow women to explore non-traditional roles, such as power and control. Noir represents a chance to think critically about gender roles within sexual identities, and to question entrenched ideology about men, women, and sex. Many items are designed to
focus a man’s attention inward, to his own body as a source of pleasure. For a man to claim his own body for sexual arousal and sexual satisfaction over his girlfriend’s, wife’s or mistress’s is a step toward more egalitarian sexual relations. In our culture, women are sex objects, and masturbation is taboo—just ask former Surgeon General Joyceyn Elders. For men to be responsible for their own sexual satisfaction—now that is a radical idea.

I want to be clear that I am not saying that stereotyped male sexuality does not dominate popular cultural discourse. Rather, I consider the ideology of what turns men on, what is the right way to be a man, and how men ought to relate to women to be seriously damaging in this culture (D’Emilio 1984). Men are socialized to view women as the key to their sexual satisfaction, to see women as potential sexual partners, and to displace their erotic life onto the body of another (e.g., Wagner 1996). Many men “experience the values of [popular media] as synonymous with the values they most desire in their own sex life because the mediums’ form and content—voyeurism, detachment, objectification, absence of inner emotional continuity and sensation—are congruent with their own habituated sexuality” (Stoltenberg 1989, p. 111). Sex education usually consists of learning where babies come from, memorizing what the vas deferens is, and being warned about sexually transmitted diseases. What is missing are lessons in communication and respect, with the goal of developing “an authentic erotic potential between humans such that mutuality, reciprocity, fairness, deep communion and affection, total body integrity for both partners, and equal capacity for choice-making and decision-making are merged with robust physical pleasure, intense sensation, and brimming-over expressiveness” (Stoltenberg 1989, p. 112).

We consume sexuality with our eyes, bodies, and minds (after Willis 1991). In the mainstream world of heterosexuality, men are “naturally” attracted to women. Men are socialized to rely on the visual sense for arousal, which shapes they way they think about sexual identity. Sight is the most distancing of the senses, “in which the subject stands separate from the object, which is other, there” (Young 1990, p. 182). Moreover, “many men tend to have the kind of sex that people having sex for a camera tend to have. Men learn from sex films how to have the kind of sex that is observable from without, not necessarily from within. ‘Showable’ and ‘performable’ sex is not particularly conducive to communicating what is going on emotionally between two people in sex, the values in it, how this sexual encounter is related to the rest of their lives...” (Stoltenberg 1989, p. 111). Maleness and masculinity is linked to the gaze and how one views the world in terms of sexual possibilities (e.g., Mulvey 1989). Sexual desire and fantasy, not just sexual behavior, operate within a system of patriarchy that subordinates women, largely through sexual domination (Bartky 1990). Although sexuality is incredibly diverse, and sexual identity has been liberated somewhat in recent years, the culture remains extremely heterosexual and patriarchal.

In teaching and talking about gender roles often masculinity seems difficult to get across—more so than femininity, which seems more variable and malleable. In cultural discourse, a non-masculine male verges into feminized space, either he is small, gay, or sensitive. However, masculinity, like femininity, is infinitely variable and is present in both males and females: as one gender theorist describes “I am employing the term “masculinity” as a more or less symmetrical pendant to the concept of femininity developed within feminist theory. In other words, masculinity is, like femininity, a concept that bears only an adventitious relation to biological sex and whose various manifestations collectively constitute the cultural, social, and psychosexual expression of gender” (Solomon-Godeau 1995, p 71). Masculinity interacts smoothly with consumption, masculine icons include
wearing work boots, baseball hats, having a hearty appetite, smoking cigars, and drinking liquor and so forth: "it is surely in part because of the thoroughness with which this society has inscribed the cultural categories of "maleness" and "femaleness" in the object code and material world, that it is so difficult to contend with the problem of sexism. If sexism persists and indeed even continues to flourish it must be to some extent because sexist stereotypes are thoroughly grounded in even the subtlest details of everyday life and the object code" (McCracken 1987, p. 132). Most products—including, inexplicably, things like pens, socks, soap—are gendered, this practice is nowhere more obvious than in a store like Ravissant (Sparke 1995). I think that part of what Noir Leather offers its customers is a chance to play at gender roles, to stretch them a bit, and possibly to change them. This is not to suggest that everyone rush out and buy a leather collar, but I do believe that challenging gender roles, questioning what is attractive and erotic, and taking sex seriously is a good thing.

**Conclusion**

I lived across the Bay from San Francisco for five years. Visiting Castro Street was an incredibly stereotype shattering experience for me. There, diversity and variation in appearance, behavior, attractiveness, and male identity in particular, is readily apparent. Gayness is not just a lifestyle; nor do the people who live there conform to images of what gays look like. I recalled that we can't judge a book by its cover; and learn over and over that we cannot predict identity—sexual, gender, political—based on appearance. In addition, the diverse world of sexual identity that exists now—as it always has—reminds us that labeling gender or sexuality in a two-by-two matrix is as restrictive as a pair of steel handcuffs. Consumer researchers must "trouble" gender and sexuality as a category (Butler 1990). We need to take into account real consumer’s lived experience of sexuality and their resistance to stereotypes in the face of social sanction. We also need to include the gay, lesbian, and bisexual population (and not just as a target market), and varied forms of sexual expression and sexual consumption.

Sexual identity, for better or worse, is highly dependent on the consumer choices we make. It is not as if through consumption choices sexual politics will radically transform. However, consumer culture is unavoidable, and the choices we make as consumers do have political, psychological, and sexual importance. Clothing, hairstyle, pierced styles, and sexual products all contribute to the construction of masculinity and femininity, sexual preference, and identity. Consumer researchers, then, are in an excellent position to study these processes which animate our lives. Icons might be an interesting place to start: the "bachelor," the "old maid," the "hussy," the "dominatrix" or the "ladies man"—what role do these images play in our conceptions of sexuality and behavior? How does marketing interact with them to produce a consumable lifestyle? Further research might incorporate ideas about how space is gendered; retail stores often target males or females, bars are usually very masculine places, board rooms are still dominated by men, and so forth (see Betsky 1995; Colomina 1990; Wagner 1996).

My own lifestyle marks me heterosexual. I live with a woman, and my identity fits in to mainstream, professional class America. But sometimes I feel as if I am passing for heterosexual. That is, my feelings, beliefs, and values are largely at odds with how men, including myself, are socialized. I feel nothing in common with my friends who rank women according to their sexual attractiveness and invite me to bachelor parties to cavort with strippers or prostitutes. I feel no compunction to eliminate my un-masculine traits such as sensitivity, empathy, intimacy; or my feminine taste in long fingernails (my own),
furniture design, and soft, sensuous clothing. Given these traits, it is often only my size that guides other’s inferences about my sexual identity. I believe that sexuality changes, slowly, but perceptibly; over the life course, it does not emerge fully formed at puberty. It is largely through being exposed to other conceptions of sexuality, not always based on stereotyped sexual relations that one learns to question established, damaging conceptions of what it means to be male or female. If we truly are interested in gender, marketing, and consumer behavior, we must be willing to study sexual identity.

What I feel disturbed by are the inherent limitations that gender roles and sexual identities place on both men and women. Although men still dominate society, and enjoy advantages in privilege, this comes at a great cost which plagues gender relations. I think writers such as John Stoltenberg are on the right track: “the change to which we aspire has got to be predicated on a new integration of selfhood, a radical new identity, a self that knows who it is...” (1989, p. 197). I don’t particularly think that we can solve these issues through visiting one store over another, but I do believe that marketing plays a strong role in promulgating dualistic gender roles and prescribed sexual identities. I acknowledge that this is changing, and that many people resist stereotypes, and that there exists a myriad of sexual identities. However, media messages still largely function to reinforce gender roles, limit sexuality, and perpetuate stereotypes. Furthermore, marketing is adept at co-opting difference as a new lifestyle marketing prospect; sexuality is no exception. The world wide web is bringing sexual products—images, phone sex, sexual toys—to a vast audience: “the main early use of many kinds of electronic communications is to let men watch and talk to naked women” (“Cybersex” 1997, p. 64). Much of this material resembles the Ravissant store— designed for men, informed by the rhetoric of male domination and male desire, and featuring anonymous, face-to-screen encounters. Certainly, the web offers other possibilities, but the international sex business is not a particularly liberating societal force. Indeed, the web replicates and intensifies the processes that create sexual opposition: “everything about the cultural context would seem to predict that sexual meetings would be tainted with or steeped in shame and guilt, hierarchy and domination, contempt and repulsion, objectification and alienation” (Stoltenberg 1989, p. 112).

The interactions of identity and consumption represent one of the critical issues of the coming century. As global markets develop, built with global marketing campaigns, sexuality will be invoked to market a vast array of products to a wider range of consumers. Cultural conceptions of sexual identity, sexual fulfillment, and their part in the promised good life of consumer choice will come under intense pressure. Understanding the role sexuality and gender play in our own consumption is a step toward making informed decisions about our lives and the lives of those that know us, care for us, and sometimes make love with us. If men begin to view themselves as the source of sexual satisfaction, begin to take an active role in sexual behavior (not just sexual pursuit), and take responsibility for their desires, this would represent a step toward more equal sexual relations.

END NOTES

1) A limitation of traditional conceptions of sexuality is the focus on male orgasm. Sexual behavior includes many diverse activities and states, beyond the notorious ‘sexual response cycle.’ Commercial sex films especially reinforce the idea that all that matters is the man’s climax. See, for example “What Lesbians Do” in Card, Claudia (1996), The Unnatural Lottery: Character and Moral Luck, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
2) Noteworthy that the ad campaign for this film, based on a book by Anne Rice (writing as A. N. Roquelarue) featured a smiling male wearing a full tuxedo, loosely tied to a doorway, and was promoted as a comedy.

3) Dominant and submissive role playing certainly sounds like academia to me, and anyone who has submitted a paper to a journal knows what pain is all about.

4) Noir, of course, means black in French. Black leather implies something that leather alone does not—the exotic, sexual, 'dark'—and black identity is stereotyped as sexual and primitive. See Gordon, Lewis (1995), Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.

5) Many advertisements play on the full mouth motif—to enjoy a mouth full of food seems to be quite attractive, and ads often feature models gorging themselves on a smorgasbord of delights.

6) Men do, of course, wear stockings, hose, garter belts, and so forth, but usually in the guise of cross-dressing, entertaining, or a mocking parody of women.

7) **Vas deferens**, noun. The main duct through which semen is carried from the epididymis to the ejaculatory duct. (American Heritage Dictionary, third edition.) This is all I remember from sex ed. in fifth grade.

8) Passing is used in several contexts to refer to a member of a lower status group being accepted for, or wishing to appear as, a member of a higher status group. Light skinned African-Americans occasionally pass for white, gays often pass for heterosexual. By my usage, I do not mean to deny the cultural oppression that produces this phenomenon.

**REFERENCES**


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