

Sex and the city: Branding, gender and the commodification of sex consumption in contemporary retailing

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Abstract

This paper explores the changing spatiality of the sex retail industry in England and Wales, from highly regulated male-orientated sex shops, pushed to the legislative margins of the city and social respectability, towards the emergence of unregulated female-orientated ‘erotic boutiques’ located visibly in city centres. This is achieved through an exploration of the oppositional binaries of perceptions of sex shops as dark, dirty, male-orientated, and ‘seedy’ and erotic boutiques as light, female-orientated and stylish, showing how such discourses are embedded in the physical space, design and marketing of the stores and the products sold within them. More specifically, the paper analyses how female-orientated sex stores utilise light, colour and design to create an ‘upscaling’ of sexual consumerism and reflects on what the emergence of up-scale female spaces for sexual consumption in the central city might mean in terms of theorisations of the intersectionality between agency, power, gender and class. The paper thus considers how the shifting packaging and presentation of sex-product consumption in the contemporary city alters both its acceptability and visibility.

Keywords

brands, city, consumption, gender, retailing, sex shop, space

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Introduction

One of the most interesting developments in the recent study of sexuality has been an increasing focus on its spatial dimensions. In this paper we address the spatial, social and gendered contours of sex shops. This is

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significant as part of a broader project to theorise both the emotional and the corporeal dimensions of the consuming body, and its classed and gendered composition. The paper highlights the importance of place, commodification, social class and regulation as key determinants in shaping the commercialisation and normalisation of contemporary sex-product retailing. We explore how sex premises and products have become key spaces and places that contribute to and constitute the contemporary city. Specifically, the paper maps out the ways in which there has been a dramatic and highly visible feminisation of the adult retail sector which has a very specific geography and a particular set of branding, marketing, sales and retail design techniques. This paper explores the complexities and contradictions that lie at the heart of how, why and where feminised spaces of (im)morality are constituted and reproduced. Crucially, the paper explores the role of agency in the commodification and marketisation of female sex shopping. The participation of female consumers in contemporary urban sex shopping is a subject of pronounced theoretical contestation. For some, the new generation of city centre female-focused sex shops are simply the latest stage in a long-standing process of the neoliberal colonisation of all aspects of public and private life, a means of creating new markets for hungry, unsatiated female consumers ready for their next shopping fix. From this standpoint, the pornification of contemporary culture is leading to 'a form of hyper-sexism that entails an increase in physical, sexual, mental, economic and emotional cruelty towards women' (Tankard Reist and Bray, 2011: xiv). Women are, in this interpretation, little more than consuming subjects dancing to the tune of the market. Such interpretations of female sexual consumption sees the proliferation and normalisation of sex stores as the 'epitome of heteronormative capitalism and patriarchy,

an industry dominated by men who produce sexually explicit material firstly, for their own benefit; next, to satisfy the insatiable sexual (and perverted) desires of other heterosexual men and, finally, to reinforce the secondary position of women by reducing them to commodified sex objects' (Maginn and Steinmetz, 2004: 3). Other readings are entirely possible, however. A range of work is beginning to challenge this approach that casts pornography as a 'monolithic medium' and argues, rather, that the new breed of female-friendly sex retailers is testament to the new agentive capacities enjoyed by women in the post-feminist era. Might not the new, highly visible generation of female-focused sex shops be indicative of the liberatory and celebratory social and economic position that (some) women now enjoy? There is an emergent body of work that attests to the new freedoms and powers that consuming women now enjoy in the contemporary city as a result of the normalisation and democratisation of desire (McNair, 2002: 166). Evans et al. (2010: 216) argue that this physical emergence of erotic retailing from the 1990s was mirrored by changing perceptions of female sexuality which was increasingly being seen as active, agentive, assertive and autoerotic and was framed through discourses of 'post-feminism and hedonistic rights of pleasure'. The changing geography of the erotic store, its increasing visibility and the materialisation of the female sex store in urban centres has in and of itself helped to make the consumption of sex more acceptable. Focusing on the commodification of female sex products in the contemporary city, the paper thus explores how the gendered branding and presentation of sex-product retailing alters both its acceptability and visibility in the city. The paper focuses on one particular space, the female sex-product retail store, in order to explore how the contemporary city acts as a key site for the representation and

sale of new forms of gendered sexual consumption. The commodification of sex products reveals both the changing gendered nature of sex shops and their increasing visibility in ways that are variously interpreted as empowering or emasculating. The changing nature of sex shops represents a perfect illustration of broader trends towards the idealisation, commercialisation and normalisation of sexual consumption. The shifts in the visibility and invisibility of gendered spaces for selling sex products reveal important new – and difficult – intersections between design and desire, profitability and pleasure, class and consumption, agency and oppression, bodies and space. It is to a critical interrogation of this problem that the paper now turns.

The shifting spatiality of the sex store

The shop itself is a classy establishment - no darkly-lit, sleazy side alley building. (Customer review, Ann Summers¹)

The spatial contours of sex retailing and consumption are deeply woven into the physical, economic, social and cultural fabric of the city. The presence of sex-related establishments in public spaces has long been a source of anxiety and fear, but providing they were secreted away in liminal, marginalised ‘hidden’ spaces, their potentially ‘polluting’ impacts could be quietly ignored. Sex shops have traditionally been perceived as masculinised consumption spaces, frequented at the margins of both the city and the clock. The landscape of sex-product retailing in England has, however, shifted dramatically in recent years (Martin, 2014). Its early origins are situated in 1950s Soho with the emergence of specialist ‘book shops’, housing books of a mildly erotic nature, acting as a cover for the pornographic images and poor quality film

held in the secreted stores’ back rooms (Manchester, 1986). In the late 1970s a chain of sex stores emerged named ‘Private Shops’, which were synonymous with the contemporary associations of sex shops characterised by concealed shop fronts, minimal shop décor and an orientation towards the heterosexual male consumer (Kent and Brown, 2006). The characteristics and localities of such stores developed through the introduction of government legislation in 1982, which remains a regulatory medium through which to control the number of sex shops in England and Wales. The legislation requires stores to obtain a ‘Sex Establishment’ license from their local authority if they wish to sell R18 videos or DVDs (Coulmont and Hubbard, 2010; Goudie, 1986; Hubbard, 2012; Manchester, 1986) and/or over a ‘significant degree’ of ‘sex articles’ (*1982 Act*, Schedule 4.1)² (both of which are vaguely and indeterminately defined by the legislation). This licensing geographically restricts stores to marginalised locations in towns and cities and requires shop contents to be concealed from the street outside. The clustering of adult entertainment premises has thus been deliberately prevented by a range of regulatory mechanisms such as zoning laws in the USA that aimed to curb the creation of ‘vice districts’ (Hubbard et al., 2009: 88). In England and Wales, local authorities have been able to remove such businesses from particular cities ‘simply on the basis that they were “out of place”’ (Hubbard and Colosi, 2013: 67). In what amounted to a form of ‘spatial governmentality’ (Hubbard et al., 2013: 126), sex premises are pushed to the hidden interstices of the city, away from more valued commercial and residential land, and far from the innocent eyes of the general public (particularly women and children, the upholders of ‘family values’) for fear that they may be tainted or polluted by noxious activities in unwanted places. Typical examples of regulated sex shops include the chain

stores 'Private Shops' (owned by David Gold and subject to much controversy), 'Harmony' and 'Simply Pleasure'.

In recent decades, arguably as part of the process of urban gentrification (Hubbard et al., 2008), there has been a shift towards more design-led, heavily branded and stylised sex consumption formats that are deemed sufficiently 'up-market' as to be the acceptable face of the sex shop sector. Sex retailing has become big business and new gendered commodities and markets are being created in the heart of our urban centres. The geographical placing of female sex shops is particularly significant and reveals a markedly different spatiality to that of traditional male sex shops. Positioned in central areas of towns and cities such 'erotic boutiques' do not require any form of licence in order to sell lingerie, sex toys and sometimes soft-core pornography to largely (or exclusively) female customers. Examples of erotic boutiques include the well-known British chain store Ann Summers that began in 1970 and can arguably be seen as a key player – a forerunner – in the mainstreaming of female adult retailing (Kent and Brown, 2006). There are now almost 150 stores throughout the UK and Ireland, and a number of independent retailers have also entered the market in the last two decades. In addition, in the last decade there has also been an emergence of up-scale erotic boutiques, such as Agent Provocateur, Coco de Mer and Myla, keen to promote their 'designer' credentials through the sale of fashion-conscious, design-led lingerie and sex toys and by presenting themselves as bespoke retail spaces catering to a sexually sophisticated female clientele. Coco de Mer, for example, is situated in a prime retail site in Covent Garden, London. Founded in 2001 by Samantha Roddick, the daughter of the Body Shop founder Anita Roddick, the store evokes a sense of grandiose, decadent luxury through the sale of designer lingerie and sex toys in

an impeccably designed store with its 'dark red walls and nineteenth century props' (Kent, 2005: 32) giving an air of wealth, luxury and seductiveness. There has thus been a profound re-shaping and re-scaling of the geographical landscape of the retail sex trade in recent decades. Sex businesses have shifted from back alleys and 'municipal districts of ill-repute' (Liepe-Levinson, 2002: 22) to the heart of the city's consumer landscape (Hubbard, 2012: 155).

The growth and lack of regulation of up-market retail spaces is raising important questions about gender, space, consumption and the body in the contemporary city. Alongside urban centrality, this new genre of sex retailers are exclusive, up-scale operations with particular customer profiles in mind. As we go on to demonstrate, the placing of sex stores reveals a great deal about the intersectionality between space, gender and class in the contemporary city. There is a highly distinctive locational geography at play that is reflected in the geography of the store locations: high-end designer erotic boutiques, such as Agent Provocateur and Myla, are predominantly located in affluent retail hubs such as Knightsbridge and Mayfair in London and in flagship department stores including Selfridges and Harrods. The location of these stores in up-scale, prime retail locations directly contrasts with the locations of licensed sex shops which are legislatively pushed to the margins of the city, further demonstrating how it is the packaging and presentation of sex that enables or disables its visibility in urban space. Female sex consumption has not simply become more acceptable: the spatial strategies and physical materialisation of the up-market sex shop has made it so.

Methodological approach

The research on which this paper is based includes interviews with four company

directors and 14 shop workers, observational research conducted in 43 sex shops and erotic boutiques in England and a content analysis of 354 online customer reviews (in which the reviews were coded into a frame, a series of major themes and refined layers of subthemes or categories using NVivo). In addition, a combination of content and semiotic analysis was used to analyse 7116 products. Each product was individually collated into an excel database in which the product type, name, colour, cost and material were recorded. This enabled an understanding of quantities and specificities of the products for sales, alongside considerations of visual representations of sex products, here used as 'visual texts' (Pink, 2007: 21).

Taken together the range of methods shed light on the 'upscaling' of the sex retail industry, on the significance of the sensory retail environment and on the hyper-commodification of sexualisation of female consumption. These themes are explored in detail throughout the remainder of the paper, and reveal that the relatively recent emergence of the feminised retail store within the contemporary city is raising a series of highly pertinent questions about the intersectionality between class, gender and space. The analysis underscores the tensionful nature of the commodification of female sex and questions the degree to which the developments underway represent a post-feminist celebration of freedom, choice and agency for women, or whether the developments discussed represent little more than the latest capitalist technique to commodify, marketise and monetise 'every last drop' of human life (Thrift, 2006).

Into the light: The affective properties of luminosity

Inside, its[sic] has the same comfortable & welcoming atmosphere, bathed in pink light from

the beautiful persex[sic]-lit displays. (Customer review, Erotic boutique, Sh!)³

Never been to a sex shop before. Always thought of them as dark and sleazy establishments with perverts at the counters. (Customer review, Sex shop, Simply Pleasure)⁴

Light is a recurrent motif in urban architecture and design. An understanding of the relationship between light, store design and the consumption experience is an important yet neglected element within contemporary retail geography. Light and luminosity are key strategies that shape social encounters, the in-store experience and consumer perceptions of space. Light, as Bille and Sørensen argue so elegantly, is a key means of 'exercising social intimacy and inclusion, of shaping moral spaces ... while working as a metaphor as well as a material agent in these social negotiations' (2007: 263). Light is symbolic, it affects our experience of being in space and can be actively configured and orchestrated to alter our relations between people, spaces and objects: 'Without light, form and space have little meaning to most of us' (Davey, 2004: 47). As the following discussion reveals, light affects retail space in very profound ways, both perceptual and material. It transforms consumers' readings of retail space, the ways they perform in these spaces and the meanings they ascribe to contemporary urban space. Store lighting is actively used to shape, promote and project notions of morality and danger, seduction and safety. It conceals and reveals, is atmospheric and affective, powerful and persuasive. The ways in which light is experienced and its affective properties lie in part in its mode and materiality (bright, dim, artificial, subdued) (Bille and Sørensen, 2007: 274). Reflections, shadows, glare, luminosity – all work in different ways to produce consumption lightscapes the mould the affective properties of objects and the spaces in which they are displayed. Both light and colour

alter the world and the way in which we relate to it, endowing certain commodities with aura, throwing others into sharp relief, and masking, camouflaging or disguising others (Young, 2006).

In the specific instance of sex-product retailing, darkness and light are used as visual cues that signal mood, texture, spatial transition and the perception of security and safety. Lighting and its absence are used to create atmosphere, ambience and intimacy. It both reveals and conceals and is affective and manipulative: 'The materiality of light has the ability to alter human experiences of space and to define sensations of intimacy and exclusion' (Bille and Sørensen, 2007: 274). Darkness is associated with night time, danger, excitement, immorality, sexual delinquency (Baldwin, 2004; Hobbs et al., 2000; Otter, 2008; Painter, 1996); 'the private' and 'the impossible to discipline' (Barker, 1998: 184). In contrast, daylight is associated with reason, morality and control (Barker, 1998: 184). Light is symbolised by the colour white (Barker, 1998: 184) – it is luminous, shining, representative of all that is simple, clean, pure and innocent (Gaimster, 2011: 65). The customer review excerpts emphasise the complex interpretations afforded to light, and how it is used as a key spatial signifier. Traditional sex shops are associated with the darkness, no doubt resulting in part from their legally imposed concealed entrances and windows which prevent natural daylight from entering the store. This renders the stores hidden, concealed and secreted from the street outside which gives the sex shop an illusionary quality of darkness. However, in order to compensate for the lack of naturally occurring daylight, the interiors of sex shops are typically lit with strong artificial lighting (usually in the form of fluorescent strip lights), which creates an unnatural and painfully bright retail space. The dislocation here between the dark invisibility of the exterior and the glaring brightness of the interior is a

perfect illustration of the spatial tactics at work in retail design. The view from the street is of a dark, impenetrable and forbidden space. The contrast between this and the glaring strip-lit interior is stark and resonant. The connotations of darkness attributed to the concealed exteriors of licensed sex shops, can also result in sex shops being seen as 'dirty spaces' (Tyler, 2011) that need to be hidden away. Positioning sex shops as dark, dirty spaces in turn generates perceptions that they have the capacity to pollute, contaminate or seep and leak into their surrounding area (Hubbard, 2012), thus explaining their alleged need for strict regulation.

In contrast with sex shops, erotic boutiques are free from the regulatory requirements of sex establishment licensing that requires concealment. Erotic boutiques are permitted to have transparent glass shop fronts that allow natural daylight in and render them spaces of cleanliness and purity, as opposed to spaces of darkness and dirtiness. The natural light permitted in stores also overcomes the need for harsh artificial lighting. Instead, recessed lighting, uplighters and chandeliers are used to emphasise the fashion-orientated and design-led nature of the retail environment. In addition, and in a very different way to the darkened exterior of traditional sex shops, designer erotic boutiques such as *Coco de Mer* and *Agent Provocateur* actively play with the seductive association of darkness through the use of dark colour schemes. Here we see colour, light, shade and shadow being used in very different ways and for very different purposes. In traditional sex shops the darkened exterior store fronts stand in stark contrast to the glaring luminosity of the strip-lit interior; in feminised erotic boutiques soft tones, subtle shading and natural light are actively used in the creation of stylised, seductive, up-scale and design-led retail environments.

Light in this context, we argue, is an illuminator or signifier of social class. Lighting

enables us to see how particular social classifications are linked to technologies, particular aesthetic assemblages and design interventions, and yet many of these assumptions – enshrined in discourses on crime, deviance and immorality, are left unspoken and therefore unchallenged (Entwistle et al., 2013). In the case of gendered sex retailers, light plays a crucial role in signifying and classifying urban space. Dark, impenetrable traditional sex shops are contained at the margins of the city, liminal, marginalised and difficult to recognise or read. Feminised erotic boutiques, in contrast, are permitted to occupy prime retail spaces – visible to all, gaily illuminated with soft pink décor and natural light. Light, we argue, plays a fundamental role in contemporary urban life, ‘as infrastructure, as technology, as medium, as ambiance, as façade or, quite literally, as a particular kind of material, or stuff, that we do, make and shape through our everyday practices. Lighting is deeply social and has always had symbolic associations. Lighting is never simply a matter of visibility’ (Isenstadt et al., 2014).

You can have any colour as long as it’s black (or pink): The chromatography of feminised retail space

This is the most female-friendly place to buy toys in London, especially if you’re shy, windows covered in pink film, staff all women, customers mostly women and there’s a pink beaded curtain up at the door! (Customer review, Sh!)⁵

The manipulation and configuration of light within different sex stores and erotic boutiques is paralleled by the use of colour to represent and reinforce particular stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity as

part of the broader process of concealment of certain spaces and the re-branding and upscaling of others. The colour of garments, toys, store design and buildings produces emotional effects and responses. We feel and see colour through our skin and colour is another key means through which social constructions of gender and sexuality are inscribed onto space. Colour is a key tactic employed by sex-product retailers to exploit gendered stereotypes in order to enhance profitability and tap new markets. This section of the paper draws attention to how gendered stereotypes are represented in the space of the shops and the products they sell. Observational research confirmed that traditional sex shops are indeed overwhelmingly masculinised spaces; produced for men, staffed predominantly by men and frequented largely by men. The physical space of the store also reflects their masculine orientation with the majority of shop fronts being blue. The colour blue is associated with both ‘sexual innuendo (blue jokes)’ (Gaimster, 2011: 66) and ‘pale blues are associated in the West with baby boys’ (Gaimster, 2011: 66). However, as discussed above, the masculinity associated with traditional sex shops is perceived as a particular form of ‘dangerous’ masculinity, one which is abject, dirty or perverted and must be concealed from view.

We explore how colour is used in a variety of ways in feminised sex retailers (store design, product design, lingerie, furnishings and visual merchandising) to signal particular sets of associations concerning social constructions of gender, and reveal how the deployment of colour can also be a deeply classed affair. Most striking is the use of the colour pink within the design and decor of the mid-range erotic boutiques in order to produce an affective sensory experience of being cocooned in a female-friendly ‘safe-space’. For example, the feminised erotic boutique Sh! in Hoxton, London, has light

pink walls, frosted glass windows with heart shapes inscribed into them and white fairy lights lining the walls. The high-street chain Ann Summers has pink carpets, floor tiles, walls and display units. The extensive use of the colour pink, alongside shiny surfaces, sparkling lights, floral patterns and heart shapes, are key motifs in the creation of stereotypically gendered children's spaces such as Barbie or Disney fantasy lands or the highly stereotypically gendered 'girls' sections of toy shops. This illustrates how the use of the colour pink is not only used to construct a stereotypical version of traditional femininity but also an infantilised version of this which has a double-effect: it both de-eroticises the space in question whilst at the same time hinting at an intertwining of sex, childhood and commodification. Sex-product consumption thus becomes symbolically and spatially interwoven with broader social and cultural debates surrounding the premature sexualisation of young girls in popular culture and commerce (Carey, 2011; Coy, 2009).

The more up-scale, design-led female erotic boutiques use colour in a rather different way. Again it is used as a symbolic motif or marker, but black is the colour of choice in a majority of these stores. The colour black is used throughout the downstairs display area of *She Said* (Brighton), including the wallpaper, decorative upholstery and soft furnishings. *Agent Provocateur* also uses the colour black in the decoration schemes of a number of its stores including the use of black chandeliers and heavy pieces of black furniture for the storage and display of lingerie. The colour black is commonly associated with sex, seduction and the erotic (McCulloch, 2010) and is used in the erotic boutique to add a more sophisticated and sexualised edge to the consumption space. The female sex shop is thus a variegated and stratified concept – far from being a homogenous retail format we see the ways in which space

and class are interwoven in both the location and the design, décor and product ranges of stores. At the middle reaches of the market in stores such as Ann Summers, pink is the dominant motif – the socially constructed colour of femininity – unthreatening and playful. As we move to the more up-scale erotic boutiques the semiotics change, the marketing message becomes something altogether more unattainable: the stores are elegant, opulent, design-led and undeniably classed and exclusionary. These are spaces for wealthy women. The use of the dominant colour black has long been associated with elegance, glamour, sophistication, style, mystery, wealth and power (Fields, 2006; Gaimster, 2011; McCulloch, 2010) with the 'little black dress' seen as the 'epitome of sophistication' (McCulloch, 2010: 24) and 'black tie' as the dress code for formal evening events and social occasions. The colour black therefore lends the gentrified erotic boutique an air of sophistication and glamour and contributes to the up-market branding strategies of shop space. It also reveals how the simple binary between the assumed darkness of traditional male sex shops and the openness, lightness and brightness of erotic boutiques is actively challenged and broken down in the space of the erotic boutique: whilst black is typically perceived as the colour of darkness, the night and danger, it is here re-appropriated to signify and symbolise sexual sophistication. Here we see how colour is deployed in very different ways and for very different effects, effects that are both gendered and classed.

The use of colour as a symbolic marker is also reflected in the sex toys sold in erotic boutiques, which are predominantly either black or pink/purple and are styled in ambiguous shapes such as the rabbit which has a range of conflicting symbolic associations. Rabbits are evocative of both childish innocence (the lucky white rabbit, the

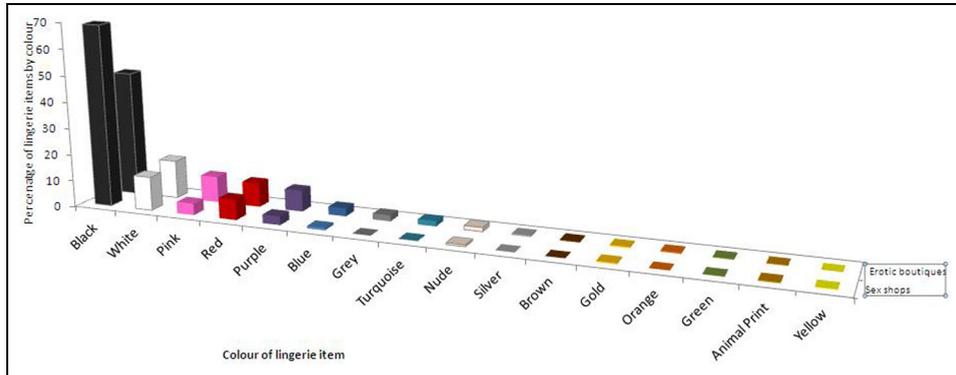


Figure 1. Proportion of different colours of lingerie items in sex shops and erotic boutiques.

innocent symbolism of a child's soft toy) and of fecundity, fertility, lust, promiscuity and naughty sophistication in the case of the Playboy Bunny icon. Rabbits are traditionally associated with sexual rigour and promiscuity (for example the unstoppable 'Duracell bunny'). The use of the rabbit shape in this toy nods to its ability to provide constant sexual pleasure and has subsequently become an iconic symbol of female masturbatory empowerment (Attwood, 2005).

The colours and styles of lingerie sold in sex shops and erotic boutiques also construct a specific version of erotic femininity. Of an analysis of 1565 lingerie items sold in eight case study stores, black was found to be the dominant colour of lingerie, making up 69% of the total lingerie in sex shops and 47% in erotic boutiques (see Figure 1). Black lingerie has been theorised as eroticised and sexualised (Fields, 2006; Lurie, 1981) and as a sign of 'female sexual sophistication' (Fields, 2006: 611), elegance and glamour (McCulloch, 2010). It is therefore classically associated with both sex and sophistication. It also has a stronger set of associations relating to sexual power, experience, authority and dominance which, when enrolled as a key motif and marker in female

sex shops, alludes to notions of female empowerment. Black is the dominant colour of PVC and leather 'bondage' or 'dominatrix' outfits and lingerie items, again signalling the potential for female consumers to buy their way to sexual freedom and control. For example, a black, BDSM style bra sold at Coco de Mer is described as having 'a distinct dominatrix feel with a structured style and linear lines reminiscent of rope'.⁶

Pink is also evident within the product offerings of feminised erotic boutiques, with 38% of the 2119 sex toys analysed across eight stores being either pink or purple. However, as with the discussion about store design and theming above, pink lingerie is more typically found in the mainstream, mid-market chain store outlets such as Ann Summers. This distinction is an important and deeply classed affair. The push-up pink bras on sale at Ann Summers promise a '3×larger cleavage' at an affordable price point of £15 and appeal to conventional heteronormative constructions of busty, lace-clad women who enjoy dressing up for 'their men'. The Ann Summers lingerie advertisements and shop windows display a particular version of femininity that is resonant of top-shelf pornography, or page 3 spreads in tabloid newspapers; cheeky, sexy, affordable

and heavily made-up women. In marked contrast, the opulent black and gold interiors of up-scale erotic boutiques, such as *Coco de Mer* and *Agent Provocateur*, reveal a very different version of contemporary woman. Gone are the shapely breasts, curves, commercialised and heteronormatively made-up dolls on display at *Ann Summers*. In the designer retail store we are shown editorially styled, small breasted, slim, faceless women. Whether submissive or domineering is indeterminate; that these women are knowledgeable, adventurous, sexually adept and in control is clear, and with price points upwards of £100 for a bra, these women also have the financial means to buy into this erotic vision of sexual competence.

Taken together, the use of colour as a symbolic marker in sex-product retail spaces and products suggests that it is not necessarily sex itself that ignites anxiety and controversy when positioned publicly and visibly in the public space of the city, but rather it is the extent to which sex space is gendered, designed and stylised that may determine its acceptability. Soft lighting, feminine pink styling and window displays that are more akin to fashion stores than sex establishments appear to generate far less controversy than traditional sex shops that are located on the fringes of the city, are painted black or blue, are dark and have masked-out windows and closed doors. These spaces are difficult to read, they generate fear and anxiety about what might lie within.

Designing desire: Branding, fashion and new forms of classed commodification

It's like entering the Versace of sex shops.
(Customer review, *Coco de Mer*)

Beyond the powerful symbolic motifs of darkness and light, pink and black discussed above, branding and design are increasingly foregrounded in the up-market design-led space of the erotic boutique. In contrast to traditional sex shops, the spaces of erotic boutiques are heavily stylised retail environments whose 'look, feel, product and image embodies a conscious attempt to mimic aspects of non-sexual products and services' in intent if not in content (Brassington and Pettitt, 2007: 43). This is achieved through the creation of themed retail environments, such as female play spaces at *Sh!* and lavish erotic 'boudoirs' at *She Said* and *Agent Provocateur*. At *Agent Provocateur*, stock is housed in dressers and dark red fabrics adorn the windows and walls. Products are delicately hung on rails, stored in heavy wooden cabinets, placed on book shelves or displayed on marble top tables. The stores are uncluttered and the displays are minimalist, emphasising a sense of scarcity, uniqueness and expense. The feeling of scarcity and expense is further highlighted by certain products being displayed in spot-lit wooden and glass cabinets as akin to the display practices more typically associated with the museum or art gallery. The store's decoration, layout and design are an attempt to replicate non-sex product, designer fashion stores and are highly engineered and stylised retail environments based on the premises of luxury, expense, design and fashion. Designer erotic boutiques make conscious attempts to align their brand images with discourses of fashion, design and style through the products they sell as well as the spaces in which they are sold. *Agent Provocateur* and *Myla*, for example, manufacture their own lingerie and mirror the seasonality of the fashion industry by launching new ranges to follow the fashion seasons of Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter. *Coco de Mer's* founder, Samantha Roddick,

recounts the strong influence that fashion has on the brand:

We design most of our products and most of those products were designed in England and they were then, or are still are ... all hand crafted and had a huge fashion influence attached to it. So we had like everything for every orifice and everything for every kind of form of sexual expression that actually functioned but we had Testino shoot our stuff, Kate Moss in it, or we had Naomi Campbell in our kind of ... gear. (Interview, 2011)

The overt reference here to the famous fashion photographer Mario Testino and the supermodels Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell emphasises the importance of high-end fashion to the branding of *Coco de Mer*. The example of Myla similarly reveals the close alliances being developed between the fashion, design and sex-product market; 'Myla is a sensual lifestyle brand at the cutting edge of fashion and design ... Our aim is to be the global lifestyle brand of choice' (Myla [Brand book], 2007: 31 [sent to author July 2012]). Alongside fashionability, high-end erotic boutiques place a great emphasis on the design and quality of their products; particularly sex toys and specifically vibrators and dildos. In the following quote Samantha Roddick recounts how consumers interpreted her products as being part of their larger fashion repertoire: 'women bought these products and they bought them and they were like oh my God, thank God that they can match their Chanel shoes with their f**king harness'.⁷ Many of the sex toys sold at *Coco de Mer* and Myla are made of rare and expensive materials such as glass, jade, wood, ceramic, silver and pearl. Myla place a great emphasis on promoting their sex toys as high-design items akin to a piece of art or sculpture: 'our premium sex toys are unique and the result of a creative collaboration between an artist, sculptor or designer and expert toy maker'.⁸ Myla also

emphasise the design elements of their sex toys by highlighting that they are created by professional designers, 'we have a team of designers whom we contacted through the Royal Society of British Sculpture' (Barber, 2001: 29). Tom Dixon, for example, designed Myla's famous 'bone' dildo which is shaped like a shoe horn, made of black crystal (Kent and Brown, 2006) and was displayed in both Liberty's and Selfridges Christmas windows. The co-founder of Myla, Nina Hampson, stated that 'We're designing vibrators that are overtly sexy, but could also sit on your mantelpiece as beautiful sculptures' (Barber, 2001). The statements from Myla highlight how art, style and design are drawn upon and combined to convert the sex toy from an object that should be hidden to one that should be visibly displayed in the space of the home. This is a dramatic departure from the assumption that sex toys induce shame or embarrassment and are renowned for being 'secreted in drawers and closets or otherwise kept out of sight' (Stein, 1990: 12). The statements from Myla highlight how the development of the store occurred through spotting and exploiting a gap in the market 'It occurred to me that this powerful combination of women's huge interest in sex and their interest in style and fashion was just waiting to be exploited. There was simply no up-market outlet for such products' (Interview, 2011). This demonstrates how fashion and design are used to brand and package sex-product consumption to enable its visibility and conspicuousness.

Taken together, these tendencies are clearly targeting women as sex product consumers. Attwood (2005: 394) argues that that 'sex is now often packaged for women as a matter of style' and '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' (Attwood, 2005: 395). This highlights how discourses of fashion and style are simultaneously used to repackage sex for women and to re-position the image of sex-product consumption from something that is heavily stigmatised to something that is heavily stylised. Collectively, the promotion of fashion-orientated stores and products orientated towards the female consumer demonstrates how fashion and design are part of a branding exercise to remove the stigmatisation of sex-product consumption (Kent, 2005). Sex toys thus become 'symbolic markers of class, status and prestige' (Woodward, 2007) that aid strategies of distinction in the formation of cultural capital as designer sex toys are aligned with discourses of good taste and subsequent class positioning (Bourdieu, 1984; Skeggs, 1997; Skeggs and Wood, 2004). As Smith states; 'these are not just toys; they are a reworking of symbolic capital, offering distinction and status to their purchasers' (Smith, 2007: 178). However, if they offer both distinction and status to the purchaser then they 'ultimately produce social hierarchies of cultural value and taste' (Comella, 2010: 215) as the branding of designer sex toys as *tasteful* is carried out alongside the denotation of other sex toys as *tasteless*. Brassington and Pettitt (2007) argue that the move towards 'tasteful' sex products via the upscaling of sex toy retailing is 'coded with class' and suggest that upscaling occurs 'in order to move away from traditional working-class sexual codes' (Brents and Sanders, 2010: 43). Sex-product consumption is therefore clearly 'embedded within a social class hierarchy, where certain displays of sexuality are seen as more legitimate or sophisticated than others' (Edwards, 2010: 155). Sex-product consumption consequently becomes based on strategies of distinction and contributes to the promotion of class hierarchies that can be both economically and socially exclusionary.

Conclusion: Class, consumption and exclusion

In this paper we have argued that the commercialisation and commodification of sex consumption to women is increasingly being used to signal status and distinction (Tyler, 2004). It is thus both deeply classed and profoundly gendered. Good sex becomes a commodified set of practices and competences that demonstrate the increasingly significant interweaving of consumption with a sexual lifestyle. The modernist 'values of thrift and self-restraint, of saving oneself rather than "spending"' (Hawkes, 1996), have given way to a slow yet consistent process of sexual post-modernization' (Tyler, 2004: 89). Selling sex has become big business, a business that capitalises on consumer anxiety and insecurity. As Bauman argued, 'like all other constituents of post-modern identity, [sexuality] is therefore permanently undermined, incomplete, open to change, and so a realm of uncertainty and an inexhaustible source of anxiety and soul searching, as well as fear that some precious kinds of sensation have been missed and the pleasure-giving potential of the body has not been squeezed to the last drop' (1998: 28). The long-held social concerns about sexual excess have given way to a commercialised quest to improve sexual performance (Jackson and Scott, 1997). In a cruel ironic twist, characteristic of much contemporary consumption, the pleasure that sex is intended to deliver becomes displaced by the individual's anxiety over attempting to achieve this pleasure. As under conditions of post-modern freedom and choice, the subject is rendered entirely responsible for the formation of their own sexual subjecthood. Hawkes (1996: 105) argues that this has led to 'the commodification of desire' as 'the market in sex presents an ever-changing panorama of choices in which the individual is encouraged to construct their own identity through

a form of erotic “window shopping” (Hawkes, 1996: 115). This pursuit of sexual subjectivity thus becomes an endless cycle of consumption in search of an idealised sexual self (Bauman, 1989; King, 1999). As Gutting argues:

Isn't promiscuity as demanding an ideal as monogamy, the imperative to be sexually adventurous as burdensome as a prudish limitation to the missionary position? The magazines, self help books and sex manuals that guide us to a life of liberated sexuality seem to induce in us as much insecurity and fear about our own sexual attractiveness and ability to perform as sermons and tracts did in our grandparents over the dangers of self indulgence ... The irony of our endless preoccupation with our sexuality, Foucault argued, is that we think it has something to do with liberation. (Gutting, 2005: 98)

Erotic boutiques clearly connect to wider discourses within post-feminism. They embrace a traditional ‘girlie femininity’ via pink stores and products whilst also blurring sexual objectivity and subjectivity. They make claims of sexual empowerment and yet continue to emphasise the female body as sexual object. They emphasise female empowerment through consumption and yet this is an exclusive and exclusionary form of shopping that comes with a very hefty price tag. The challenge for female consuming subjects is increasingly one that requires a degree of agency over the creation of their sexual selves. The research presented here suggests that women can shop their way to sexual satisfaction and can become active sexual subjects. The freedoms presented by the market are, however, open to debate and, most crucially, only open to some. This is a clear illustration of the prevalence for many of financial exclusion in consumption in the contemporary era. As Gill and others have argued, this supposed sexual subjectification ‘has turned out to be objectification

in a new and even more pernicious guise’ (Gill, 2003: 105). Women’s agency and empowerment is increasingly tied to their bodily aesthetics, discipline and consumption credentials under a retailscape in which sexuality becomes synonymous with consumption as pleasure (Storr, 2003). This reveals just how adept capitalist commodity markets have become ‘at appropriating the language of freedom and the political project of feminism to market products’ (Sonnet, 1999: 176). The erotic boutique’s allusion to post-feminist discourse also serves to translate sex consumption into something that is valued and valuing rather than vilified. This market repositioning in turn enables such stores to by-pass legislative regulation and position themselves visibly on the high street and up-scale retail locations. This development forms part of a broader process through which the sex and the city lifestyle becomes acceptable as part of the ongoing gentrification of the contemporary city, a process that enrolls women as part of the project by virtue of their acceptable and celebrated sexual consumption practices (Arthurs, 2003; Kern, 2013; Lloyd, 2008).

Sex, space and consumption are currently undergoing a significant transformation, one that brings into question contemporary debates about commodity culture, empowerment and gender. The key question that the paper raises is how the commodification of sex retailing impacts on broader questions about feminism, equality, space and consumption. We have argued that there are opposing discourses surrounding how sex shops and erotic boutiques are socially perceived and commercially branded. The long-held perceptions of traditional sex shops as dark, masculinised and ‘seedy’ has ensured that such stores require strict regulation, which brings with it a very particular geography. In turn the regulatory regime that regulates sex shops has opened up a market opportunity for a new breed of sex-product

retailers to colonise the high street. Female-centred, unthreatening and centrally located in the city this new genre of sex retailers have capitalised on the commodification of sex and the empowerment that this can potentially offer women who have the financial and cultural capital to enjoy their newfound sexuality without regret or remorse.

Three broader conceptual questions emerge from the discussion. First, it is clear that the developments discussed above have profound social implications. The emergence of designer erotic boutiques on the high street is premised upon a particular middle-class sensibility that promotes gender equality and an active engagement in one's sexual fulfilment which is in turn intertwined with aspirational lifestyle branding and a freedom to buy sexual gratification through consumption. One reading is that these developments are less about sexual freedom or liberation and more about the means to conspicuously consume. Sex-product consumption is thus 'positioned, and sometimes caught, between new sexual possibilities for women and familiar markers of class distinction' (Comella, 2010: 215). As the majority of women will not have the financial means to purchase many of the products that are promoted, it would appear that good and gratifying sex remains largely accessible to a sexual elite. The expansion of design-led sex-product retailing is a decidedly classed affair which is yet another example of capitalism seeking out and colonising new markets.

Second, we have argued that the geography of sex retailing really does matter. This paper has brought to the fore how both public perception and government regulation of sex retailing impacts directly upon its visibility and transparency in the contemporary city. As stereotypical discourses of sex shops as dark, dirty and seedy render them hidden and pushed to the margins of towns and cities, so too discourses of design, style and taste render sex in the city acceptable and

enable sex-product retailers to inhabit high traffic, high-end and high-visibility locations in the contemporary city. This reveals with great acuity that the ways in which sex-product consumption is packaged and presented affects its ability to ignite either moral castigation or liberatory celebration. It has shown how sex-product retailing displays and reproduces sexual activity (traditionally considered a private activity) in public space, and thus reveals that when sex consumption is made fashionable, exclusive, design-led and aligned with female sexuality, it is deemed acceptable and can uncontroversially inhabit the high streets of the contemporary city. The irony and contradictions inherent in this encroachment of erotic boutiques onto the high street is readily apparent: whilst traditional sex shops remain geographically marginalised and hidden because of concerns that they can pollute and contaminate their surrounding areas and are considered a particular danger to children, erotic boutiques require no formal regulation or legislation and can thus locate themselves in both design-led quarters within the city or on high streets with high foot-fall, adjacent to family stores. The key point here is that it is the way in which sex retailing is packaged and presented that invokes either acceptance and celebration or protest and regulation, suggesting that it is not the presence of sex in public space that ignites anxiety but the gendered and classed representations of such activity.

Third, and finally, we have raised a number of questions about how the commodification of sex might empower women. The optimistic reading of the developments discussed above is that the commodification and commercialisation of sex and sexuality open up new opportunities for female liberation and emancipation – the post-feminist moment. Perhaps this opens up space and a moment where women can really be in charge of, responsible for, and excited by,

their own sexuality. Possible though this might be, our current reading is less emancipatory and altogether more conciliatory, commercial and compliant. The commodification of sexual products, play and consumption raises a number of issues for feminist debate. As Cox (2000: 135) argues, 'today lingerie and its relationship with sexual play are totally normalized and the two are entirely interrelated – one dresses rather than undresses for sex' and it is of course the female body that must be 'dressed'. This positions women as aesthetic objects of sex: women remain sexual objects and not subjects of their own making: the normalised female body remains that which is regulated, restricted, managed and regulated. The ways in which the female body is presented in sex retail establishments continues to equate sex and sexuality with the visual representation and aestheticisation of the female body. The 'mannequin', whether she be displayed in a sex shop, erotic boutique or bedroom, is therefore a 'simulacrum of the female form for the purpose of commodity capitalism' (Toffoletti, 2007: 65) as she is simultaneously intended to be an exact replica of the female body, and as an idealised female form engineered to specifically display and sell commodities. In sum, the political, social and geographic issue becomes one of how the commodification of sex retailing has (or has not) enhanced gender equality in the contemporary city. Women are, we would argue, increasingly required to discipline and maintain their bodies, to achieve (or at least aspire to) an idealised representation of the erotic and desirable female form (thin, hairless, made-up, flawless). Women thus become their own regulators of what constitutes attractiveness, intermediated by ongoing discourses, lifestyles and consumption environments. But of course self-management and regulation is an ongoing dialectic between what Foucault (1979) has described as 'self-surveillance' 'and the

expectations of sexual display' (Donnan and Magowan, 2010: 29). The representation of women as aesthetic objects serves to 'objectify women within a certain convention of beauty that relies on the endless consumption of products' (Juffer, 1998: 150). The representation of women as aesthetic sexual objects is directly related to capitalist accumulation – women as sexual objects/subjects have become the perfect vehicle through which to commodify sex, legitimately, safely and to the missing 50% of the population. This directly challenges the central post-feminist discourse of female empowerment and strength, based on a form of 'power femininity' (Gill, 2009: 103) that is 'unapologetically sexual' (Wolf, 1993: 147), in which the post-feminist subject is a 'knowing, active and desiring' (Gill, 2003: 103) sexual subject; an agent of her own sexuality. Whilst sex shops and erotic boutiques have promoted the idea that better sex is always available, this pursuit of sexual subjectivity inevitably becomes an endless process of consumption whereby sexual subjectivity is continually in the making but never quite complete (Curtis, 2004) and 'the ultimate sexual experience remains forever a task ahead' (Bauman, 1998: 24). The promotion of idealised sexual subjectivity and experience highlights how contemporary retailing offers yet one more space where sex, space and capitalism collide (Storr, 2003). The paper has explored both the emancipatory and the oppressive effects of commercialised female sex consumption and highlighted the need to further interrogate the complex social and spatial practices and exclusionary power and class relations that have enabled this latest episode in capitalism's constant quest for new market opportunities and new ways to monetise sexuality.

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Notes

1. http://www.ciao.co.uk/Ann_Summers_Shop__Review_5538435 (accessed 7 May 2012).
2. The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982.
3. <http://www.bview.co.uk/listing/2391594/Sh-Womens-Erotic-Emporium-in-W11> (accessed 7 May 2012).
4. <http://www.qype.co.uk/place/453084-Simply-Pleasure-com-London-28th-may-2011-05-28> (accessed 7 May 2012).
5. <http://www.urbanpath.com/london/adult/sh.htm> (accessed 22 April 2011).
6. <http://www.coco-de-mer.com/products/coco-de-mer-sylph-half-cup-front-fastening-bra/> (accessed 18 March 2013).
7. Interview with Samantha Roddick, Founder of Coco de Mer, January 2011.
8. *Myla Brand Book*, September 2007, p. 39 (authors copy).

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