

The Pornography and Erotica Industries: Lack of Research and Need for a Research Agenda

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Abstract

Despite their increasing size and ease of access, the pornography and erotica industries have received scant attention from academics in the business disciplines. This paper examines what little research has been conducted and offers background material drawn from other disciplines on historical social approaches to pornography. These areas include sumptuary law and approaches to moral issues generally. The paper concludes with a suggested approach to determining a research agenda for this much neglected area.

Introduction

The sheer scale of the pornography industry and the speed at which it has developed is at once both impressive and terrifying. One key segment, pornography and erotica, was estimated to produce annual revenue of \$8 billion in the United States in 1983 - a figure that at least doubled by the turn of the century. Surprisingly marketers have undertaken little research into this phenomenon, so pornography and erotica remain unexplored fields for research. We introduce marketers to pornography and erotica as legitimate areas of research, providing an overview of motives, difficulties, and the need for an organised research agenda to study this area

Internet Pornography

The largest impetus to study pornography and erotica comes from the Internet and e-commerce fields. We do not emphasise the role of the Internet or the prevalence of net pornography here, but it is worthwhile to note that work conducted thus far has stemmed from this domain. Mehta and Plaza (1997) appear to have been the first to examine pornography on the Internet with their 1994 conference paper, later published in the *Information Society Journal*. Perhaps the most notorious work conducted to date is that of Rimm (1995) exploring online pornography using a content analysis of written descriptions provided by producers, and examination of consumer download habits for different classifications of images. While the study did attract support (Branscomb, 1995; MacKinnon, 1995; Meyer, 1995) it has been largely discredited, as has the follow up article by Elmer-Dewitt and Bloch (1995). Leading the charge are Hoffman and Novak (1995a, b, c, d) who point out the conceptual and methodological flaws of this work.

Two further publications provide more recent bases for academic study of pornography and erotica. Beaver (2000) raises questions about obscenity, regulating or rating content and harm to society (hypothesised and real). He is not alone in highlighting that the protection of children is particularly important and problematic (see, for example, Barcan, 2002; Oswell, 2006; and Smith, 2006). Looking at the commerce of pornography Lane, (2000), reviews

Internet pornography from a socio-historic perspective. He refers to archaeology and fetish, and more modern precursors of Internet pornography including: telephone sex lines, magazines etc. Although providing a collection of cases for the general reader, Lane's work should be regarded as a prompt for further academic discussion.

As academics we have a responsibility to research and report on social phenomena, this is not something we can delegate to casual social commentators. Given the extent of consumer interest in the pornography and erotica industries, we should understand how they affect commerce and society. Earlier publications provide significant insight, however, more detailed study is required if we are to produce relevant research for our constituents (Winer, 1999). Marketers, researchers, public policy officials, educators, and society in general may claim an interest in outcomes from properly conducted research into the pornography industries, but that to date, have been denied these outcomes by the business disciplines.

Research Contribution in the Business Discipline

As academics interested in pornography as commerce, a review of the business literature, is necessary. A search of Google Scholar was conducted to find articles satisfying the criteria: "pornography"; "anywhere in the article"; in "business, administration, finance and economics" (search conducted May 22 2007). A total of 2210 results were found. An initial audit of results revealed that pornography was almost exclusively referred to as an example in papers that dealt with other issues. A refined search for "pornography"; in "article title"; in "business, administration, finance and economics" yielded only 9 results, of which 6 were citations. A search for erotica using the same criteria yielded 2 results.

These search results indicate that marketers have substantively neglected pornography and erotica as areas of study. Business academics have used pornography and erotica to discuss the use of information technologies, consumer economics, human deviance, norms, policy and law, yet Barcan (2002), Karp (2003), Lane (2000) and Smith (2006) identify pornographers as innovators in promotion and distribution. They are also adept at developing products and pricing (consider their use of product bundling, packaging and brand building strategies associated with porn actors, as well as new payment systems). As marketers we are interested in studying such strategies as well as the producers, intermediaries and consumers engaged in processes of commercial exchange. The prompt from outgoing editor of the *Journal of Consumer Research* to investigate pornography as an area under-researched (Mick, 2003), lends support to this argument.

In an examination of pornography and erotica we need to ask ourselves who we are looking at, and why. Is it the use of women; people from lower socio-economic backgrounds; the health risks associated with production or social impacts that are of concern? Are we interested in distribution or the use of intermediaries? The amount of web traffic directed to pornography (including passing on of content and links) is significant; Tedesco (1998) alleges 43% of Internet traffic goes to a sexually explicit site. Without a research agenda, the idea of studying pornography is unpleasant, and we regard this as a large hurdle, in itself. In order to open this field of research to marketers we necessarily consider literature outside the marketing field.

Rationalisation for Future Study

To rationalise a study of pornography and erotica, we refer to the work of Haidt (2001) on questions of morality and reason. All people make moral judgements based on social intuitions, Haidt evaluates the quality of those intuitions and why they are so influential. He begins his article with a scenario of sexual intercourse between a brother and sister, and proceeds with a rational justification for the behaviour described. Some readers may find it difficult to continue reading his paper; Haidt anticipates this, and uses a variety of rhetorical skills to manipulate and guide the reader. Haidt (2001, p.814) explains that “moral reasoning is usually an *ex post facto* process used to influence the intuitions (and hence judgements) of other people”. Baron (1998) suggests that people who follow moral intuitions can bring about non-optimal or even disastrous consequences as outcomes of decision making.

It is possible that we avoid research areas that are intuitively unpleasant, or whose explanation to family and friends may cause embarrassment. Avoiding such research removes the risk of exposure to unpleasantness or embarrassment. The role of scholars, is to delve into areas, develop theory and influence public decision making where a need exists. A call of caution is warranted. A previous researcher in pornography relates that “scholars should be wary” (Slade, 2001, p.338). Without a developed research agenda, we risk being drawn into areas that will encourage affective reactions, as others have in the past. Smith (1999) recalls Justice Stewart, famous for ruling, “*I know it when I see it*”, on the subject of obscenity. Gewirtz surprisingly argues in favour Justice Stewart's ruling on the basis that people are not always able to articulate reason, but this does not mean that reason is absent from their argument (Gewirtz, 1996). We want to avoid statements like Justice Stewart's which may negatively impact quality of academic discourse and judgements.

The role of intuition *is* recognised by academics as a form of business decision making, and one that can be reconciled with structured decision making (see, for example, Khatri and Ng, 2000; Miller and Toulouse, 1986; Sauter, 1999; Simon, 1987). If marketers are to engage in studies of pornography and erotica it is recommended that we do so informed of the likelihood of the pressures towards moral intuitionism. We must acknowledge the presence and role of intuition, and in doing so, strive to develop rational forms of analysis, and articulation of analysis, in the face of issues requiring moral or affective reasoning.

In order to avoid badly articulated affective reactions we must develop a foundation for research, and to do so, we begin not with sex, violence or disease. Instead, we begin by looking at the norms and morals associated with consumption, and their historical derivation. We begin with history because moral intuitions are innate and enculturated (Haidt, 2001). Whilst dealing with the 'innate' is complicated, we can understand enculturation. Haidt (2001) states that “cultural knowledge gets in largely through non-verbal and nonconscious means, but it gets out through conscious verbal communication” (p.828). Legislation is one of the most obvious means by which culture is passed on using conscious (or verbal) communication.

Although the sale or consumption of clothing and food are not generally regarded as sites of controversy, sumptuary law demonstrates that even the most apparently mundane products have been subject to regulation historically. The majority of these laws were passed in the 13th century (Brundage, 1987; Hunt, 1996; Kovesi Killerby, 2002). They were designed to regulate the consumption of items of clothing regarded as daring, expensive or symbolic (Hunt, 1996). On the face of it, any link to the regulation of pornography would appear

tenuous, at best. However, we must consider why it was regarded as necessary to limit the use of luxury items.

The reasons for sumptuary laws include the concerns of religious leaders and statesmen that economic prosperity lead to excessive consumption (Kovesi Killerby, 2002). Economically, excessive consumption of luxuries was not regarded as sustainable (Brundage, 1987; Kovesi Killerby, 2002). While this justification is warranted in some cases, if we consider legislation that regulated the colour of clothing worn by prostitutes in German towns - yellow in Leipzig and Vienna, for example (Brundage, 1987), the issue here is not sustainability. Nor is it support of the dye maker's guild. Instead, what we see is a series of attempts to govern consumption in order to make conspicuous someone's character. Consistent with Brundage (1987) and Hunt (1996) we suggest that consumption has been regulated because of the desire to control morals and behaviour within society.

Kovesi Killerby (2002) argues that authorities did not consider the consumption of luxuries to be evil *per se*. Concern was warranted given morally normative considerations, for example, "the context of - use, by whom and for what purpose" (Kovesi Killerby, 2002, p7). The same can be said of regulation of pornography in the modern era. Debate in America has been split over the issue of whether pornography exists as a 'civil right' or a 'civil threat' (Smith, 1999). Legislation is enacted to control proponents of each belief, although enforcement remains problematic (Meier, 1999). Kovesi Killerby suggests that sumptuary laws were similarly ineffective in regulating consumption, and that lawmakers were not genuinely committed to eradicating luxury consumption, instead, "legislation was mostly talk, a way for the lawmakers to pretend to themselves and to others that they were true to these ideals" (Kovesi Killerby, 2002, p.6). 'Morality politics,' (Smith, 1999) enables moral intuitions and serves to highlight the role of legislation in developing group norms and value systems. It appears that morality politics has a long history, and one that should perhaps be challenged.

To support a research agenda will be to make the pornography and erotica industries open to public comment, or, conspicuous. The argument to avoid debate of pornography and erotica will say that discussion of these areas brings them into an area of conscious consideration, and implicitly supports consumption at the level of values and morality. However, business literature already extends beyond discussion of the merely legislative. Examples of research that might otherwise attract criticism for undermining values, include: illicit drug consumption (Smith and Fitchett, 2002); popular music and drug trends (Diamond, Bermudez and Schensul, 2006); 'home-made' porn (Barcan, 2002); and Internet child pornography (Oswell, 2006). We support Hirschman (1991), who called for research into the 'dark side of consumer behaviour', and suggest that making visible something that has been covertly consumed, does not signify moral approbation.

A Social Marketing Research Agenda

The marketing discipline has been considered unethical (Dunfee, Craig & Ross, 1999), to "push" products that are not needed, and to encourage the growth of the consumer society. According to Holbrook and Hulbert, marketing is regarded as a "social problem" and being "a force working toward the production and distribution of "bads" as well as well as "goods" (2002, p706). Social Marketing, on the other hand, advocates concern for negative externalities in production and consumption. Golberg cites Andreasen saying that the purpose of social marketing is to work for the improvement in the "quality of life" of people everywhere (Golberg, 1995, p347). He goes on to suggest that the "researcher's role in

fostering change (is) not just at the individual level, but also at the policy/social environment level”(Golberg, 1995, p351). Where we might once have said that environmentally aware production and marketing were the limits of our marketing role, we now must argue for involvement in more expansive terms.

Let us consider briefly, our democratic political roots as being at the foundation of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and Social Marketing. Democracies are founded on the idea that citizens are involved in their governance (McCluskey, Deshpande, Shah, McLeod, 2004, p437). Usually we expect to find the word 'participation' in the political rhetoric of self-governance, and we find, increasingly in Social Marketing, emphasis on community involvement, grass-roots campaigns, and localised solutions. This is, apparently, a period of growth for community involvement (Houtzager, Collier, Harriss & Lavallo, 2002) and as marketers, we advocate corporate involvement in community to our clients. As affiliates to disciplinary study are we practising what we preach?

In the realm of political marketing, Hayes and McAllister have found that it is the undecided amongst the electorate that are hardest to influence, and the most difficult to encourage to participate (Hayes & McAllister, 1996). It is this group who, despite access to information, choose not to 'attend' to that information, and subsequently, fail to participate. Perhaps idealistically, McCluskey et al., support the role of news media to “advance the standard” of politics (2004, p441), although the conclusions of Hayes & McAllister would render this irrelevant. And Goldberg advances the idea that macrosocial marketing campaigns are distinguished by their overall lack of success (Golberg, 1995). To sum up: marketers have a poor reputation collectively; democracies assume citizen participation; and, thus far, macrosocial campaigns have failed to produce significant social change.

In a further indictment of social marketing, Wallack, Dorfman, Jernigan & Themba state that, “the condition for - cooperation is too often the avoidance of controversial issues,” (Wallack et al., 1993, p24-25). In pornography and erotica we have an area that will be regarded as controversial. If we are to undertake study of these industries we should be clear about the social value of this research. Dunfee et al., suggest that marketing research is dominated by descriptive research, whereas normative research would perhaps be more meaningful, (Dunfee et al., 1999). This is the time for normative research, and pornography and erotica consumption and production offer a platform for this research.

We suggest a preliminary research agenda may follow two broad streams. The first will focus on the commercial significance of the pornography and erotica industries, with emphasis on innovation and technology adoption. The second stream will follow the path of normative research. Research within this field will investigate citizen behaviours, participation and social issue involvement. Why do consumers endorse fair-trade coffee but do not apparently consider potential harms associated with pornography production? We will also question the values associated with pornography consumption. Basil and Weber found that concern for appearances will influence attitudes to corporate philanthropy (2006), is this why merchandising is increasingly popular in social marketing? What does this mean in relation to covert consumption? If macrosocial campaigns are generally unsuccessful, and pornography and erotica industries the opposite, what can be learnt from the latter in order to improve the former? All of these questions have the potential to expand the field of research in Social Marketing.

Conclusions

As marketers we must evaluate the role of business rhetoric in supporting the presence of pornographic and erotica products in society. We do not call for a ban, or regulation of consumption any more than currently exists. However, we do call for a research agenda that will allow us to evaluate rationally, and without values-based moral intuitions, the effects and effectiveness of the production, marketing and consumption of pornography and erotica.

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