Special Session: Gender and the Erotics of Consumption
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INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that “sex sells”, and advertising has long used erotic imagery in this regard (Elliott, Jones, Benfield and Barlow 1995; Reichert and Lambiase 2003). The many feminist critiques in the 1960s and 1970s of the portrayal of women as sex objects in advertising have been replaced with a postmodern emphasis on celebration, which manifests itself as an increasing, often ironic, preoccupation with the male body as well as the female body. It is now common, therefore, for sexual appeals in advertising to include both male and female models, as, for example, in the provocative ads for Obsession perfume and Calvin Klein jeans. The abundance of eroticism in advertising is not matched with an abundance of consumer research on the topic, however, and there have only been a few studies that have explored the relationship between erotics and consumption in any depth, particularly in relation to the gendered dimensions of this relationship (Belk 2003; Brown 1998; Schroeder and Borgerson 1998, 2003; Schroeder and Zwick 1999).

The word “erotic” quite literally means “of or causing sexual love, especially tending to arouse sexual desire or excitement” (Oxford English Dictionary). Consumer culture is undoubtedly replete with sexual narratives of desire and seduction. Yet, according to Belk, Ger and Askegaard (1996) and Thompson and Holt (1997), consumer desires are seldom mentioned in the consumer behavior literature,
despite the fact that they are all-pervasive, expressed through metaphors such as magic, religion, fire, romantic love, dreams, thirst, hunger, sex, and addiction. Belk, Ger and Askegaard (1996) suggest that the sexual metaphor in consumer desire is one that “also suggests that the state of wanting itself is simultaneously exciting, pleasurable, and frustrating: an exquisite torture.” (p. 370).

It is perhaps only when we view consumers as having desiring bodies and minds that we can fully appreciate the important roles of myth, fantasy and the imagination in consumption. This consumer imagination also has the power to fetishize objects, in the sense that certain objects may stimulate or attract sexual desire. Stratton (2003, p. 237), for example, elaborates on the idea of an “active commodity fetishism, of a consumption driven by the libidinal energizing of commodities.”

Each of the three papers in this special session aims to highlight some of the underpinning complexities that inhere in the notion of gender and the erotics of consumption.

**Visual Lifestyles: Sex, Technology and Marketing Representation in Digital Photography**

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Drawing on a theory of the fetish in visual representation, this paper investigates the interactions of identity, representation and sexuality in contemporary digital camera advertising. Many mainstream marketing campaigns appropriate
pornographic imagery, and the authors show how digital camera ads raid the referent system of pornography to promote their products. They discuss the use of voyeuristic images and sexual innuendoes in various print and Internet ads for handheld, cell phone, and tiny video surveillance cameras, from companies such as Ricoh, Kodak, Siemens, Pentax, Canon, and Casio.

Just as it is not enough to merely assume that “sex sells,” we need to understand why images are considered sexy, what they represent about arousal, sexual desire, and interpersonal relations, and how advertising harnesses these concerns to create brand associations. To this end we present a critical analysis of sexual issues in contemporary advertising via an interdisciplinary reading that brings insights from visual studies, consumer behavior, and social theory to bear on how photography, advertising and sexuality intermingle in contemporary visual consumption. The emphasis is on photography – as information technology, as consumer behavior, and as popular product, and focuses attention on photographic conventions and advertising techniques to show how advertising photography constructs sexual themes. Several visual genres enrich our analysis, including pornography, portrait photography and film.

The paper introduces the concept logic of pornography to theorize how cultural and representational codes of pornography influence other realms, such as advertising, and how contemporary ads express these codes. Digital cameras are the focus for several reasons. First, they have exploded in popularity – digital model’s sales now surpass traditional cameras (Photo Marketing Association 2003), with a worldwide market of about $6.6 billion in 2002 (Imerge Consulting Group 2003). Second, digital camera ads often feature sexually tinged photographs (see Photo 1). Photography has traditionally been the province of male desire – cameras represent
technologically sophisticated gadgets with which to survey and record at a distance (see Mirzoeff 2002; Schroeder 2002; Scott 1994; Slater 1995). Third, by taking a sustained look at the multidimensionality of camera advertising – the ads themselves are photographically produced, they show photographic techniques and tools, and they promote a photographic lifestyle.

At a basic level, photography fetishizes goods by reifying and eroticizing consumer products (e.g., Goldman & Papson 1996; Schroeder & Borgerson 2003; Solomon-Godeau 1991). Photographic representation of fetishism depends upon three factors: liminality, concepts of the other, and visual conventions. Liminality refers to the conceptual divide between nature and culture, a realm in between that startles, unnerves, unsettles, and attracts attention (Schroeder & Borgerson 2003). Sexualized photographic representations inhabit this liminal zone – they oscillate between photographing a “natural” act while reminding us of the very artificiality of depicting this act.

Erotic photography, pornography and advertising routinely present images of the other – the exotic, sexually ambitious subject that exists for the viewer’s imagination (see Borgerson & Schroeder 2002). Most pornography assumes heterosexual male consumers – although there is a large gay market (much so-called “lesbian action” porn is produced under a heterosexual gaze). Women, or more accurately, the feminine, generally play the object of desire. Moreover, women of color, Asians, Blacks, “natives”, and so on, typify the pornographic realm. In addition, fetish clothing, especially tight-fitting latex and leather, pushes many models
into the liminal zone between nature and culture (Schroeder & Borgerson 2003). For example, iconic images of exotic “island girls”, complete with primitive, pre-Christian notions about sex and guilt, overpopulate advertising and pornographic imagery (see Borgerson & Schroeder 2002; Cortese 1999; Ramamurthy 2002). Furthermore, photographic conventions such as close cropping, lighting, and depth of field visually fetishize objects via isolation, decontextualization and reification. The pornography industry developed photographic codes that shape its visual representations, including poses, positions, gestures – including “the money shot” – realist aesthetics, and production values that contribute to the look of porn (cf. Kendrick 1996; O’Toole 1999; Williams 1999).

Consumer research and marketing scholarship often overlook visuality (Schroeder 2002). This interdisciplinary visual method offers a productive, critical analysis, particularly suited to sort out meaning construction in advertising imagery. Overall the paper argues the logic of pornography that pervades the genre necessarily influences the possibilities and potential of digital photography.

Techno-erotics and DIY Masculinity

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Home improvement expert, Harold Hill of Harold Hill

Of DIY dexterity and double-glazing skill,

Came back to find another man’s kippers in the grill,

So he sanded off his winkle with his Black & Decker drill.
Technology has long been associated with masculinity. Despite many attempts to overcome its stereotyping, images of technology as male persist, with male gender identities continuing to be tied up with technology at both work and leisure. This gendering process is a complex one. Recent studies of the relationships between gender and technology emphasize “a two-way mutually shaping relationship between gender and technology in which technology is both a source and consequence of gender relations and vice-versa” (Faulkner 2001, p. 81). There are thus many ways that masculinity has been shaped and performed through a myriad of different technological practices.

Techno-erotics are deeply embedded in many of these practices, and various authors argue that men’s absorption with technology offers sensual pleasures (Balsamo 1996; Cockburn 1985, 1992, 1997; Faulkner 2002; Florman 1976; Wajcman 2000). Of course, from a marketing perspective, there is nothing particularly new about this idea. Representations of technology, particularly in advertising, have often been overtly associated with eroticism, an obvious example being the motor car with its long-held connotations of sexual desire. Most recently Belk (2003) has noted the autoeroticism and fetishistic characteristics that underpin male fascination with their automobiles. In a more general sense, Hacker (1989, p. 49), in a study of engineering students, identified the erotic possibilities and sensual pleasures that could be gained from working with and exerting control or mastery over technology: “the discipline in a sense eroticized power relations – glory and status in pain given and taken; or pleasure withheld; the postures of superiority or dominance and submission; a fetishism with special equipment and technique.”
This fetishistic absorption in the “tools of the trade” can also be seen in the preoccupation with DIY (Do-It-Yourself) that came into being from the 1920s onwards. DIY allowed men to reassert traditional, direct, male control of their physical environment, in this case the home, where there was no risk of gender compromise in activities to do with building, repairing or maintaining the home. By carving out a space (often in a literal sense, for example, the basement workshop) for themselves within a traditionally female sphere, a domestic masculinity could be created, one where they could express “pride in their homes, much as they did their cars, by tricking them out with gadgets and keeping them polished and purring” (Gelber 2000, p. 77). The concomitant growth of home power tools enabled men to avoid the emasculating images that could otherwise be associated with the role of suburban dad. In our opening quote from the sadly now demised 1970s New Wave singer, Ian Drury, we see how Harold Hill wreaked a terrible vengeance on his rival with the aid of his Black & Decker drill, in order to regain control of his errant wife. The Black and Decker hand-held electric drill, as the most potent symbol of the DIY movement (Gelber 2000), encapsulates these overarching, masculine themes of power and control.

This paper explores the techno-erotics of DIY masculinity, tracing them historically from DIY’s origins in the early twentieth century through to its contemporary performance on television programs aimed at both male and female audiences. In a comparative analysis of 20 episodes of DIY television programs (10 aimed at a predominantly male audience and 10 aimed at a mixed audience), we show how the techno-erotics that underpin DIY masculinity are evolving in new ways to accommodate a broader audience. In particular, whilst still reinforcing certain aspects of traditional DIY masculinity, they are moving from a focus on tools and technology
to the use of the male body to “sell” the programs to these audiences, and concomitantly open up possibilities for a new DIY femininity and a new “feminine” engagement with this eroticized male zone.

**Women, Carnality and Advertising: HB's “7 Deadly Sins” Campaign**

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This paper discusses the powerful, symbiotic relationship between women and carnality, as indicated by the preponderance of erotic narratives in advertising addressing women. This is particularly overt in the advertising of products that are depicted as being endowed with the power to enable women to experience intense quasi-sexual pleasure from their consumption. Examples of such product categories include chocolate, luxury ice cream, biscuits, and shampoo. This is a world that reflects a perception of women as ‘consummate consumers’ who are ruled by their bodies and, as such, are less able than men to resist the lure of carnal pleasures (Belk 1998; Belk and Costa 1998).

In tandem with this erotic discourse is its flip side, a reminder that to give in to one’s lower promptings is a weak and wicked thing to do. Belk and Costa (1998), for example, refer to the “emotionally charged” and guilt-laden environment within which women consume chocolate (p.189), the ultimate “feminine” product. This ambivalence is part and parcel, and indeed adds a certain frisson to, women’s consumption of “naughty but nice” products. Stratton (2003) argues that food products are embedded within a narrative of eroticism because “eating is women’s
secret pleasure, reminding women of the repressed pleasures of their own bodies” (p. 237).

The “naughty but nice” narrative is one that is rooted in long-standing, traditional models of femininity, through its association with women’s bodily transgressions and weaknesses, and above all women’s susceptibility to temptation and sin. It is therefore a narrative that needs to be understood within the context of a dominant one that equates women with nature, in binary opposition to men’s equation with culture. Indeed contemporary advertising appeals resonate with us because there is a socio-cultural acceptance that such wants are powerful in women and therefore they must be expected as well as controlled, indulged as well as accepted and, ultimately, they must be stimulated.

The body and its appetites have been largely ignored, or at the very least, neglected, in marketing and consumer behavior research, with consumption conceptualized and described as a disembodied phenomenon (Joy and Venkatesh 1994), an emphasis that can be understood in the context of the gender dichotomy in Western culture generally (Paglia 1992). This emphasis is now changing, and indeed the resurrection of the body is an important, indeed central focus of new consumer research. It is also in keeping with a postmodernist, celebratory and liberatory emphasis, which addresses itself to the complexities and interconnectedness of the body and the mind in consumption (Bordo 1993; Joy and Venkatesh 1994; Firat and Venkatesh 1995), and the disbanding of binary opposites in Western culture, which has had a profound impact on gender discourse (Cixous 1988; Irigaray 1985, 1993; Joy and Venkatesh 1994). Indeed, the revalidation of the body in consumption, and the physicality of consumption, is a key element of postmodern feminist research (Shildrick 1997).
The centerpiece of the paper is a discussion of an advertising campaign for HB’s “7 Deadly Sins” range of luxury ice-creams, which beautifully encapsulates and provides a perfect exemplar for pondering these issues. These so-called "limited editions" represent the sins of revenge, gluttony, sloth, greed, jealousy, vanity and lust. The seven deadly sins are represented by a single woman in seven guises, each of which symbolizes one of the deadly sins. The advertising campaign has been much applauded, and indeed it won a Media Lions Grand Prix at the Cannes Festival in June 2003. This was despite widespread outcry from religious groups, at the trivialization of the seven deadly sins, by equating them with the consumption of a range of luxury ice creams.

HB’s “7 Deadly Sins” ice-creams are derived from HB’s Magnum ice-creams which, as the name may suggest, has made much of the phallic symbolism and masculine potency inherent in the product category:

I'd never explored the 7 sins until I met Magnum. He introduced me to my sinful selves - jealousy, gluttony and lust, and so my journey began … so many sins, so little time. Discover while you can. Magnum 7 Deadly Sins Limited Edition from Walls.

This paper traces the journey embarked on in the advertising campaign, as our intrepid heroine explores seven scenarios, seven landscapes of desire, each of which denote the seven deadly sins and her seven sinful sides …

SELECTED REFERENCES


Photo Marketing Association (2003). *The path from pixels to prints: The challenge of bringing digital imaging to the mass market*, Jackson, MI: Author.


