Automatic Lover: Linking Consumer Practice to Cultural Texts About the Vibrator

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This working paper presents the early stages of an exploratory interpretive study on an emerging type of Brazilian woman as a more overt consumer of sexual products. By using Hirschman, Scott and Wells’ Model of Product Discourse (1998), we analyze consumption practices in comparison to cultural texts about the vibrator. We intend to further understand, with a sociological approach, how women in Brazil create and negotiate meaning through sexually-related consumption; and to examine, with a marketing approach, the effectiveness of product placement and of stealth branding as strategies to market sex to women. Managerial recommendations are also provided.

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**Conceptualization**

People are having sex. At this very moment, millions of people are either engaging in sexual intercourse or planning to (Mackay 2000). And while they are at it, it is very likely that some sort of consumption might be involved. Be it of preservatives, lubricants, magazines, toys, erectile dysfunction drugs or the Internet, in present day western societies, one can hardly have sex and not be a consumer at the same time. So why does literature on consumption rarely address sexuality?

Although sexuality has been an important topic in the sociology literature for decades, it has to date received relatively little attention in the marketing field. The existing marketing research that, to some extent, relates to sexuality has more frequently focused on topics like homosexuality, gender issues, hedonism, desire, and sex in advertising (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Stern 1991; Elliot and Ritson 1995; Kates 1998, 2002; Reichert and Lambiese 2002, Belk, Ger and Askegaard 2003), while the actual consumption of sex products and services has been addressed by very few (Gould 1991; Kent 2005; Langer 2007).

The idea for this exploratory study arose during a previous research on the emergence of a more overt female consumer of sexual products (Walther 2007). The ethnographic method was used then, comprising in-depth interviews and participant observation at women-only sex shops in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, which is popularly and scholarly known as a highly sexualized culture (Parker 1991). During the interviews with shop attendants, an episode of North-American TV series “Sex and the City” was repeatedly mentioned as the reason for which the so-called Rabbit vibrator became the best sold item. Therefore, studying the vibrator as a commoditized product seemed like a promising path of investigation.

Thus, the aim of this study is twofold: (1) to further understand, with a sociological approach, how women in Brazil create and negotiate meaning through sexually-related consumption (Gould 1991); and (2) to examine, with a marketing approach, the effectiveness of product placement (Balasubramanian 1994) and of stealth branding (Holt 2002) as strategies to market sex to women.

**Method**

In this study, we applied Hirschman, Scott and Wells’ Model of Product Discourse (1998) to consumption practices and cultural texts about the vibrator. This model assumes that, in order to acquire meaning, any good must go through a process that will culturally construct it as a symbol and hierarchically place it amidst a product constellation (McCracken 1988) or object system (Baudrillard 1968). Therefore, understanding the process, that is, how goods acquire meaning, is as important as understanding what they mean. This is why data analysis through the Model of Product Discourse may help reaching the aims of this study.

Hirschman, Scott and Wells used data from primetime commercials and programs. They also identified the influence of history on contemporary product meaning. Here we analyzed three Sex and the City episodes—especially the one in which a vibrator played a relevant part—comparing them to practices, as described by respondents during our previous study (Walther 2007). Later, we intend to use, as non-fiction texts, articles from a Brazilian women’s magazine that focuses on sexuality.

After comparing text to practice, we arrived at several interpretive questions that equated scenes from Sex and the City with issues regarding Brazilian sexual identity. Then it was time to resort to history, referring to works like Laqueur’s “Making Sex” (1990) and Brazilian social scientist Gilberto Freyre’s seminal book “Casa-Grande e Senzala” (1933). This step provides a conceptual map for consumption scenes and helps answering questions about how things came to be the way they are.

During all steps of this research, it was important to identify cultural and legal differences between the USA and Brazil, and how they reflect on practices and representations of sexually-related consumption.

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24 “Automatic Lover” is the title of a 1978 disco song by Dee D. Jackson, in which a woman falls in love with a robot.
Major Findings

Using the Model of Product Discourse to understand social constructions about the vibrator as a commoditized symbol of new female sexualities proved itself as an enriching endeavor. The comparison of cultural texts with practices and history showed that current social conceptions about masturbation, female orgasms and vibrators, despite significant changes, still remount to ancient times.

How did the vibrator become widely perceived as a replacement for men and not as a complement for sex? The vibrator was seen, at the time of its invention and for almost a century, as a device to cure “hysteria” in women. The current difficulty to envisage the simultaneous existence of both man and vibrator in a woman’s life reflects very powerful and long-lasting social patterns, such as the androcentric model of sex, which assumes vaginal penetration by the penis as the source of female orgasms (Maines 1999).

How did men and women come to resist and fear the vibrator? It was a shift in its positioning as a commoditized product that changed the vibrator’s popular perception from a harmless healing device to a menacing addictive automatic lover. Both the realization that female orgasms were more easily produced by a vibrator and its transformation into a commoditized penis contributed largely to male feelings of emasculation and to female fears of addiction.

How did female sensuality become associated with infantile imagery? Historical views of sex as being dangerous to women stand in the way of a sound communication between sex products manufacturers and their female customers. In order to market sex to the female audience, companies have been representing women’s sexual pleasure as fashionable and cute.

These were some of the questions this study tried to address. The investigation of these issues contributes to the understanding of how the new female consumer in Brazil and helps generate managerial recommendations. One of them would be to profit from Brazilian soap operas’ enormous reach and influence. Although social issues and cultural trends have been, insofar, successfully disseminated by soap operas in Brazil, sponsored product placement could hugely benefit from meaningful intertwining with the plot (Avery and Ferraro 2000).

Following soap opera’s tradition of featuring strong, controversial female characters, it is only a matter of time before we see a vibrator on Brazilian primetime television.

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