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Japanese Love Hotels: Protecting Privacy For Private Encounters

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This paper explores a cultural curiosity – Japanese “love hotels.” We explore the historical roots and sociological environment of love hotels. Even with a religious and cultural acceptance of sex in Japan, privacy is still an important aspect of the love hotel business. The ways in which love hotels protect patrons’ privacy is a primary part of the service encounter, and is demonstrated here. The importance of privacy may suggest that the need for sexual privacy may be rooted deep in our evolutionary biology. This is an important lesson for the field of marketing, especially for those in the sex-related industries.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores a cultural curiosity—Japanese “love hotels.” These have historical sociological roots deep in the culture. But even with a religious and cultural acceptance of sex in Japan, privacy is still an important aspect of the love hotel business. The ways in which love hotels protect patrons’ privacy is shown here to be a primary part of the service encounter. The importance of privacy poses that the need for sexual privacy may be rooted deep in our evolutionary biology. This is an important lesson for the field of marketing, especially for those in the sex-related industries.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most fascinating businesses in which to examine marketing issues is the “love hotel” industry in Japan. As their name implies, love hotels are by-the-hour hotels focused on carnal pleasures. North America may partly fulfill this niche with seedy “adult motels.” But the Japanese version is a high-tech wonderland. It is not just a place to fulfill sexual needs but also a place that encourages customers to engage their sensual appetites (Tsuzuki, 2001).

Recent estimates are that there are at least 30,000 love hotels operating in Japan that are worth \$40 billion US (Chaplin, 2007). Others have estimated that around 500 million couples visit love hotels each year, which equates to more than a million visits per day (West, 2005, p. 38). Currently, love hotels are generally restricted to Asia (Burpee, 1999). There seems to be considerable interest in love hotels, judging from the popular press articles about them, their mention in travel guide books, a book of love hotel interiors by Kyoichi Tsuzuki (1991), and a traveling exhibit of these photos (e.g., Burpee, 1999; Cameron, 2005; ikjeld.com, 2005). Recent financial returns have been phenomenal. In fact, some financial reports put the financial returns in the 15% range and resulted in overseas investor interest (Cameron, 2005; Dodd, 2004).

While a previous paper has discussed Japanese love hotels in general (Basil 2007), the focus of this paper is the lengths to which hotels go to protect the privacy of patrons. To the extent that we understand this niche of the hotel business and the lengths to which the industry goes to protect the privacy of patrons we will be better able to fathom both the financial returns and fundamental principles of marketing. This paper will start by examining the phenomenon of love hotels from a historical and sociological perspective.

HISTORY

There is an assortment of historical accounts of the origin of love hotels. Some tales trace the roots back to the Edo Period (1600-1868) and specialized tea houses called “*deaijaya*” (West, 2005). But these were typically locations for prostitution, however, and couples were often not part of the picture, so it is more likely that the love hotel industry for couples arises from a later rootstock. One account is that “*enshuku*” establishments developed early in the 20th century to cater to couples. Interestingly, two of the most shocking features were reported to be the double beds and locking doors (West, 2005). A second account suggests that the hotels sprung up to provide space for soldiers and prostitutes during the US occupation (ikjeld.com, 2005). A third account traces the industry to the relocation of hotel operators to Tokyo after a flood, and their search for a niche in the market (ikjeld.com, 2005).

Whatever their origin, love hotels began springing up in sizeable numbers in the 1950s. Their basic operation was an

affordable love-nest that rented by the hour. In the 1960s they were often labeled “yellow hotels,” “couple hotels,” or finally, “love hotels” (West, 2005). Almost immediately, these love hotels began developing “themes.”

“...from the 1960s on love hotels appeared, catering—at least superficially—to modern, Western ideas of love and romance. Many took an individual theme, whether a European-style hotel bedroom, a pleasure den with a rotating bed and ceiling mirror, or a movie such as the eternally popular *Roman Holiday* or *Gone With the Wind*, complete with duplicate bed and curtains” (ikjeld.com, 2005).

During the 1970s one of the most famous of these “love hotels” was Tokyo’s Meguro Emperor Hotel (West, 2005). This “kitchen castle” style of love hotel can be seen in the photos in Figure 1.

The early 1980s was a prosperous period for the love hotel business which coincided with a boom in the Japanese economy. In the late 1980s, however, there was a downturn in the economy. Partly as a result, a “Public Morals Act” was passed to regulate the runaway love hotel industry (West, 2005). Most expected that this would be a death blow to love hotels. However, the love hotel business began to change. First, the hotels moved away from the typical tacky themes that were popular in the 1980s toward individually-themed rooms, done by special designers. Part of this was a purposeful move away from the “sex” business into “boutique” hotels, if only to keep the authorities away. Yet many of the old traditions remained. For example, the most notorious love hotels were “grandfathered in” and allowed to operate in the form they were before the law was passed in the love hotel districts that has existed before such as Tokyo’s Shibuya’s Love Hotel Hill (Dogenzaka) and Sapporo’s Susukino District. In addition, other “boutique hotels” were allowed to have hourly rates.

SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Several previous analysts have speculated on their own sociological explanations of the sex-based love hotels (e.g., Chaplin, 2007; West, 2005). But it is worth a visit to review and reorganize what we know about the sociological and cultural foundations of love hotels.

Erotica. Japan has a long history of acceptance of the erotic. Celebration of the erotic is probably based in the religious roots. Hindu, a religion whose acknowledgement of the erotic can be seen in the *Kama Sutra*, is a foundation of Buddhism. Buddhism, meanwhile, is the historical basis and currently one of the two most common religions in Japan with its own acceptance of erotic. For example, Japan has a tradition of erotic images called “*Shunga*” or “images of spring” that date back as far as the early 17th century (Fagioli, 1998; Klomp makers, 2001; Uhlenbeck, Winkel, Reigle-Newland, Tinios, Segawa-Seigle, & Shigeru, 2005). Perhaps the most famous of these were erotic art called “*Syunsouzu*” that was done by Hokusai Katsushika (usually called “Hokusai”) who lived in the Edo period between 1760 and 1849. Followers continued and built upon the tradition in both art and writing. Shinto is the more recent state religion of Japan, and is probably an even more hospitable religious milieu. For example, Shinto celebrates a fertility festival dedicated to the penis called “*Hounen Matsuri*” where whopping wooden phalluses are publicly paraded. This cultural foundation results in something that has been described as a country

FIGURE 1



where sex is accepted without much of the guilt associated with it in the West. A lack of guilt over sex makes for an accommodating environment for love hotels.

Marriage. Another factor that likely led to the growth of the love hotel industry in Japan is rooted in marriage traditions. Historically Japan has had a high rate of arranged marriages. In these cases some critics have observed that a sense of duty is based more on a sense of obligation than erotic love (Shelley, 1998). In addition to arranged marriage, a current condition, similar to many other countries around the world, is that people are marrying at an older age. This increases the likelihood of premarital sex. As a result of these two forces, some believe this allows Japanese people to be more tolerant of sex and extra-marital affairs (though, as is common elsewhere, this appears to be more acceptable for men).

Space. Japan is also a comparatively crowded country. An average apartment consists of two “6-tatami-mat rooms” or approximately 525 square feet (Smith, 2004). Per person, the typical space per individual in Japan is 31 square meters (333 square feet) compared to 60 square meters in the US (645 square feet; Yan, 2004). “Space is at a premium. Also, until recently, most people lived with their families until marriage, often with three generations under one roof, separated by only paper screens. Without a private space for the most private of acts, the streets wouldn’t be a decent place to walk” (Moran, 2005). Research has shown that crowded conditions have been shown to increase the desire for privacy for sexual intercourse (Edwards & Booth, 2001). Thus love hotels provide space for these encounters.

Perhaps as a result of the religious and cultural acceptance of the erotic, cultural aspects of contemporary marriage, and crowded conditions in Japan, love hotels cater to a cross-section of customers. There is a dearth of research on sexuality in Japan (West, 2005), so there is not much hard data on actual customers that is not proprietary. Yet the evidence is clear that clients include couples that are both married and unmarried as well as some level of prostitution (Chaplin, 2007). Yet the variety of couples that visit love hotels may result in advantages for all. While a young couple may simply be seeking a location to enable an encounter, an extra-marital couple may be seeking a discreet place for their encounter, and a married couple may find a “love hotel” provides a level of illicitness which can provide something “out of the ordinary.” While the first two may provide the bulk of the business, the latter may help to provide legitimacy for the love hotel industry. Yet the

range of customers that are accommodated also results in a preoccupation with privacy that is a model for marketers everywhere.

THE CONCEPT OF PRIVACY

Privacy is an important concept in marketing, and perhaps getting more so in the contemporary era as more and more data are held by companies and governments (Curran & Richards, 2004). With regard to the specific issue of privacy and sex, there appears to be a trend toward greater privacy for sexual relations. In the United States the principle can be traced back at least as far as the 1965 *Griswold v. Connecticut* decision where the Supreme Court of the United States struck down state laws banning contraceptives under the 4th Amendment’s “Right to privacy” and that principle seems to have been expanded through various decisions to today (George & Tubbs, 2005).

It appears that the issues of privacy and sexuality are quite old, perhaps predating the Judeo-Christian morality (Yeazell, 2001). It is possible that the desire for privacy in sexual relations are very fundamental, arising from socio-biological roots in mate guarding (Buss, 2002). Supporting research has shown that people in crowded conditions express a desire for sexual relations in private (Edwards & Booth, 2001).

There are some indicators that Japan and the Japanese may have somewhat greater cultural openness to sexuality. This can be seen in the religious roots of Shinto, historical art such as Shunga, and current acceptance of erotic manga comics. Yet the Japanese Love Hotels take great effort taken to insure privacy. One reason may be the fact that many love hotels encounters, especially prostitution and extramarital relations, may be less legitimate.

Another reason for the privacy of love hotels may be cultural. While we are familiar with the concept of privacy in our own culture, there is some evidence that the concept of privacy varies across cultures (Capurro, 2005). Some evidence suggests that in Japan the concept of privacy may be somewhat different than it is in the west (Nakada & Tamura, 2005). Largely this is centered around the notion of public and private. Perhaps this would explain why public erotic art and love hotels are tolerated and acceptable, but other acts are expected to remain private. The culture and state may allow love hotels, yet individuals may not individually endorse them and in fact may be embarrassed by them. Consistent with this assertion, there is also a dearth of research on human sexual behavior in Japan, including non-proprietary data on love hotel

FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3



visits. My personal communication with Japanese people and people familiar with Japanese culture affirm the private aspect of sexuality.

So it is interesting to note that even in a culture where sexuality is embraced, there is still a great deal of effort afforded to protect the privacy of lovers. As one popular writer has summarized it, "To ensure their clients can fully relax, love-hotels are models of discretion. Customers never see the staff and anonymity is assured" (Moran, 2005). This paper will examine the ways that love hotels protect the privacy of their patrons.

HOW LOVE HOTELS PROTECT PATRONS' PRIVACY

One of the first identifiable ways of protecting privacy is through the locations of love hotels. Specifically, love hotels are located largely off of the thoroughfares that are the turf of traditional hotels, and instead are more likely located on smaller streets or alleys. The Dogenzaka region of Shibuya and the Susukino district of Sapporo are excellent examples of these environments. Because of the lower levels of traffic passing by, lodgers are less likely to be seen by others and this offers a measure of discretion for customers. These alley locations can be seen in the photos in Figure 2.

Another way of insuring privacy for potential patrons is through providing information in front of the hotels. This can range

from price information to photos of the rooms. Similar to a menu outside a restaurant, this allows people to browse without having to convey their intentions by going into (and out of) the wrong hotel. Examples of these signs are shown in Figure 3.

An alternative way of insuring privacy is by providing potential customers plenty of information for the hotel and room selection process in advance of a visit to a love hotel. As a result, a potential customer can compare hotel, rooms, and prices before going to a love hotel neighborhood. This minimizes their "window shopping" time and reduces the likelihood they will be seen in the street outside of the love hotel. Two media that are used to convey this information are websites and booklets that show the different hotels, their location, and each of the rooms at the hotels. Two such websites are <http://www.binguan.info/index.htm> and <http://www.sapporo-mig.co.jp/rio/price.html>. In addition, these sites also make available a printed directory of love hotels in a region. And many love hotels are part of a consortium where a visit to one love hotel provides information on the other hotels owned by the same chain.

Once a person has decided on a hotel, another way in which love hotels insure privacy is through the use of entrances that provide sheltered entry. Patrons can quickly "duck in" so that passersby have to be in exactly the right location to see someone enter a love hotel. As a result a friend or neighbor who thinks they may have seen someone they know suddenly finds that the person has simply disappeared, hopefully before they are sure if that was

FIGURE 4

FIGURE 5


Mr. X or not. Examples of these entrances can be seen in the photos in Figure 4.

There are similar accommodations for those who drive. Many love hotels have dedicated parking with walls and security to reduce the likelihood of being seen. As a previous writer has observed, “Drivers enter underground car parks hidden from view and staff cover their number plates to foil any prying eyes” (Moran, 2005).

The third way that love hotels protect the privacy of customers is by using dark lobbies. Since being seen in the lobby of a love hotel would probably be even more embarrassing than being seen in front of a love hotel, lobbies are built to insure privacy. First off, love hotels are often fairly small. Minimizing the number of customers reduces the likelihood of running into someone you know. In addition to being dark, the lobbies are often structurally segmented by screens and such. These measures reduce the likelihood of customers being visible to others. The darkness also makes it harder to identify someone in the rare event the customers would pass an employee or another customer.

A fourth way of insuring privacy is to insure customers do not have to face a desk clerk. Several years ago this was done through the use of signs and screens. “An empty reception greets customers and a back-lit panel displays photographs of the available rooms”

(Moran, 2005). The clerk was stationed behind an opaque screen where the money or credit card was passed. More recently this is accomplished with computers. The computers display images of the rooms. A couple chooses a room and is off (Figure 5)

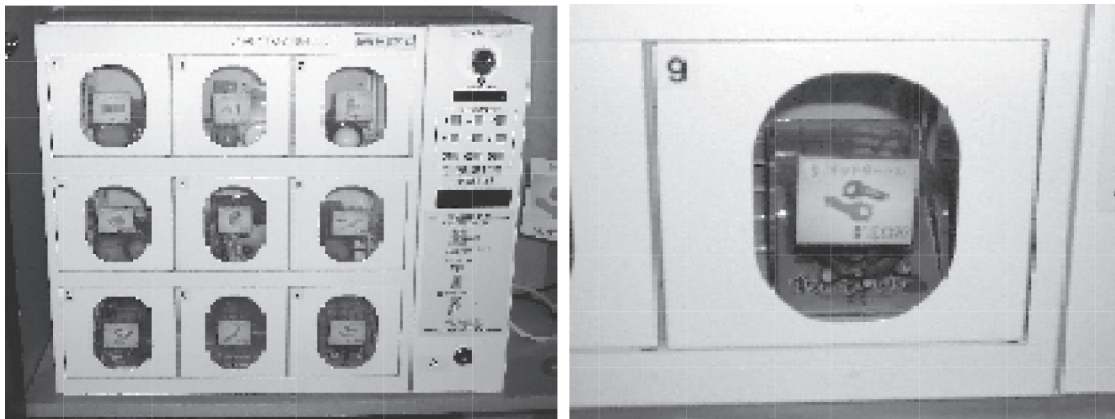
Often these computers produce a slip with the room number. To help with the navigation through the dimly lit lobby, there are often lights that direct customers to the elevator (this can be seen in the floor lighting), and even to their room (often indicated in green). As Moran has observed, “...lights on the floor act as a guide to the room” (Moran, 2005). These navigational devices are shown in the photos in Figure 6.

Once the room is reached and the couple enters, the door locks (Moran, 2005). Once inside the room, hotels often sell other products or services. The Public Morals Act intended to make it difficult for love hotels by requiring food service. As a result, many love hotels now offer food. But to insure privacy for customers, often this is through in-room self-service devices. Alcohol and much of the food is sold in refrigerators that automatically keep track of what is removed. Another product that is often offered in love hotels are sex toys. Figure 7 includes photos of an automated sex-toy vending machine also with an automatic inventory system. Because these machines are located within the room, they provide

FIGURE 6



FIGURE 7



privacy to customers, perhaps even a better place to pick up a sex toy than at a store.

The conclusion of the visit to the love hotel is the payment. To retain the anonymity of the encounter most love hotels include an automated check-out machine just inside the door of the hotel room. The system accesses the check-in time and rate information and adds any in-room purchases. A simple detail of the bill and payment are all that are required before slipping away anonymously. Credit cards are accepted but cash works even better in retaining the anonymity of the encounter (Figure 8).

DISCUSSION

Love hotels are a large and important business in Japan. They are rooted in a history of religious and cultural acceptance of the erotic. Throw this history into the contemporary context of crowded conditions, and you can see why love hotels have come to provide a location for these carnal encounters. A close analysis of love hotels demonstrates that they function by providing a place and by going to great lengths to insure that that place is private.

There are important insights to be learned from the study of love hotels for a number of marketing ventures, including pornography, sex stores, and the commercial sex industry. Specifically,

even in Japan, a country tolerant of sexuality, privacy protection appears to be an important principal for a successful sex-based enterprise. Perhaps the sense of vulnerability arises from something more basic than religious rules, but arises from a psycho-biological feeling of vulnerability or mate guarding while engaged in sexual relations. Whatever the case, it appears to be critically important to assure customers how their privacy will be protected, to demonstrate how that happens, and then to live up to that standard.

It is also interesting to note the cultural differences in Japan's tolerance of love hotels. This may also be a reflection of the ability to separate public and private so there is some tolerance of the collective will about what other people chose to do, while in the west we often are not worried about our own behaviors, but are worried about others'—this is called the “third-person effect” (Lee & Tamborini, 2005).

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FIGURE 8



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