

Magic Toyshops: Narrative and meaning in the women's sex shop

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Abstract

The sex shop aimed primarily at the female consumer is a phenomenon which forms part of our everyday understanding of the sexualisation of culture or the mainstreaming of sexual representation and consumption. The women's sex shop privileges notions of female empowerment achieved through the consumption of goods and spaces dedicated to the pursuit of female erotic pleasure. Prioritising women's interpretations of the visual presence of the women's sex shop, this project establishes how the sex shop is re-made for its female consumers, making it both acceptable and desirable to a new audience. Primarily its aim is to interrogate the ways in which design is put to use to reflect, materialise and contribute to discourse around feminine sexuality and sexual pleasure.

Utilising a feminist research methodology this thesis takes as a starting point the voices of women consumers and retailers, facilitating a new reading of the ways in which women negotiate the meanings invested in the spaces of gendered sexual consumption. In line with the testimony of participants, investigation begins by positioning the women's sex shop in relation to its progenitor, the traditional male sex shop, the model without which the women's shop could not be envisaged or designed. Secondly it investigates the ways in which the design of the women's sex shop and its goods, appropriate or resist established , normative and classed representations of female sexuality expressed in the geographical position of the shops, the interior layout, the external façade and the use of visual references. In conclusion, drawing on consumer narratives, research exposes a visual and spatial symbiosis between the 'seedy' masculine and the stylish women's sex shop. Key tensions and contradictions are unearthed in the things and spaces of the women's shop, calling into question the notions of female sexual agency and empowerment it proposes.

KEY WORDS: sexuality, consumption, design, gender, appropriation, resistance, agency.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

For the last twenty years women have been able to buy sexual products in shops dedicated, not only to the pursuit of female pleasure, but to a notion of female empowerment achieved through the consumption of highly designed sexualised goods. The concept of the shop selling sex products specifically, if not exclusively, to women arguably arrived with Sh!, a female oriented sex shop situated in London's Hoxton. It was opened in 1992 by owners Kathryn Hoyle and Sophie Walters, as an explicit challenge to the traditional notion of the sex shop as an exclusively male domain. Myla, selling sex toys alongside luxury lingerie came to London's Notting Hill in 1999 and Sam Roddick's luxury erotic boutique Coco de Mer arrived in Covent Garden in 2001. Other shops have followed elsewhere, Nua, which has franchises in Brighton, Manchester and Sheffield, Tickled and She Said in Brighton amongst them¹. Conceived: 'as an antidote to sleazy sex shops' (Sh! 2012), the women's sex shop has had to radically re-position itself within the market in order to move away from the murky anonymity of the 'traditional' masculine orientated sex shop that inhabits both the urban back streets of larger cities and the hinterlands of our imaginations. Significantly, the women I interviewed for the purposes of this research are almost unanimous in differentiating what they see as women centric sex shops such as She Said or Sh! from the Ann Summers chain. Bought in 1972 by Ralph and David Gold, the brand has developed from a 'traditional' sex shop into a ubiquitous presence on every high street; selling underwear, sex toys and novelty goods aimed at a female and couples market. However, without prompting, all but one of my research participants, when asked which women's sex shops they had visited, either omitted to mention Ann Summers or distinguished it in some other way, for example, as being for 'couples' or 'for men' but primarily in terms of aesthetics – Ann Summers was characterised as 'tacky'. Furthermore, participants identified it in interview as occupying a more mainstream sector of the market than the small independent shops which form the main focus of this thesis: 'I've been to the high streety ones'. Chapter 5 will give a fuller account of the place of Ann Summers in

¹ Some changes have inevitably taken place during the life of this research. Tickled has now been taken over by She Said and Nua no longer exists in Brighton, its premises have been taken over by another branch of She Said.

my research and Chapter 6 explores participant's class and taste understandings of the shop.

This thesis focuses on women's interpretations of the visual presence of the female orientated sex shop. It highlights the geographical position of the shops, the interior space and layout, the external façade, the use of cultural and historical visual references in the design of the shops and its products – asking how the traditional notion of sex shop is re-made in the women's sex shop and how design contributes to a differentiation between gendered experiences of consuming pleasure. Sh!, She Said, Coco de Mer et al utilise a range of visual strategies both inside and outside the shops in order to re-gender and re-code shops as feminine environments. Sh! for example presents a violently sugar pink façade to the street, Coco de Mer has archly beautiful windows featuring a tasteful assemblage of curiously suggestive and expensive 'objet d'art'. Various the shops seek to normalise the act of sex shopping by positioning it within the apparently oppositional frameworks of domesticity and luxury and style. Thus on the one hand the design of shop interiors may reference a supermarket and on the other a turn of the century bordello. While women's sex shops may differ in terms of the ethos they propose and the particular narratives they utilise in order to make their offer of autonomous female sexuality, all engage with an understanding of female 'sexual empowerment' widely circulated in current popular culture:

The sexualisation of contemporary British culture has in part been enabled by a neo-liberal rhetoric of agency, choice and self-determination, which within sexuality discourses have produced an 'up for it' femininity a sexually savvy and active woman who can participate appropriately in consumer practices in the production of her choice biography.

(Evans Riley and Shankar 2010, p115)

The term 'sexual empowerment' features significantly in a post-feminist landscape which links neo liberal discourses of individual self determination to consumption practices rather than political struggle for sexual freedom. Inextricably linked to the concept of the sexualisation of culture, its very ubiquity in myriad consumption contexts has meant that it has come under discussion in the academic community (see for example Sonnet 1999, Gill 2008, Evans Riley and Shankar 2010):

Today...empowerment is understood much more broadly. Acts as trivial as purchasing a pair of shoes or eating a particular brand of cereal bar are not

recognized as gestures of female empowerment just as surely as participating in a demonstration or pushing for a stronger voice in politics. (Gill 2008, p36)

This notion is implicit in the offer made to consumers by the women's sex shop which holds out sexual empowerment, materialised in designed goods and spaces, as an appealing new model for feminine sexual identity and sexual display. Embodying a raft of significations for my research participants, the term emerged in testimony as broadly allied to a concept of feminine sexual agency, primarily in this context the capacity and willingness of the female consumer to identify as actively seeking her own pleasures. While the phrase didn't figure overtly in my list of interview prompts it became clear early on that for some women sexual empowerment might reside in the bravura position signalled by crossing the threshold of a women's sex shop and sampling the variously murmuring and twirling vibrators on display. At points in testimony it was linked to the pursuance of individual sexual pleasure while for other participants it was measured by the distance between their own openly practiced sexual consumption and their mothers' ambivalence about sexual matters. The women's sex shop is not unique in being a site or practice subject to a process of *making over* or re-appropriation in order to signify women's empowerment rather than female objectification. Feona Attwood acknowledges the breadth of practices subject to this act of re-making:

The sleazy style of sexually explicit practices is rearticulated as tasteful and sometimes ironic. Aestheticising and domesticating the sexual is crucial to the marketing of sex to women enabling its re-articulation as a new set of things – art, dance, sport, thing of beauty.

(2009, p179)

However, it is this process materialised and constructed in spaces and things which frames the interests of this thesis. This study draws out the complexities, the contradictions and the muddying inherent in the embodied challenge made by the women's sex shop to the dominant sexual paradigm invested in the 'traditional' male sex shop. Through an empirical focus on feminine consumption, this thesis offers a new inter-disciplinary structure for investigating women's interpretations of the visual presence of the female sex shop. The overarching aim of research then is to establish how our traditional understanding of the sex shop is re-imagined and re-made in the women's shop, asking in what ways, for its female consumers,

designed spaces and products are harnessed in a project of materialising and contributing to discourse around feminine sexuality and sexual pleasure. Ultimately, it is women's understanding and experience of sex shopping, their interaction with and judgement of designed shops and goods which has dictated the thrust of my exploration.

Current contextual debates

Several things drew me initially to a study of the female sex shop. A previous project which centred on lesbian culture provoked an interest in the sex toy and at which points it crossed over from lesbian to heterosexual culture and/or back again. Furthermore, a proliferation of writing which, quite properly, has made a focus of lesbian culture as well as 'marginalised' or subcultural sexual practices such as bondage or sado masochism, led me to feel that while lesbian cultural practices have been a site of cultural analysis and debate since the 1980's, contemporary heterosexual female sexuality has been left largely neglected. Moreover, it seems that second wave feminism polarised debate around women and sexual representation, concerning itself, in the '70s and 80's, with heterosexuality as the primary site of inequality and the act of sexual intercourse between women and men as an embodiment of a power relationship that served to reinforce women's oppression (Hite 1977 McKinnon and Dworkin 1987). This has left a confused legacy in terms of heterosexual women's relationship to sexual expression, and more particularly to pornography. One that postmodern feminism is perhaps attempting to resolve in terms of a sympathetic attention to the commodification of style, irony, and a sort of hedonistic libertarianism - all of which factors are plainly key to the visual narrative and marketing imagery employed by the women's sex shop.

In recent years, the women's sex shop has become a part of our cultural understandings of feminine sexuality, referenced repeatedly in the popular media as a manifestation or at least a conspicuous symptom, of a new sexual libertarianism amongst women. Discussion has been sited primarily in the broadsheet press in terms of a delighted engagement with a subject that is at once 'risqué' and amenable to being dressed up as pseudo-intellectual analysis, essential for a 'think piece' in a Sunday colour supplement. The format employed here usually includes an appeal to an 'observer' who has the cultural, medical or

academic credentials with which to place the sexualised commodity in a cultural context. Co-terminously this is a device we see imitated in *Sex and the City* via Carrie's sex column monologues which form the 'analytic backdrop' to the action of the show. And again in the format of the 'sex problem' show which involves the expert 'sexologist' in commenting on and instructing women and couples who are not performing adequately between the sheets (for example *Sex Tips for Girls* 2001– Channel 4, *The Sex Education Show* 2011 Channel 4, *Sex, How to do everything* 2013 Channel 5). Both popular and academic writing has tended to cite the women's sex shop as a part of a generalised move towards the 'sexualisation of culture' - the move of sexual or pornographic imagery and practices into the mainstream. The evidence cited for this is huge and all encompassing, for example a proliferation of sexual programming on late night television, vending machines selling sex toys in bars, clubs and hairdressers and pole dancing classes at community education centres. Attwood usefully defines the sexualisation of culture as a:

...rather clumsy phrase used to indicate a number of things; a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities ; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay; our fondness for scandals...

(Attwood 2006, p78)

Over recent years, the American HBO produced television series *Sex and the City* has been a fertile source of discussion which has proved particularly significant in terms of the women's sex shop. The series depicts the sex and shopping lives of four middle class professional women and is almost always cited in press discussion of the women's sex shop. Since its first broadcast in Britain in 1999 it has stood for a mediated feminine sexuality posited as not only explicit but commodified and stylish. *Sex and the City* is significant here, significant in terms of 'extra textual' references but also because it helps to 'fix' the sex shop in terms of class. It has resonance for the women's sex shop in that both draw on familiar visual discourses of style, design and luxury in order to make an explicit link between feminine sexuality and class - to proffer the tantalising possibility of acquiring of a kind of 'sexual capital', to be achieved via the consumption of

sexualised objects. Attwood notes that the representation of female sexual behaviour illustrated in this show must be understood in terms of, not only; 'sexual democratization' or 'female objectification' but through:

the ways that these intersect with a vision of 'liberated' sex, with class distinctions and with the lifestyle and commodity preoccupations of consumer culture.

(Attwood 2006, p85)

The show is regularly positioned alongside the women's sex shop in media coverage of Sh!, Coco de Mer and others - and indeed the meaning of one is neatly transferred to the other in representation. Furthermore, in actuality, the show has served to boost sales of sex toys. Specifically an episode featuring Charlotte, the most sexually repressed of the four female characters, who realises autonomous sexual enlightenment prompted by use of the now culturally familiar, Rampant Rabbit:

...in the past 15 years the vibrator has undergone something of a renaissance. It began with the invention of the Rampant Rabbit in the mid-1990s – a model that features a clitoral stimulator, and was popularised by its appearance in a Sex And The City storyline in 1998.

(Aitkenhead 2012)

A number of popular journalistic writers (Levy 2005, Whelehan 2000, Walters 2010) have focussed on problematising an increasingly sexualised culture in terms of what it means for the feminist project:

When we talked about empowerment in the past, it was not a young woman in a thong gyrating around a pole that would spring to mind, but the attempts by women to gain real political and economic equality.

(Walters 2010, p7)

Previously condemned by traditional feminism as signalling the objectification of women, neo burlesque shows, stripping classes and pornography aimed at women have all been called into question in terms of their troubled association with feminism. Thus popular cultural commentators such as those cited above have inevitably asked the question posed on the back cover of Whelehan's *Overloaded*: 'are we dumbing down or just selling out?' In line with these debates Sex and the City's depiction of a highly commoditised female sexuality has also been problematised. Levy describes Sex and the City as:

A deeply seductive feminist narrative [but also] a deeply problematic one, one that articulated many of the corruptions of feminism we have been contemplating.

(2005, p174)²

Recently, the overwhelming retail and popular success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its myriad imitators has inevitably generated renewed popular debate. *Fifty Shades of Grey* is part of a trilogy written by E. L. James and published in 2011, the first installment selling nearly four and a half million print copies in 2012. An erotic novel aimed at the female reader, it is notable for its sado masochistic scenes in which the sensory charge lies in the submission of the female character to the wealthy male protagonist. Clearly the success of the novel encapsulates the questions raised by Levy et al, since on the one hand it appears to challenge tired stereotypes around women's disengagement with pornographic representation, on the other the novel depicts fantasies of female yearning for subordination to the desires of a powerful masculine figure.

Discussion around the capacity of cultural artefacts to signal female sexual empowerment, as well as the forms this sexual empowerment might take, has not been limited to the popular press. Academic writing has also addressed new forms of mediated sexuality in terms of its claims to facilitate empowerment, asking what a focus on individual self-actualisation means for collective participation in the feminist project. (see Gill 2003, 2008, Attwood 2005, 2006, McNair 2002, McRobbie 2008). Overall, it is vital to acknowledge the centrality of opposing views around popular sexual culture to any understanding of the women's sex shop and indeed the criticality of the sex shop to this dialogue. Undeniably, one imperative for this research was a desire to contribute to a current and on-going discussion and Chapter 2 of this thesis explores in more detail how and where the women's sex shop might be situated within and between the debates briefly outlined above.

Previous academic interest focussing on the market strategies employed by the dedicated women's sex shop, has tended to focus on the tactics it has employed in terms of moving sexual retailing away from the familiar paradigm of the sordid male sex shop to re-brand the sex shop as stylish, desirable and woman friendly. (Dennis Hall on US based sex shop Good Vibrations 2000 and Tony Kent's useful

² For a fuller discussion around Sex and the City see also Arthurs 2003 and Attwood 2006

tracking of sexual retailing over the last four decades 2006) Malina and Schmidt (1997), writing specifically on Sh! suggest that:

Sex shops targeted exclusively at women can be seen as new and ground breaking phenomenon. As such it may signify the end of the dichotomies of the modernist perspective and the advent and celebration of the leisurely exploration of female sexual diversity and creativity in the consumption of "sex toys" on the one hand and the shopping experience on the other.
(1997, p2)

However, the 'leisurely exploration of sexual diversity' heralded in Sh! is not critiqued here in terms of a detailed examination of the material culture of sexualised objects and spaces nor is attention paid to the meanings made of these by the female consumer. A proliferation of work arising from the discipline of sociology, cultural and media studies has addressed the broader topic of women as sexual consumers and has been significant to my own research. For example Feona Attwood's 2005 article *'Fashion and Passion: Marketing Sex to Women'* provides a useful analysis of the positioning of the sex toy in retail marketing terms as well as in the popular media, primarily via an examination of internet sites such as BabesnHorny, Taboo Boo and so on. Also Jane Juffer's 1998 research on sexually explicit texts for women *At Home with Pornography: Women, Sexuality, and Everyday Life*, which investigates how and where pornography fits within women's everyday lives: 'in ways that challenge and sometimes reinforce dominant conceptions of home and domesticity' (1998, p3). Academic concentration on representation rather than empirical research in the field of the sexual commodity is perhaps due to female sexuality still being seen as a 'difficult' subject, as evidenced by the reaction of various colleagues to my topic. In spite of the 'visibility' of these shops, the enticing shop window display, the aesthetically pleasing pink carrier bag, the media furore; there is still an assumption that actually visiting them may be a difficult activity to admit to, let alone to talk about. Merl Storr's 2003 work on Ann Summers, *Latex and Lingerie, Shopping for Pleasure at Ann Summers Parties* is an exception that has been significant to the generation of my own work. Storr's important text unpicks the structure and characteristics of 'homosociality', in terms of an anthropological examination of the means by which a group of women in a very particular sexualised situation collectively construct femininity. Her significance to my own work lies in her extensive use of interview and participant observation in order to establish the

collective practices of this identification as they take place within a very specific site of cultural production. Thus Storr's analysis of these parties as arenas in which women make meanings around sexuality, gender and consumption was important for me. However, my own perspective extends analysis of women's *experience* and *understanding* of sexual consumption in terms of an engagement with the visibility of commodities and spaces.

Other work has also been influential in terms of allowing women's voices to take centre stage in analysis. Samantha Holland's 2004 *Alternative Femininities* explores women's use of alternative modes of appearance as an expression of feminine identity. Like Storr, this was an early model for this thesis in terms of its reliance on interview as a means of accessing women's experience and self-constructed identity. My interest in placing methodology at the centre of research, has been strongly influenced by the work of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural studies, specifically in its theorising of women's engagement and relationship with popular culture. Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1987) has also been critical, particularly in terms of its respectful validation of women's participation in a practice that could be seen as difficult for feminism. While much research has perhaps tended to take a traditional position that maintains the researcher at a distance from the research subject, my central concern here has been both to honour the experience and perspectives of those women who talked to me and to foreground a transparency or clarity of methodological standpoint specifically in relation to their testimony. I include a chapter on interview methodology and I hope a general awareness throughout my text of my own place both in and outside of the research. Chapter 2 gives a fuller account of the literature which pertains to this research and Chapter 3 provides a detailed overview of my methodological ethos and research methods.

Theoretical position and contribution to scholarship

The challenge and contribution of this thesis to existing scholarship, lies in its proposal for a new framework by which user narratives are allowed to take centre stage in exploration of intersections between gender, consumption, sexuality and designed objects and spaces. Studies of design have tended to be occupied by

design in production and representation rather than by engaging empirical evidence for the experience of the consumer in the act of consuming designed objects. Significant work has emerged from material culture, dress studies and sociology which has provided an empirical response to a concern with the production of both individual and collective gendered identities and to a resistance to dominant discourses as revealed in consumption. Those studies which have been significant to this research are discussed in Chapter 3. However, while these texts may successfully draw out discourses from which women's engagement in popular culture may be plotted and theorised, the interests of sociologically based work do not lie in discourse materialised in *things*. Thus an important aspect of the academic contribution made by this research lies in its multi-disciplinary approach. While it draws significantly on the interests of design studies and material culture it also foregrounds a method and theoretical ethos derived from the social sciences, in order to access, prioritise and account for the lived experience of sex shop consumers.

While Chapter 2 outlines the polemical positions of sexualisation of culture debates, my hypothesis takes as axiomatic that female sexuality is and will be commodified and that this commodification is vital if meaning is to be made and transmitted in consumption. My research departs from current discussions outlined above in that it does not take a position on the value or otherwise, of sexual commodification in terms of women's potential for sexual self-expression. However, it stresses as fundamental to this thesis, that meaning is actively constructed in women's interaction with and understanding of, the designed objects and spaces of the women's sex shop. Discussion with consumers establishes that the design of both shops and the goods for sale in them, materialise a complex range of sometimes competing or contradictory discourses around feminine sexuality. Thus this thesis proposes that, clearly embedded in the material actuality of shop interiors as well as in the face they present to the street, are a number of discursive modes which serve to frame participant understandings of sexualised and gendered consumption. Female sexuality is framed as social and political, libertory and recreational, therapeutic and overwhelmingly, aestheticized. Within these structures several overarching themes and modes of enquiry have emerged. Primarily notions of public and private elide, they are revealed as tangled threads which run throughout this

thesis. Attempts to account for women's narratives of sex shopping, via this framework, show that while women's consumption in the glamorous environment of Coco de Mer or the open layout of Sh! might locate sexual consumption in a public domain; in other ways the women's sex shop retains a firm grip on familiar narratives of privacy and secrecy.

For participants these twin concepts are firmly materialised in the 'sleaziness' of the traditional masculine sex shop, and were articulated as such whether or not women had actually visited this type of shop. It became clear very quickly, that without the masculine paradigm of the traditional sex shop, the women's sex shop could not have been imagined, described or materialised. For this reason analysis takes the notion of re-articulation as a starting point. My empirical chapters examine the ways in which the women's sex shop relies on a re-appropriation of visual codes employed by the 'traditional' male sex shop and unpacks how far this is understood by participants as a form of resistance to a patriarchal culture materialised in the (real or imagined) anonymity of the 'traditional' male orientated sex shop. These themes of re-appropriation and resistance to a hegemonic regime and furthermore the collisions, contradictions and discrepancies between them, are key to an understanding of the women's sex shop and indeed form another strand which runs throughout my analysis chapters.

The women's sex shop must utilise a number of strategies in order, not simply to position itself in opposition to the male orientated shop, but to facilitate women's access to a form of consumption that is evidently problematic for some. This thesis shows that aestheticisation and design are key to the re-gendering, de-sexualising, normalising and domesticating of sexual consumption. Juffer recognises the pervasive nature of this discourse of aestheticisation and foregrounds its use as a necessary address to women if the commodification and subsequent circulation of erotica is to occur:

A more instructive approach is to inquire into the relationships between making a product palatable for relatively widespread marketing, the content necessary for that commodification to occur, and the possible uses that result. Such an approach reveals that some products do well precisely because they are easily assimilated into a mainstream politics that valorises sexually explicit products as long as they reinforce certain dominant

conceptions of love and marriage(such as the John Gray texts³) or the pursuit of feminine beauty (such as the Victoria's Secret Catalogue⁴).
(Juffer 1998, p26)

Thus attempts to represent the sex shop and its goods as stylish, highbrow or therapeutic may be viewed as strategies to situate goods within a dominant discourse of feminine sexuality. However this thesis shows that this process also serves to provide an 'alibi' for consumption, to 'de-commodify' the object and thus increase its status. Moreover, a focus on access to sexual consumption will show how particular modes of discourse are aligned with class in order to differentiate between desirable and non-desirable goods. Juffer invokes debate around a distinction between 'high and low art:

in which the "good" form of sexually explicit material is available only to an elite few, while the masses wallow in their low-brow porn.

(1998, p25)

While shops do draw on similar distinctions - for example Coco de Mer calls itself an 'erotic boutique' and Sh! a 'women's erotic emporium' my research shows that this is a somewhat limited analysis. Divisions between high and low brow, while present in sex shop narratives, coalesce around other embedded tropes of sexual commoditisation. Chapter 6 shows in what ways design is utilised in the project of opening up sexual consumption to a hesitant or cautious consumer.

To conclude, while the project of raising issues emerging from gendered sexual consumption is one that is active in various disciplines, this research makes two main contributions to existing scholarship. Firstly this thesis contributes to developing a new framework for examining gender and sexual consumption by drawing on methods and a guiding theoretical ethos located in social science disciplines, in order to access the meanings women make in the act of sexual consumption. Secondly it serves to reveal tensions between the shop's promise of personal and sexual empowerment for the consumer and participant experience of consuming a version of gender identified sexuality read from and ascribing, designed objects and spaces.

The following section provides an overview of my chapter content:

³ Author of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus: A Practical Guide for Improving Communication and Getting What You Want in Your Relationships: How to Get What You Want in Your Relationships* published 1992 by Thorsons.

⁴ Victoria's Secret is a large USA retailer of women's lingerie.

Chapter 2: Critical Review is split between two sections. The Introduction and Disciplinary Concerns focusses on the interests of this thesis as it sits within a tradition of material culture, prioritising the way in which consumers make meaning through things. The first section; *From struggle to self-actualisation: resistance and re-signification* examines the significance of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies to my research. This looks specifically at intersections with feminist cultural studies where opportunities for resistance within women's everyday lives are explored, particularly within areas that are problematic for feminism. The second section; *From Sleazy to Sassy and Covert to Chic*, positions the women's sex shop within contemporary sexualisation of culture debates. Specifically it looks at how the women's sex shop might be located within the phenomena of porn chic.

Chapter 3: Methodology Chapter is in two sections. Firstly; *Underpinning Ethos and Rationale* which broadly recognises the indebtedness of this thesis to feminist research methods, surveying the scope of its interests and establishing where this project engages or departs from its precepts. This chapter also problematises the relationship between researcher and participant, specifically in terms of the production and ownership of knowledges that propose to identify structures of inequality. The second section; *The Research Process*, focuses on the nuts and bolts of research including accessing participants, the interview process and transcription. It also accounts for the method of data analysis used and how this was adapted for the purposes of this research topic.

Chapter 4: Men in raincoats: luxurious wallpaper is the first of three empirical analysis chapters. The primary concern of this chapter is to show how the women's sex shop is positioned by my participants, in opposition to the 'traditional' male sex shop. This chapter enlists the notion of domestication to explore how the women's sex shop sits within a framework of debate around women and pornography. This juxtaposition serves to introduce ideas around accessibility to female sexual consumption.

Chapter 5: A good morning out: Going sex shopping with the girls focusses on women's accounts of going shopping. It starts to explore various discursive modes by which sex shopping is accounted for by participants. This chapter also

begins an investigation of notions of hiddenness and visibility to be continued in the following chapter, situating this polemic within current debates around the sexualisation of culture. Chapter 5 also investigates the notion of homosociality in relation to sex shopping.

Chapter 6: Posh means you can walk in anywhere primarily focuses on the shops in visual terms. It continues a problematisation of distinctions between public and private, permissible and transgressive space. It examines the ways in which these polarised conceptions are embedded in women's accounts of the *look* of the sex shop and how they are harnessed on behalf of a notion of female empowerment. This chapter also examines how design may be utilised as an alibi for sexual consumption.

Chapter 7 is the conclusion and revisits the rationale for this research as well as telling the story of its beginnings and my own place within it. It highlights the disciplinary, theoretical and methodological contributions of this project, pointing also to potential directions for future research in the arena of feminine sexual consumption.

Chapter 2

Critical review

Introduction and disciplinary concerns

As I have indicated in my introduction to this thesis, this work is undoubtedly interdisciplinary in nature, inter-disciplinary in that analysis operates within the spaces between, as well as across, these various disciplines, making use of a number of analytical and methodological approaches rather than prioritising a particular disciplinary position. While this thesis will show its indebtedness to Cultural Studies and particularly to developments in Feminist Cultural Studies, both for opening up new areas of and perspectives for cultural debate and for its reflective use of sociological research methods, it is most nicely rooted in the area of Material Culture Studies. Undoubtedly this is because in acknowledging the polysemous nature of objects and the myriad ways in which people may make use of them to create social meanings, Material Culture has itself emerged and borrowed from a wide tranche of disciplinary approaches. Woodward in tracing the origins and development of the comparatively new discipline of Material Culture, emphasises that it:

affords a multidisciplinary vantage point into human-object relations, where the contributions of anthropology, sociology, psychology, design and cultural studies are valued.

(2007, p4)

Woodward's stress on the capacity of objects to do 'cultural and social work' (2007 p6) emphasises the notion that social meanings are invested in and transmitted via, objects. Daniel Miller also makes use of the term 'work' in this context, but more specifically rooted in a Hegelian tradition, he theorises consumption as the process of moving an object from 'vast alienated world of products', itself divorced from the abstraction of production, to the meaning 'full' world of the individual consumer:

...consumption as work may be defined as that which translates the object from an alienable to an inalienable condition; that is from being a symbol of estrangement and price value to being an artefact invested with particular inseparable connotations.

(1987, p190)

Miller's example of the work done on a pint of beer by the 'cultural milieu which give such objects their social meaning' (1987 p191) suggests the way in which Material Culture prioritises the notion of the material presence which embodies and generates a raft of 'possibilities of sociability and cognitive order, as well as engendering ideas of morality, ideal worlds and other abstractions and principles' (1987 p191). The sex shop itself, as well as the designed products for sale in them, surely do this 'cultural and social work' on behalf of prevailing discourses around female sexuality and unpacking these embodied discourses and situating them within, alongside and potentially counter those meanings ascribed by consumers, is the purpose of this study. It is because this thesis takes as a fundamental premise that women's motives, meanings and experiences in shopping for sexualised objects *do matter* in terms of theorising contemporary sexual cultures, that I would situate my interests primarily within the discipline of Material Culture. Moreover Material Culture's engagement with consumption clearly prioritises the:

...transformative capacities people possess when they deal with objects, the material culture approach had the advantage of encouraging a grounded empirical focus that addresses mutual relations between people and consumer objects.

(Woodward 2007, p26)

It is the 'grounded, empirical focus' involved in talking to women about their experience of shopping in the arena of the women oriented sex shop, that marks out this study and potentially shifts it a little from what may be seen as celebratory accounts of consumption, those that focus on consumption in terms of individual identity production and prioritise the operation of agency in consumer choice (Featherstone 2007, De Certeau 2002, Fisk 1991). As Woodward goes on to suggest, this attempt to mediate between the historical, cultural and social meanings of sexualised things may be 'muddled' by the 'multiple interpretations, practices and manipulations' (Woodward 2007 p4) of consumers, but it is the exposure and unpacking of the 'muddying', the 'rifts' and the contradictions suggested by women's experience of the sex shop that are the interests of this thesis. These concerns also fall within a very current awareness of what Attwood describes as the 'sexualisation of culture' (2009:xiii), while she points to an obvious interest in this on the part of the media and media commentators such as Ariel Levy's *Raunch Culture* (2005), Whelehan's *Overloaded* 2000 and Natasha

Walter's *Living Dolls* (2010), in disciplinary terms academic engagement in this area emerges primarily from media and cultural studies and tends to prioritise representation of female sexuality. Where, like this thesis, it uses sociological research methods in order to investigate the meanings that sexual practices have for women, the objects and spaces which are involved in or significant to, that sexualisation are not fully present as germane to the analysis. This leads to the strangely absent pole in Holland and Attwood's (2009) highly nuanced participant observation of pole dancing classes, the vertiginously high heeled shoes that are required for pole dancing are mentioned but not theorised and the pub setting of the classes is assumed and normalised. The semantic density of setting, paraphernalia and accoutrements, the visual and material confirmation of the contradictions inherent in constructing pole dancing as empowering and self-actualising, would perhaps have figured more largely in an approach informed by material culture and design history such as the one employed by this study.

The adoption of a methodology which prioritises the lived experience of consumers, is central to the notion of incorporating or problematising the *muddying* referred to by Woodward. While I will be exploring the issues raised by this methodology in more detail later, I emphasise here that it is this grounded and empirical way of working that has largely led to what I describe as struggle or rift, it is clearly a commitment to a feminist research methodology that forces the writers I have most enjoyed and who have most influenced my own work (such as Holland and Attwood, 2009), to acknowledge any personal as well as theoretical resistance to the ideologies implicit in the practices and in the objects under discussion. Thus it is clear that a way of working which contains its own embedded ideology has shaped the outcomes of the research, the necessity to validate their subject's experience as they themselves describe it, means that the researcher is forced to either search out some form of resolution or simply acknowledge inherent contradictions and complexities and 'leave it at that'.

Structure of critical review

Given the brief outline of my interests above, I have structured my critical review in two sections. The first, *From struggle to self-actualisation*, broadly explores intersections between class, gender and consumption, looking primarily at where lived experience is expressed in empirical studies informed by the social sciences,

facilitating a construction of consumption which moves from being viewed as a project of alienation towards being a meaning making project of individuation and identity construction. Here my starting point is a discussion of the significance to my work of Janice Radway's 1984 text on the consumption of Romance novels and the ways in which the consumption of an artefact characterized as upholding and safeguarding traditional hegemonic structures, is re-defined and re-signified as an arena in which women may resist the demands of their domestic lives. The notions of resistance and appropriation are explored here as central to investigation of the women's sex shop, a phenomena framed by both retailers and consumers as an arena in which women may consume sexualised items as a means of resisting a view of female sexuality defined within a masculine paradigm.

The second section, *From Sleazy to Sassy and Covert to Chic*, looks initially at how the women's sex shop might be positioned in terms of recent work around the sexualisation of culture, examining how far class and gender are interrogated in this body of work as defining categories in terms of access to and agency in what is arguably an increasingly sexualised society. Here I will be examining both academic and journalistic representations of 'striptease' (McNair 2002) or 'raunch culture' (Levy 2005) placing them in opposition in order to explore fissures between a feminist reading of pursuits such as pole dancing classes or neo burlesque (and of course, shopping in a women's sex shop) and those which allow for an arguably more nuanced response to and acknowledgement of, the tensions inherent in such practices. Here I particularly highlight the phenomena of porn chic, which I suggest, has made use of, appropriated, as well as challenged, sexual codes and conventions as a means by which to broaden the appeal and the range of the sexualised commodity on both a class and gender basis, looking at how far this 'up-marketing' of sexual consumption has facilitated consumer access to notions of resistance. Furthermore, while porn chic has facilitated the mediation of the sexualised object via new channels, moving sexual consumption out of the sleazy and into the sumptuous, sassy and seductive, co-terminously it has exposed tensions between the visual and material which call for a study prioritising the ways in which sexual discourse is constructed and maintained by *things*.

Part 1. From struggle to self-actualisation: resistance and re-signification

The female centric sex shop is a phenomenon which materialises a range of issues and debates played out largely in the substantial media discussion generated by the subject, particularly in the broadsheet press. Representation in the popular media has engaged primarily with the women's sex shop and sex shopping in terms of the ways in which it appears to transcend the sordid associations of the traditional male heterosexual sex shop through the prioritising of luxury designed goods, for sale in opulent surroundings. While media representation has contributed to the 'fixing' of the female centric sex shop in terms of its class and taste significations, a theme I will return to in chapter six, the shops themselves clearly materialise and indeed rely upon, a discourse of empowerment a version of feminine sexual agency which prioritises a liberated consumer identity, a woman happy to purchase her preferred brand of sexual self-pleasure. Thus the interests of this thesis can be located within two overarching and linked, thematic areas; initially the representation and materialisation of contemporary ideology around female sexuality and secondly the designed object as it intersects with notions of class, taste and gender. This thesis takes as a starting point the notion of the sex shop as a specifically gendered text and examines what Partington describes as the 'reproductive transformation' of meaning 'carried out by consumers when they invest goods with meaning' (1991: 49). Therefore my work focuses on the role of such shops as being constitutive and generative of discourse rather than simply *representational* of an existing understanding of feminine sexuality. Analysis of the various visual signifiers employed by the design of these shops seeks to establish the ways in which they borrow and appropriate 'feminist' discourses in order to make a particularised appeal to the consumer. My primary research with consumers attempts to uncover the role female orientated sex or 'erotic' shops may play for women in regulating, defining and possibly liberating their potential to pursue sexual empowerment. As well as the ways in which these notions intersect and are dependent upon the meanings given to 'things' (the shops and the objects for sale in them) in terms of what Woodward describes as the: 'narrativisation of broader discourses of self, identity and biography, which link aesthetics to ethics of self, and social identity' (2007 p6). Thus these themes are underpinned and defined by an approach which foregrounds the ways in which the meaning of goods and the site of their exchange, is negotiated and constructed by the consumer both

ideologically and in terms of the ways in which the consumption of aestheticized sexual objects forms part of both a self narrative and a positioning of the self in terms of 'social identity'.

This is a position which draws, moreover, on Yvonne Tasker's framing of popular culture as one in which 'ideology becomes a lived relation and meaning a contested area' (1991:86). I find Tasker's position useful here in that it leaves space for the contradictions I seek to address in the designed spaces and objects of the women's sex shop, in terms of the way in which they may be viewed both in the context of this thesis and by consumers themselves, as embodying meanings that either (or both) challenge or reproduce existing discourses and social structures concerning female sexuality. How might women negotiate the meanings materialised by the 'look' of the women's sex shop and by those objects for sale in them and how might these meanings fit with a notion of these shops as a vehicle for individual sexual self-expression? In what ways does the women's erotic emporium, persuasively peddling a tastefully libertarian lifestyle, sit within Brian McNair's description of 'new spaces for female sexual display'? (2009: p70). In chapters four and five I look at how these apparent 'contradictions' have been negotiated. The shift from a feminist reading of a practice as embodying hegemonic sexual ideology, to a reading in which the same practice purports to challenge such hegemonies is a shift too far for some and currently the subject of virulent debate amongst both popular and academic feminist writers. (Levy 2006, Walter 2011 etc) Chapter 6 examines in further detail the process by which this move is materialised within the design of the shops and how this is read and understood by their consumers.

Any existing academic work in the *particular* field of this study has emerged from a range of disciplines. While as a comparatively recent phenomenon⁵, over the past 17 years, there has been a considerable response in the popular media to the arrival of the female orientated sex shop, relatively little academic attention has been paid to the specific area of the gendered consumption of sexualised products. Dennis Hall's account of the US based shop Good Vibrations (2000) also Malina and Schmidt who discuss the shopping experience in terms of 'hedonistic consumption' (1997:8), construct the female orientated 'erotic

⁵ The first women's sex shop, Sh!, opened in Hoxton in 1992

emporium' in terms of difference from the traditional heterosexual male sex shop, Tony Kent's description of Erotic retailing in the UK (2006) gives a brief account of the beginnings and development of the female sex shop and surveys the current market. His focus is the move of sexualised retailing into a mainstream market and he acknowledges that design has played a part in turning 'an area previously perceived as sleazy into one that is both acceptable and desirable' but does not critique the post-feminist orthodoxy that: 'the ease of women looking at women, not dressing up for men, and for all women to feel sexy, is the achievement of these specialist shops' (2006:209). Feona Attwood (2005) similarly focuses on the ways in which the female sex shop re-brands the sexualised product for the female consumer. In addition Merl Storr's anthropological work of 2003 on Ann Summers parties investigates the Ann Summers party as a homosocial gathering via which women negotiate meaning around the intersections of gender, sexuality and consumption. Since wider investigation has necessarily drawn on broad disciplines and fields of work, therefore my critical review is structured on a thematic basis which endeavours to situate the central research questions of this thesis within the historical development of concepts, theoretical perspectives and approaches to particular issues, foregrounding what these have brought to my own investigation or indeed where my interests depart from a particular position.

Initially then, this study has been widely influenced by and clearly in part emerges from, the field of Cultural Studies, a discipline which has assisted in moving the study of consumption away from a deterministic view, as exclusively a process of alienation some way towards a view of consumption which focuses on the process of consuming as an individuated creative project. Specifically, I have been influenced by Feminist Cultural Studies and in particular the work of Janice Radway (1984) on the meanings that women invest in the practice of reading popular romantic literature. This is a work that was instrumental in moving Cultural Studies beyond its established analytical category of class towards an engagement with feminism, a consideration of women's engagement with popular cultural practices and which proposed that these practices might be said to carve out a site of feminine 'resistance' to a patriarchal culture. The later work of feminists working at the centre, published in *Off Centre* (1991), has particularly shaped my work, again in terms of its concentration on changes in fields of study, its prioritising of an exploration of meaning making within a context of women's

everyday lives and the concurrent inception and development of notions of appropriation and resistance; key themes that will be traced within various fields and bodies of work but initially as emerging from the work of the Birmingham Centre. However my own exploration of this body of work recognises the limitations of the interests of The Birmingham School for this particular study, in line with Miller's assertion that:

popular culture...often attempts to deal specifically with working-class culture or with sub-cultures which are seen as resistant to the dominant forces in society, so that...the analysis tends to reduce the material to its place in reproducing or opposing given social positions and conflicts.

(1987, p173)

The female orientated sex shop is widely characterised both by the media and by shop owners themselves, as 'opposing given social positions' in that it proposes to provide women with McNair's 'new spaces for female sexual display'? (2009:p70) which are in direct opposition to, or resistant to, the version of female sexuality on offer in the more 'traditional' and male orientated, sex shop. However, I suggest that its role in 'reproducing' them is less readily acknowledged. Thus my interest lies in exposing these contradictions and difficulties rather than in the struggle for *resolution* which is a feature of both Radway and the *Off Centre* writers. A propensity that, alongside Miller, I see as tending to prioritise the: 'association of cultural practices of dominated groups with a heroic image' (Miller 1987 p173). In prioritising a construction of the women's sex shop which foregrounds it as 'resistant' to a patriarchal sexual culture, one is possibly in danger of failing to acknowledge that access to this particular form of libertory cultural expression is dependent on the consumer's familiarity with an array of specific knowledges, particularly those associated with aesthetic understanding. Thus clearly the subject here is not merely a 'materialisation' of resistance to the dominant sexual culture, but a phenomena which works hard to mark out taste, luxury and aesthetics as significations of class and gender, ultimately conflating these notions with the image of a desirably sexually libertarian lifestyle. In this very broad sense then, my work draws on Bourdieu's theoretical framework (1979). Steph Lawler's empirical account of highly differentiated representations of women's resistance (2005), utilises Bourdieu's understanding of the ways in which class distinctions are embedded in 'cultural and symbolic, as well as economic axes' (2005, p110). Lawler employs Bourdieu's concept of habitus to examine representations of

classed femininities, the ways in which: 'different meanings attached to different forms of masculinity and femininity cohere around class' (ibid, p110). I suggest that the women's sex shop works in this way to prioritise a somewhat restricted and classed notion of 'sexual empowerment' dependant on a feminine identity cohered explicitly around taste significations, These shops differentiate themselves aesthetically, not only from the 'sordid' or 'seedy' associations of the 'traditional' male sex shop but propose an agentic position which is compromised in that it not open to all:

What gives habitus its particular force, in this context, is that power is conceptualised as working such that it is not what you do or what you have, that is marked as wrong or right, normal or pathological, but *who you are*. This is not to deny that subjects can resist such a positioning... However it is important to note that there are some people who, by virtue of their habitus, are able to pass judgement implicitly or explicitly, on others, and to make that judgement count.

(ibid, p113)

Thus, to clarify, I would suggest that this piece of work strives to problematise and to locate, the feminine sex shop at various points between two pole positions. One in which women's sexual consumption might be seen as a process of reification in which women take a subjugated position both in class and gender terms and a dialectically opposing view in which women's sexual consumption indicates an active participation in a liberatory and creative process of individual self-fashioning.

The 'pleasure as resistance' debate

This section will focus on mapping a trajectory starting from writing of the late 1970's and early eighties coming out of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies (or like Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* first published in 1984, work which has subsequently been identified as in the tradition or sitting within a model of the BCCS⁶), to a body of current writing, in which I would position many of my own interests, and which brings similar concerns, debates and methodological approaches to certain 'problematic' current cultural practices. This mapping will highlight four particular areas which are significant to and

⁶ Radway's 1987 preface to the British edition of this work gives a detailed analysis and explanation of the ways in which she was both influenced by the British work but says that in many ways the links were co-incidental,

foregrounded in, this body of work. Firstly a moving away from the decoding of a text, to account for and prioritise meaning making on the part of the consumer, in relation to my own work this means that interest is located in consumer constructions of the female orientated erotic shop and shopping within it, rather than in a 'disembodied' decoding of assumed meanings inscribed on objects or spaces. Secondly and concomitantly, a methodological approach which, subsequently characterised as the ethnographic turn, has used methods borrowed from the social sciences in order to account for those relationships constructed between audiences and text. While this area will be covered in much greater detail in the methodology chapter, I wish here to highlight this departure as signifying a way in which research methodology is embedded within and crucial to meaning making and draw attention to its significance for my own approach.

The third and fourth areas of interest concern an attention to practices that might be defined as problematic for feminism and for the feminist researcher, in that they are practices 'traditionally' viewed as defined by and located within hegemonic masculinist structures, for clearly the women's sex shop is defined by its relation (and opposition) to, the very masculine space of the 'traditional' heterosexual male sex shop, a space that some of my participants describe as difficult or 'uncomfortable' to negotiate. My excitement here has been exploring a tranche of work that deals with what the academic may perceive as a slippage or rift between 'ordinary' women's wholehearted pleasure in and validation of a practice which is perceived by the academic researcher as having embedded within it an ideology hostile to the feminist project. The task that faces the feminist researcher then is a struggle both to honour the place and the meanings that the practice has in the lives and understandings of their research subjects while acknowledging and addressing the complexity and problematic nature of the practice for feminism. Tasker (1991:85) acknowledges this key contradiction and pre-figures the dilemmas thrown up by the re-appropriation by women of practices formerly framed within hegemonic power relations – such as for example women's contemporary endorsement of pole dancing or burlesque:

the re-evaluation of forms which, within a feminist "common sense", form part of the representational conspiracy to keep women in their place has been problematic.

(1991, p85)

Clearly the clearest and most acute manifestation of the dilemmas Tasker points to here are the pornography wars of the mid-1970s. While I would situate my own work largely within contemporary debate around the sexualisation of popular culture, as already stated, it is the empirical nature of this research itself which perhaps moves discussion of the women's sex shop towards a somewhat fluid or nuanced response to the ideological questions inherent in the topic of feminine sexual consumption. Nevertheless, in understanding the trajectory of these current controversies played out in both the popular and academic press (Levy 2005, Paul 2005, Walters 2010 and others) it is important to map the origins and polarities of this debate. Thus finally I point to work which strives, not only to identify this rift located in the space between a 'problematic' practice and women's engagement in it, but looks to work which moves towards 'resolving' these difficulties through a framing of the consumer as re- making meaning through the 'appropriation' of such practices. This 'remaking or 'making over' of a practice 'conventionally' defined as existing within the framework of a dominant ideology, is, in relation to the women's sex shop, described by both the shop owners interviewed and by consumers in terms that suggest its being a 'making over' of the traditional, heterosexual male sex shop. However in attempting to define the usefulness of this term to a study of the feminine sex shop it is imperative to trace the development of the notion of 'appropriation' and significantly to examine its relation to the proposal that appropriation may form an explicit or implicit 'resistance' to dominant ideologies – in the case of the women centred sex shop 'resistance' to a 'traditional' understanding of female sexuality located within a dominant masculinist culture. Therefore this section examines writing around women's relationship to consumption practices, texts which endeavour to expose both the ideological structures that inform or underpin such practices as well as to depict the myriad ways in which women may be said to have resisted, exploited or subverted those meanings encoded on goods in production in order to fashion meanings which resonate in their own daily lives.

My own use of the term appropriation sits within the tradition of identifying appropriation as a form of resistance found in subcultural studies, significantly of course, Hebdige, D (1979). Here I begin to highlight some of the concerns that may come into play in a discussion of whether shopping for sexualised items in the women's erotic emporium may entail a similar sort of appropriation as resistance.

The Women's Studies Group at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies published *Women Take Issue* in 1978, it was driven by the perception that existing work carried out by the CCCS while it concerned itself with class antagonisms, did not address gender as a distinct category for debate. The Women's Studies Group articulated the need for and challenged the notion of, a single decisive factor in social and cultural relations adding gender to class as a determining feature in economic oppression. This text clearly embeds women's consumption in patriarchal and capitalist structures: 'female sexuality as sexuality on display is part of the *use value of the commodity labour power itself*' (Bland, Brunson, Hobson, Winship:1978 p66) Sexual display does not have emancipatory muscle but is framed as subjugation:

Here they are doing a grand job as teachers, doctors, and barristers, running companies and ministries and banks, just like men and ready for separate tax allowances when suddenly skirts soar up to flash point, somebody opens up Bunny Clubs and the image shatters.

(ibid, p67)

At this point the significance of their work for my own research lies in desire of the Women's Studies Group, to expose the lived experience of women, leading to a very reflective use of ethnographic research methods which explore and expose the relationships, specifically relationships of power and status, between interviewer and interviewee, particularly in the work of Angela McRobbie: *Working Class Girls and the Culture of Femininity* and Dorothy Hobson: *Housewives: Isolation as oppression*. However, while *Women Take Issue* primarily locates its interests in the ways in which gender combines with class to produce oppression in women's everyday lived experience my own work moves towards a less deterministic examination of the ways in which women frame a notion of female sexuality via the experience of shopping for sexualised objects. Yvonne Tasker writing in *Off Centre* published in 1991 as a successor project to *Women Takes Issue* offers an evaluation of the Cultural Studies Project, which usefully encapsulates its relationship to this thesis:

new theories of and attitudes to the audience, to readings and readers, has led to a more general re-evaluation of popular pleasures in which ideology becomes a lived relation and meaning a contested arena, so that audiences gained the power to negotiate ideologically with the text.

(1991, p86)

Here the differences between these two anthologies is neatly summarised, in the second (*Off Centre*) the female audience, or consumer, has 'gained power' if not to scale the walls of a hegemonic relationship framed by class and gender differentiations, at least to re position and re consider cultural practices on their own terms, to ascribe meanings which may potentially be in opposition to those meanings ascribed on a 'text' by a feminist 'common sense'. Tasker's framing of the interests and concerns of Cultural Studies is deeply resonant for my own project which seeks rather to construct the female sex shop in terms of consumer understandings of shopping for sexualised objects, of the objects themselves and of the spaces they inhabit, than reading meaning from the 'text'; the design of objects, retail spaces or from media response to the phenomena. While for the owners of these shops it is clear that the shops themselves aim to construct an ideology differentiating female sexuality from the version they see as on offer to women in the traditional sex shop, it has also become clear that in shopping for sexualised items many of the consumers interviewed self-consciously viewed themselves as engaged by Tasker's 'ideological negotiation with the text'. Interviewees showed themselves very cognisant of the ideological nature of the women's sex shop and of their own negotiation with the various signifiers of that ideology, contained within interior decor, shop fronts, products, customer service and so on.

The American academic, Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (first published in 1984), moves towards a contemporary engagement with similar themes around the intersections of feminism and popular culture, specifically work which explores this notion of slippage between ideology and practice. It is within a perception of the struggle that is necessitated by this slippage that my own work might be said to be located, although, while resolution of the struggle in the case of Radway 1984, Partington 1991, Holland 2010, Storr 2003 is to be found to some extent in the notion of 'resistance', in the case of the sex shop I suggest that the struggle here for expression of an agentic feminine sexuality is both positioned by and finds its resolution, via commodification. Specifically through the experience of shopping for sexualised objects constructed within a visual framework of luxury and high design. This struggle for resolution has been framed as 'pleasure as resistance' and as such it has been subject to debate and critique for what has been seen as a concomitant de-politicisation of women's engagement in various

consumption practices, a celebration of consumption as agency which side-lines the political debates of second wave feminism. (see recent work by McRobbie 2009, Walter 2010 and others which extends this debate).

Radway's *Reading the Romance*, responded in the US to critique that an elite literature could not represent the vast majority of Americans, in an attempt to establish 'what a literary text can be taken as evidence for' (1987:2). Her work met the call for a study of literature consumed by 'ordinary' Americans, as Wood (2004) suggests 'Radway returned to a very simple question: what do we do with literary texts'? Her work departs from a reading of the text that focuses on decoding its meaning, to one which accounts for the meanings inscribed on the text by its consumers. In Radway's chapter prefacing the 1987 British edition of *Reading the Romance* she suggests that her way of working 'accidentally' coincided with similar work coming out of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies which had begun to use ethnographic methods in order to explore: 'the nature of mass cultural consumption' (198, p2), a move that was subsequently characterised as 'the ethnographic turn'.

Radway acknowledges that while the Birmingham school was occupied by a view of cultural production as securing the domination of one group over another, the American tradition was less ideologically deterministic, lacking the rootedness in Marxism that characterised the Birmingham work. However her use of ethnographic methods to 'make sense of American culture' (ibid p3) focuses her work not only on issues around the relationship between the feminist researcher and her 'real women' subjects but also on culturally specific meanings of pleasure and how these meanings may be addressed and accounted for by feminism. Significantly Radway's aim to explore the 'evidentiary status' of literature is tempered in the preface to the British edition by acknowledgment of the part her own ideological position has played in her account of the romance reading habits of her research subjects. Radway hoped initially to establish a more 'accurate' picture of a specific literary production and consumption but in the practice of ethnographic research was compelled to foreground the ways in which her own feminist ideology impacted on her interpretation of the reading habits of her subjects:

...I now think that my initial preoccupation with the empiricist claims of social science prevented me from recognizing fully that even what I took to

be simple descriptions of my interviewee's self-understandings were produced through an internal organization of data and thus mediated by my own conceptual constructs and ways of seeing the world.
(1987, p5)

Thus there is a clear rift between her own feminist interests in exposing the lives of the Midwestern Smithton women as lived within a patriarchal framework, a life dominated by domesticity and the caring and nurturance of others and her desire to validate their own account of the 'escape' they locate in their avid consumption of a literary genre which promulgates the patriarchal myth of romantic love and fulfilment through marriage. Radway's answer to this dilemma is to frame the Smithton women's reading habits within both a notion of 'resistance' and 'escape'. The resistance she describes is located in the *act* of reading or the *process* of consumption by which the Smithton women carve out a space situated between and in spite of, the demands of their domestic lives. She suggests that their immersion in the commodified romance of the text offers a vicarious form of nurturance in the women's perception of the relationship between hero and heroine - a psychological reading which feels a little incongruous in terms of Radway's overarching methodology. While Radway posits her subjects as resisting, through the act of consuming a commodified notion of romance, the demands put upon them by the patriarchal culture which they undoubtedly inhabit, she does not suggest that they are challenging the patriarchal framework depicted by the novels themselves. For the sex shop consumers I have interviewed, the notion of sexuality they are consuming has not simply already been commodified, it is central to this commodification of the notion of sexuality on offer, that these shops and the products for sale in them are constructed and encoded explicitly as a form of resistance for women. This resistance lies in their explicit *differentiation* from the objectified version of female sexuality manifested by and within the traditional male sex shop and an appropriation or making over, in myriad ways and forms, of the notion of female sexuality found there. While Radway describes the contradictions and complexities inherent in women's enjoyment of romance novels, contradictions are also embedded deep within the women's erotic shop, however just as Holland and Attwood discover in their exploration of pole dancing classes (2009) for many of the women who visit and shop in such places the experience does indeed provide the means to an expression of an agentic

sexuality, one which some of my participants suggest that they have struggled to discover elsewhere. As Radway suggests:

...it was the women reader's construction of the act of romance reading as a "declaration of independence" that surprised me into the realisation that the meaning of their media-use was multiply determined and internally contradictory and that to get at its complexity it would be helpful to distinguish analytically between the significance of the event of reading and the meaning of the text constructed as its consequence.

(1987, p7)

Wood however (2004) cites Modleski's (1986) critique of *Reading the Romance* as overly prioritising the notion of 'resistance' and suggests that:

The "pleasure-as-resistance" argument seen to foreground postmodern thinking was deemed to characterize the depoliticizing of cultural studies.

(2004, p149)

While Wood emphasises that this is to misrepresent the breadth of Radway's achievements, her assertion that Radway does show us how the Smithton women 'make sense of romance novels *in their own terms*' (2004:p149; my emphasis) is surely key to the way in which some feminist academics have dealt with what they perceive as ideologically problematic practices. The notion of re-constructing the meaning of a phenomena that ostensibly underlines female objectivity 'in their own terms' is moreover, key to the way in which the women's sex shop owners interviewed characterise their own businesses. While acknowledging the inheritance of the heterosexual male sex shop as a place that has been analogous to hegemonic power relations, the female orientated version is re-imagined and re-made in 'their own terms'. Thus clearly the very existence of an overarching and dominant discourse around female orientated sex shops which constructs them in terms of difference to the heterosexual male shop, points to this notion. Moreover, the testimony of research participants as consumers prioritises the ways in which shopping for sexualised goods in the arena of the women's erotic emporium moves towards addressing women's need for agentic sexual expression; a type of shopping activity which, in that it may either be an example of Tasker's 'negotiating ideologically with the text' or evidence of an enthusiastic individualistic 'de-politicising', clearly signifies a 'contested area' of meaning but perhaps does not provide the element of 'resolution' that Radway points to in her own text.

In the same way that Radway is investigating the meaning inscribed on the romance novel by the Smithton readers, Angela Partington in her study of *'Melodrama's Gendered Audience'* (1991), makes a case for understanding the cultural reproduction of class and gender differences as situated in the *'relationships between audiences and commodities, and the conditions of meaning-making'*. She considers the ways in which audiences/consumers invest meaning in the text, in this case film melodrama of the 1950's, meanings which are specific to particular conditions and defined by particular knowledges; a process she describes as 'reproductive transformation'. Partington develops the notion that working class female audiences of the '50's were 'resisting' an identity imposed by the film makers, that their consumption of melodrama entailed re-ascribing meaning to the text:

the working-class audience may have negotiated and resisted the "housewife" identity (as defined by experts and professionals) they were supposed to adopt, by making it part of the repertoire of femininities which is masquerade.

(1991, p67)

Partington raises a number of themes here, particularly her discussion around the intersections of consumer culture and femininity which pre-figures Butler (1992) in its construction of melodrama's audience as acting out a 'repertoire of femininities produced within consumer culture' (1991, p50). She later extends this notion in her 1996 discussion of perfume packaging, design and advertising which figures the consumer as engaging in meaning making around gender identities: 'while considering design as a source of cultural codes at the consumer's disposal' (Partington 1996, p204). Ultimately Partington's attempt at resolving the ideological difficulties, suggested by a particular genre, is less convincing than Radway's. Her suggestion of 'resistance' on the part of the audience lacks the grounding in the lived experience of consumers that characterises and is so engaging, in Radway's text.

We will see in chapter four that resistance to normative structures is central to consumer understandings of the women's sex shop and that it the criticality of this positioning of the women's sex shop in opposition to masculinist sexual frameworks that has prompted the theoretical emphasis outlined above. Detailed analysis of testimony will further unpack this notion as it is embedded in the

shopping experiences of my participants. This section of my critical review then has attempted to situate this thesis in terms of its disciplinary concerns, to emphasise its indebtedness to the BCCS in terms of its engagement with consumption as a creative project, but significantly with feminist cultural studies where it engages with a re-evaluation of practices or spaces which do not sit easily within the orthodoxies of traditional feminist theory and interests. The next section will continue this theme by investigating the relevance to this thesis of pornography's uneasy relationship with feminism and track the continuing debates engendered by this topic through contemporary discussions around the sexualisation of culture.

Part 2. From Sleazy To Sassy and Covert To Chic: the 'classing' of gendered sexual re-signification

The previous section discussed the notion of feminine resistance to and re-signification of patriarchal regimes, specifically in terms of women carving out a space within such normative frameworks. Re-configuring them as a site in which, unexpectedly perhaps, some measure of subjectivity, agency and self-fulfilment is achieved. While the women's sex shop has been examined in relationship to such contexts, this next section looks at those factors which might be said to problematise access to that agentic resistance. I begin to examine the ways in which participation in a discourse of re-signification and resistance is dependent on familiarity with or understanding of, key taste and class signifiers. It is the intersection of the visual and the material in the design of the sex shop and its products, their careful alignment with style, luxury and even intellectuality, which both embodies and constructs these ideas around female sexual agency, while also signalling just who may participate legitimately in their dialogue of feminine sexual empowerment. Furthermore, here this piece of work is positioned within current literature around the 'sexualisation of culture'. I suggest that there is a fundamental debate underpinning this discussion which figures pornography and its troubled relationship with the feminist project as central to the notion of a re-appropriation of sexual representation and materialisation of feminine sexuality.

This account of primarily, recent literature will situate the female orientated sex shop within a body of work which seeks to move beyond a critique of the sexualisation of popular culture, to scrutinise the claims made by commercialised

practices such as pole dancing and neo burlesque or the purchase of luxury underwear and designer sex toys, that through their consumption women are empowering themselves, borrowing from forums and practices once associated with female objectivity and subverting them in complex ways to facilitate manifestations and explorations of female sexual agency. The material I review here concerns itself primarily with representation, significantly it seeks to uncover evidence for the notion of a new kind of 'sexual empowerment', one that links commodity fetishism with a realisation of feminine sexual subjectivity. Gill (2008) suggests this is:

...indeed, a daring rejection of what is frequently presented as "feminist orthodoxy" in relation to beauty. Stiletto heels, long imbued with sexual meanings, have acquired a particular symbolic potency in this post-feminist movement.

(2008, p37)

Gill's example here of the way that cultural artefacts such as the high heeled shoe, which for feminist writers has traditionally been redolent with meaning around female objectivity, have been re-ascribed to indicate feminine empowerment is clearly significant here in that my own study tracks the *re-appropriation or re-signification* of the sex shop. A type of shop that has commonly been perceived as belonging to an exclusively masculinist paradigm and which has generally been labelled as materializing the objectification of women's sexuality - it has moved to its manifestation as an environment which purports to facilitate women's sexual agency through the consumption of sexualised products. Current and recent writing divides I suggest, though perhaps not neatly, into two divergent trajectories in exploring and accounting for the various manifestations of an increasingly sexualised culture. I have chosen to position these strands of writing as in one sense polemical, this potentially reductionist reading does assist description of where my own research sits and while this study takes account of both areas, it is important here to explain its relation to and distinction from each. Levy (2005), Walters (2010) McRobbie (2009) and other recent works take a feminist and essentially critical position, asking the question 'where and how can feminism be located within the increasingly commodified sexualisation of popular culture?' On the other hand, for McNair (2002), Holland (2010) and Attwood (2004), McNair's useful term, the 'democratisation of desire' (ibid p11) is necessarily synergistic with the commodification of sexuality and my interests lie in examining the nature of

that 'democratisation' and how far it can be said to reach out to all women. However, for McNair particularly, while feminism is of course a discourse firmly embedded and acknowledged within his discussion, his primary interest is in the democratisation of sexuality in the interests of society as a whole. Thus this first trajectory has some sympathy for the sexualisation of culture on the basis that it leads to this democratisation of sexuality or a new level of participation in sexual discussion by excluded groups; for example gay and lesbian but arguably also heterosexual women. It suggests that the sexualisation of culture provides a forum for expressing and discussing sexuality previously denied some groups under a hegemonic, patriarchal and heterosexual culture. This trajectory is broadly accepting of or at least willing to accommodate, the commodification of sexuality, in that it contributes to or provides a platform for, discussion and the mediation of sexuality by these marginalised groups. McNair makes this point in a wide ranging sense, for example he cites the opening up of explicit discussion around sexuality prompted by the threat of Aids and this is pointed to in the testimony of some of my participants as having a positive outcome for women, simply in that it provided a forum for women to discuss 'what they want' as well as possibly resulting in a de-prioritising of penetrative sex. Others, specifically feminist writers, Holland (2010), Attwood (2004), Gill (2008) make some similar points around manifestations of popular culture which are appropriated by women as 'empowering'. But while this representation of the 'democratisation of desire' on the part of McNair et al, does clearly identify an agentic, active sexuality, resisting and possibly subverting normative or doxic understandings of a mediated sexuality, a reaching out in terms of gender and sexual orientation - to what extent does this term actually take into account class, as a factor in either the facilitation or restriction of access to participation in a notion of sexual agency? In what ways is this 'democratisation of desire', an explicit rationale of the female orientated sex shop, expressed in the testament of shop owners and workers and constructed in the visual and material gendering of the women's sex shop? Steph Lawler's 2005 account of highly differentiated representations of women's resistance draws on Bourdieu's understanding of the ways in which class distinctions are embedded in 'cultural and symbolic, as well as economic axes' (225, p110). Lawler utilises Bourdieu's concept of habitus to examine representations of classed femininities, the ways in which: 'different meanings attached to different forms of masculinity and femininity cohere around class' (2005, p110), I suggest that the women's sex

shop prioritises a somewhat restricted and classed notion of 'sexual empowerment' dependant on a feminine identity cohered explicitly around taste significations.

Thus here I will begin to situate my own work within discussion of the differences and intersections between, both academic and 'popular' texts, which appraise the sexualisation of popular culture in divergent terms, on the one hand cautious endorsement and on the other heated critique. While the 'sexualisation of culture' is a phrase that has implications in a very broad sense, potentially encompassing an enormous range of political and social issues from revelations of political sleaze to neo burlesque at the Brighton fringe, I am focussing here particularly on discussion around what has been termed 'porno chic' a phrase that, according to McNair, has been in currency since the 1970's ⁷ and is used variously by both academic and popular writers and journalists to describe the appropriation of codes and conventions of masculinist pornography by other areas of culture such as advertising, fashion photography, dance and so on. I have found McNair's inclusive use of the term useful in unpacking the concerns of this thesis:

Porno-chic replaced the traditional demonization of porn with, if not always approval or celebration, a spirit of excited enquiry into its nature, appeal and meanings.

(2002, p63)

Therefore, it is apposite at this point to introduce and adapt McNair's loose framing of the term as incorporating a hugely varied range of texts which examine a mediated sexuality from both an academic and popular or journalistic standpoint. However, I recognise that using his rather all-encompassing understanding of porno chic, may be seen as problematic in that clearly the phrase encapsulates or prioritises *visual* play with the codes and conventions of pornography over other forms of, primarily written, discussion around sexuality. Nevertheless, this particular attention to the visual codes of pornography is germane to the subject of this research, in that my investigation of the encoding of female sexuality found within the feminine sex shop prioritises a material culture analysis and it is this

⁷ While there does not seem to be consensus around the origin of this term, McNair suggests that the term porno-chic (or porn chic) was first used to describe the popularity of films such as *Deep Throat* and *Behind the Green Door* which acquired a sort of popular status as a signifier of a: 'mature, sexually liberated, "swinging" society' (2002 p62). The term has subsequently been used variously by academics and journalists to refer to aspects of the sexualisation of culture, specifically with regard to popular culture, including fashion photography, music, film and so on.

attention to the visual that marks it out from other studies around the intersections of feminism and the sexualisation of culture. Indeed the women's sex shop can be seen as, very explicitly, a part of the porn chic phenomena, not least in that the shops themselves will either adopt, adapt or self-consciously renounce, those signifying codes for sex shop. The covert, 'hard core' back room/downstairs, blacked out windows and images of pouting, pneumatic blondes are replaced by elegant window displays and discrete and tasteful packaging, thus its concern is with the '*re-signification*' of codes. Moreover, while McNair engages explicitly with sexuality as commodity, his analysis engages almost exclusively with various forms of media representation and does not move towards an examination of 'things' in this context. In fact he refers to books, films, CDs and so on as 'embody[ing] ideas and values as opposed to merely value' – unlike: 'cars and washing machines' (ibid p10) which, he suggests, do not contain 'explicit messages about love, hate, loss and the whole range of emotions which surround sexuality and sexual politics' (ibid p209). My own work extends or perhaps departs, from McNair's thesis in terms of introducing a material culture perspective which supports a discussion encompassing things, places and activities in exactly this way, as artefacts which *do* hold an 'embodied ideology' and with which consumers interact and work on, in the same way as they might other mediated representations of sexuality such as film, television, advertising, magazines and so on. Ultimately it seems clear that Porn Chic is a phenomena that is central to an understanding of the women's sex shop in that it has operated as an engine by which pornography has been enabled, not only to broaden its appeal in gender terms, to re-align itself with notions of empowerment rather than subjugation but also to move from the margins to (very nearly) the mainstream.

The 'Sexualisation of Culture' Debates

In the conclusion to his chapter on porno chic under discussion here, McNair suggests that:

Porno-chic ...might be viewed as an index of the sexual maturation of contemporary capitalist societies, rather than a measure of their degeneration into sleaze.

(2002, p87)

This succinctly expressed position neatly encapsulates the ways in which his thesis diverges from those of Ariel Levy (2005), Walters (2010) or Whelehan's

(2000); popular texts written for the interested reader, whose arguments are essentially polemical and journalistic in style. Critiques of both 'raunch' or 'striptease culture' draw on and re-invigorate pornography debates of the late '70s and 80's (spearheaded by Williams, Dworkin, McKinnon et al). I suggest that there is a fundamental debate underpinning this discussion which figures pornography and its troubled relationship with the feminist project as central to the notion of a re-appropriation of sexual representation and materialisation of feminine sexuality. Current debates around the sexualisation of popular culture are framed by these earlier feminist discussions which polarised debate on pornography as either a violation of women or something that might be recovered and disassociated from violence in order that women might enjoy visually stimulating material too. The 'normalisation of "soft core" pornography' (McRobbie 2004), the prevalence, virtually on the high street, of lap dancing clubs, the adoption of a pornographic aesthetic by advertising, fashion, television, film and so on in the form of 'porn chic' and the adoption by women of various practices formerly associated with female objectivity such as burlesque and pole dancing has led a number of writers (Levy 2005, Walters 2010 et al) to critique post modernism's sublimation of the feminist project into commodified libertarian lifestyle, articulated in terms of playful irony. Stephen Maddison makes a convincing empirical argument which highlights the continuing objectification of women in hard core pornography as a counterpoint to what he sees as a complacency in contemporary sexualised culture which: 'foregrounds individual rather than collective empowerment' (2009, p43). This is a notion materialised in the characters of Bridget Jones and Carrie Bradshaw, who while they seem to embody the emancipated post-feminist woman, convinced of her own entitlement to pleasure, are represented as fulfilling themselves via success in heterosexual relationships rather than in terms of self-actualisation. In his analysis of hardcore gonzo pornography Maddison provides a powerful challenge to revisionist studies of pornography post the feminist porn wars of the early '80's. Through scene by scene examination of a hardcore porn film he highlights both the number of times the actress is struck by the male protagonist and the phallocentric nature of the action in which the actress merely provides a selection of orifices for the reception of penis, spunk or urine. Maddison calls, both for a greater critical engagement with those material conditions that have led to the expansion of the porn industry and scrutiny of what he sees as the

problematic alignment of female sexual agency with consumer practices rather than collective struggle:

female empowerment becomes a function of consumer culture rather than one of a structural redistribution of gender power.

(2009, p43)

Ariel Levy's popular text of (2005) *Female Chauvinist Pigs* usefully describes the way in which a particular commodified and debased view of feminine sexuality has become not only embedded in popular culture, but has come to signify a version of liberated female sexual subjectivity:

Women had come so far...we no longer needed to worry about objectification or misogyny. Instead, it was time for us to join the frat party of pop culture, where men had been enjoying themselves all along.

(2005, p4)

Significantly Levy asks why women are participating in a sexual culture that entirely fails to challenge a hegemonic masculinised notion of sexuality and moreover defines sexuality in commodified terms. Her use of the term raunch is apposite, a euphemistic term used by producers of soft porn which encapsulates this notion of a commodified sexuality, it serves to materialise notions of 'kick ass' feminine self empowerment. A *raunchy* girl wears faded denim, cut off hot pants and an unbuttoned plaid shirt knotted beneath her breasts, she swigs Budweiser from a bottle and tears off a bit of beef jerky with her teeth while thrusting pelvis or backside in the direction of a camera; her sexuality is a caricatured appropriation of masculine sexuality, she is at once the parodic subject and object of desire. I suggest that Levy's term is one that is useful here in terms of demarcating this particular body of work in that the word, although perhaps not explicitly pejorative, describes a particular type of popular, bawdy, sleazy sexuality viewed through a masculinist prism and it is this framing of certain sorts of sexualised culture as being essentially masculinist that forms the basis of the critique posed by these texts.

Levy's text, while it outlines a range of practices and representations of female sexuality that are clearly problematic for many of us, fails to explore the ways in which increased representation of female sexuality, in any form, may open up a path via which women might individually and collectively locate sexual self-

expression. Feona Attwood (2006) usefully surveys current academic approaches to the sexualisation of culture, taking into account a growing 'repertoire of sexual practices' specifically cybersex, which her account posits as peculiarly postmodern. She suggests that a key approach to sexualisation is a concentration on the democratisation of sexuality, a move away from expert to popular arenas of debate as well as a blurring of boundaries between mainstream and pornographic representation encapsulated by the term 'porn chic':

Porn has turned chic and become an object of fascination in art, film, television and the press. Porn style is also now commonplace, especially in music video and advertising and a scantily clad, surgically enhanced 'porn look' is evident, not only in the media but on the streets.

(Attwood, 2009, pxiv)

Clearly the shift implied by the moving of the sex shop from covert seediness to stylish and accessible sexual self-actualisation could be seen as part of this widening or 'democratisation' of sexuality. However Attwood herself suggests, citing Gill (2003) that:

Women are offered a limited and commodified vision of active female sexuality in place of the new languages and practices of eroticism demanded by feminism.

(2006 p83)

Gill (2008) cites Goldman's use of the term 'commodity feminism', coined by Goldman in 1991, to refer to ways in which advertisers harness the cultural power of feminism while simultaneously neutralising or domesticating it. However, for many of my participants the commodified vision of active sexuality offered them by certain female sex shops is clearly a step up from what has previously been on offer. Attwood and Holland make a similar point in *Keeping Fit in Six Inch Heels*, which discusses the meanings that pole dancing classes have for women participants in terms of allowing them: 'to "see", "be" and "do" sexiness,' (2009 p180). They suggest that:

In a climate where women are encouraged to be actively sexual, yet have inherited a tradition which provides them with little idea of how to manifest this, the pole, like lingerie and sex toys, may also "stand in" for women's sexuality and give them the means of articulating it.

(2009, p178)

Attwood is responding here to her own earlier plea for a:

more considered account of the ways in which sexualisation, commodification, objectification and politics are currently being connected. (2006, p84)

She requires that academics move away from what she sees as an easy dismissal of post feminism's alignment with popular culture and engage with an analysis that acknowledges discourses linking sexualisation, class and lifestyle, as well as by taking account of women's actual experience of practices purporting to prioritise female empowerment.

Like Attwood, McNair's recent work forms part of a body of writing which, while fully acknowledging the commodification of a mediated sexuality, leads the way in examining the sexualisation of culture from a tentatively hopeful perspective. His broadly optimistic position is framed in terms of the 'democratisation of desire' which he describes as: 'the emergence of a more diverse and pluralistic sexual culture than has traditionally been accommodated within patriarchal capitalism'. (2002, p12). Indeed he moves towards a view of the commodification of sexuality which refutes a simplistic reading of porno chic as the product of a 'degenerative' consumer capitalism which reduces all popular culture to the merely commercial. McNair points to many feminist readings of the representation of 'sexualised looking' (ibid p 117) as evidence for a positive female sexual subjectivity. He cites as an example here, divided feminist response to advertising such as the 2000 Opium ad photographed by Steven Meisel and featuring Sophie Dahl which, while highly controversial, seemed to some to signal representation of woman as potentially desiring subject rather than desired object. Attwood also discusses this image in terms of a multiplicity of potential readings, dependant on context, on a seeping of feminist discourse into mainstream representation and the breaking down of boundaries between unacceptable and acceptable images of female bodies:

Thus, although notions of objectification as an expression of hostility towards women continued to be drawn on in some readings of Dahl's image, a range of other contextual factors were used in other readings to construct Dahl's body as an image of a strong and successful female self for whom sexual display represented a refusal of regulation and a transgression of older, dominant norms of good feminine behaviour. (Attwood 2004, p16)

As McNair acknowledges, his own recent work and that of others such as Feona Attwood 2004 and Rosalind Gill 2007, comprise an academic meta discussion which has taken place since the early 90's around the sexualisation of popular culture, opening up an analysis which moves beyond discussion of pornography framed as the objectification of women and female sexuality as positioned within a hegemonic and patriarchal culture. Attwood suggests that:

The implication that sexual display might be a source of power rather than danger for women and that the regulation of strong imagery might conceal a disgust for women's bodies, indicates that the reading of pornography and objectification was publicly framed in quite new ways.

(Attwood 2004, p15)

Angela McRobbie in '*The rise and rise of porn chic*' Jan 2004 Times Higher Education, also discusses the 'reframing of the landscape of representational sexual culture' in an article that at once figures consumer culture as a channel through which young women may forge a multiplicity of sexual identities whilst critiquing the de-stabilising of pornography as a feminist issue. This framing of porno-chic as essentially a meta-discussion of pornography which may draw on the codes and conventions of the pornographic to examine, satirise or deconstruct them, clearly has a very profound resonance for the female sex shop:

Porno-chic is not porn, then, but the representation of porn in non – pornographic art and culture; the pastiche and parody of, the homage to and investigation of porn; the postmodern transformation of porn into mainstream cultural artefact for a variety of purposes including, advertising, art, comedy and education.

(McNair 2002, p61)

The women's sex shop then, is itself appropriating as well as possibly subverting and resisting the 'codes and conventions' of the male orientated sex shop, this is a theme I will return to in some detail in later chapters. However, here McNair is referring primarily to various media examples such as the Paul Thomas Anderson film *Boogie Nights* and televisual representations of pornography spanning programmes such as *Eurotrash* or *Pornography – A Secret History*.

While McNair's text is extremely comprehensive in its analysis, it does not engage explicitly with the relationship between porn chic and class. Although he does acknowledge that while 'pornification' has *extended* discourse on agentic sexual

expression to a broader section of the population, porn chic, and at this point he is referring specifically to the use of porno chic imagery in advertising, remains in the realm of 'sophistication' in that a participative reading requires an understanding which is not simply 'adult' as McNair suggests, but discriminating in terms of the consumer's reading of nuanced references which discriminate between high versus low culture and artistic 'exploration' versus pornography. I would suggest that this is a significant theme for the female orientated sex shop which enlists the consumer in a project of identity construction built around a notion of agentic feminine sexuality which resists existing norms and is reliant on a complex range of knowledges and understandings. This is clearly underscored by some shops referring to and actively constructing, themselves as, 'erotic' rather than 'sex' shops. Steph Lawler examines media representation of two differently classed groups of women protesting following a 'name and shame' campaign, giving names and addresses of 'known paedophiles' in local communities. She invokes Bourdieu's theories of distinction to make her point that resistance is only legitimated under certain conditions under which particular 'appropriate' femininities cohere with class:

...rules were invoked that were not the *explicit* "rules of the game" (ie, the politics of protest) but were a set of rules around who can be recognized as legitimate political actors.

(2004, p120)

The rules which exclude the working class women from legitimate protest, coalesce around notions of appearance, the women are marked by the visibility of the work they have done on their bodies in the form of tattoos and piercings, while conversely, the middle class women are marked by the 'invisibility' of such feminine 'work'. The middle class Balham mothers are constructed as knowledgeable while the working class Paulsgrove mothers are portrayed as simply ignorant. While the Paulsgrove women are represented by the media as exposing their children to the violence, chaos and immorality of their daily lives, the Balham children are depicted as winsome innocents. I suggest that the notion of 'resistance' which is inscribed on and central to the appeal of porn chic and furthermore, on the women's sex shop and the objects for sale in them, is subject to a similar process of legitimisation. Lawler paraphrasing Fox (1994) suggests that:

...only some forms of contestation get to count as “resistance” and what gets to count as resistance tends to be what is approved by the bourgeois observer.

(ibid, p121)

Access to the ‘resistance’ or re-signification implied by porn chic is dependent on the level of ‘sophistication’ that McNair refers to in the ‘work’ done by the discriminating and knowledgeable consumer who can read the subtly subverted codes of porn chic or recognise the ironically re-signified femininity coded in an all pink shop front or the design credentials inscribed on a particular up market sex toy. Lawler’s discussion encompasses Bourdieu’s identification of the: ‘logic of domination which means that submission and resistance are interlinked in an apparently paradoxical relation’ (ibid, p121). Her work draws on both Bourdieu and Foucault as portraying agency as inextricably bound within power relations, a notion surely materialised visually and repeatedly in the design of the women’s sex shop. Lawler goes on to suggest that there is little empirical evidence that Judith Butler’s insistence on the political power of re-signification has been successful although clearly there have been transformations in the fairly limited arena of the re-signification of linguistic terminology such as ‘queer’. Evans et al (2010) discuss a similar point within the context of the sexualisation of culture, specifically the relationship drawn between contemporary heterosexual feminine sexuality and agency. They cite, for example, the re-signification of pole dancing as a ‘technology of sexiness’ once a practice signalling the suppression of women now ostensibly an exercise class for and about the ‘empowerment’ of women, as evidence of the potential muscle of Butler’s call for re-signification:

In relation to agency and contemporary female (hetero)sexuality, we theorize a technologies of self in which one works upon oneself and one’s body (as an expression of agency) to reproduce oneself through discourses of sexual liberation (as the available discourse provided through neo-liberalism and consumerism).

(Evans et al 2010a, p121)

This particular topic is also discussed in these terms by Holland (2010), whose research, including participant observation, with women attendees of pole dancing classes, provides an empirical approach to evidencing the possibility of such a project of re-signification, the potential to shift, subvert and alter the nature of those discourses available to subjects. Holland’s work examines and exposes the

points of resistance found by her participants in pole dancing classes, here a discourse of 'empowerment' is positioned as central to their experience and any limitations, in terms of access to participation in such a playing out of this notion, where exist, are represented as cohering around cultural identity and age rather than class. However while Evans et al do begin to acknowledge the restrictions around 'access' to resistance as examined in Lawler's empirical discussion of the Paulsgrove protestors: 'these alternations always remain within power structures' (ibid 121), it is not explained in detail, as it is in Lawler's account, how these exclusionary practices might look or work, in practice:

These discourses intersect with factors that produce particular limitations on who can take them up. Such factors include structural identities derived from class, ethnicity, embodiment and sexuality, and the role of the media in the cultural recuperation of alternative identities.

(ibid, p123)

Evans et al's theoretical position is most helpful in the mechanism proposed by which an acknowledgment of female sexual agency can be predicated and possibly subverted, by drawing on existing discourses, discourses themselves 'necessarily' located within frameworks of domination. While clearly drawing on the work of Foucault and Butler their broadly optimistic stance also echoes McNair's with the caveat that the opportunity for a subject to choose from a range of possible sexual identities may be hampered by a mediated and mass market construction of feminine sexuality informed by dominant power relations:

...the multiplication of porno-chic discourses opens up possibilities for radical re-workings of female sexual subjectivities, however, these may be recuperated in the media to re-produce dominant discourses that objectify women and limit those who can participate in sexualized culture in relation to class, ethnicity , age , embodiment and sexuality.

(Evans et al 2010a, p127)

Evan's et al call for academic work which engages: 'with the intersecting, intertextual consumer discourses that work thorough the subject in producing the self'. They suggest that this should be work which identifies and maps out:

...spaces for contested meaning, [which] in producing the potential for subverting identities, need to be highlighted where they are employed to further extend the discursive boundaries of femininity.

(ibid, p127)

I suggest that this piece of work on the women's sex shop does in fact aim to produce just such a nuanced account, incorporating consumer accounts of how shopping for sexualised products in the gendered environment of 'Sh!', 'Nua', 'Tickled' and so on may contribute to the construction of an active feminine sexual identity, always providing the consumer is sufficiently 'sophisticated' to read the subtle coding inscribed on shop and product. Chapter five takes up this theme and investigates the discourses utilised by women in the act of sexual consumption, chapter six extends this to an investigation of those discourses implicated in regulating access to personal sexual empowerment through sexualised commodity consumption.

Conclusion

This chapter positions my thesis within an understanding of consumption which prioritises the meaning consumers make *with* and *for* things. It has examined the notion of 'appropriation' and uncovered its historic relationship to the concept of 'resistance'. In particular my research has drawn on those studies which have strived to uncover 'resistance' in women's consumption of popular culture, finding resolution in feminine pleasures and practices which are apparently framed within a hegemonic paradigm - explicitly the work done by feminist Cultural Studies. Thus I acknowledge that analysis of the women's sex shop necessitates a 're-evaluation' of practices and spaces which are problematic for feminism and this has led me to frame the question; how is the women's sex shop negotiating the path between a 'feminist' reading of the shop as embodying a masculinist ideology, to a reading in which the shop is represented or experienced as challenging such hegemonies? Chapters 4, 5 and 6 will show how this transition is materialised within the design of the shops and how it is read and understood by consumers.

Furthermore, while I recognise the cross disciplinary reach of this study, I suggest that its interests also occupy a space between pole positions in the current and prevalent discussions played out in the popular and academic press surrounding, what has been called, the sexualisation of culture. Public debates around the collapse in sexual regulation have been rife and rampant, Attwood cites Plummer 2003:

The shift within which sex has increasingly become a subject of debate in popular rather than expert arenas, the breakdown between mainstream and restricted, “obscene” categories of sexual representation and the increased entrenchment of sexualities within media forms has become a particular area of interest in this respect.

(Attwood, F, 2006, p81)

Specifically, within this structure we have examined how discussion of feminine consumption of sexualised objects in shops dedicated to female pleasure sits within debate around the ubiquitous phenomena of porn chic. Thus while this chapter has endeavoured to mark out how the women’s sex shop is characterised (alongside other practices such as neo burlesque and so on) as an agent of resistance to normative understandings of gendered sexuality, conversely, it has anticipated a trajectory which asks how these shops are subject to and moreover utilise, existing (and sometimes competing) discourses around feminine sexuality.

If the female sex shop is to function as a locus for a gendered representation of sexuality it must be negotiated and may indeed be revised, by its female consumers. Therefore, while foregrounding its relation to a tradition of Material Culture, I emphasise the grounded empirical focus of this research which makes use of sociological research methods to interrogate design, moving it away from being a disembodied decoding of assumed meanings inscribed on objects or spaces. The methods and underpinning rationale of my research processes will form the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

This project aims to uncover the multiple meanings of the female sex shop through listening to the voices and paying attention to the understandings of the women that shop in them. The women I have met and interviewed for this research have undoubtedly already formulated their own interpretation around the significance and place of the female sex shop in their lives and to their sexuality and it is important not to make the assumption here that this is a necessarily an unconscious process on their part, or that, in some cases, they do not participate in this research without a cogent and significant agenda of their own.

For example one discourse, that I have identified as arising out of interview, notable in that it features repeatedly and energetically in the narratives of some of my interviewees, I have labelled, 'pioneer discourse'. By this I mean that I have extrapolated from dialogue with these various women, a strong and explicit sense of a particular personal and political meaning, as well as purpose, which is consciously and actively being performed in the act of visiting and shopping in, a female sex shop. Furthermore and very explicitly for example in the case of Kathryn Hoyle of 'Sh!', for several of the sex shop owners and managers that I have visited, their company represents an individual crusade on a variety of fronts; political, personal and ethical. Several of these women, both consumers and retailers, were actively enthusiastic about participating in interview and appeared genuinely pleased to have their voices heard on this topic. Anne Oakley in her article of 1981 on the values implicit in feminist research herself argues this position, suggesting that this type of research can be:

a tool for making possible the articulated and recorded commentary of women on the very personal business of being female in a patriarchal capitalist society.

(1981, p48)

Obviously this quote is particularly apposite in this context. In that my suggestion here extends beyond the process of interviewing women in order to allow them a voice in a 'patriarchal capitalist society', to a discussion of whether a visit to a sex shop may be an act, or site, of real articulation for women, in what may be seen as

the *most* personal business of being female. And furthermore can sex shopping for women be seen as an act of resistance or of subversion, however tentative, within the framework of a 'patriarchal capitalist' system or do these shops simply articulate and re-affirm in the most cynical and self-seeking sense, those dominant norms that seek to describe and position feminine sexuality within a masculine paradigm.

Throughout this text and in its title, I have used the term 'narrative' to describe the accounts solicited via the semi structured interviews undertaken for this research, my use of it is informed by a personal sense of the nuances encompassed by the word, but also by a slight reluctance to overuse the word interview with all its attendant and problematic inferences around the relationship between researcher and object of research. As my experience and confidence grew I realised that the most successful way to elicit thick material from the interview process was to approach the interview with minimal prompts and only to direct when participants wandered too far off the topic or when I felt a point would benefit from further elucidation. My hope was that the interview should be an opportunity for participants to ruminate on the part that sex shopping played as an outlet for sexual self-expression. Thus I suggest that the term narrative encompasses a sense of the personal nature of these accounts, women's description of the experience of sex shopping and their understanding of the visual presence of the sex shop, exposed their relationship to and opinion of, a commodified feminine sexuality embodied in the frontage, internal space and objects for sale. Thus the process of telling was, for some, an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which the design of the sex shop works to open up or close down individual sexual self-expression.

We increasingly recognize that all narratives, whether oral or written, personal or collective, official or subaltern, are "narratives of identity" (Anderson 1991); that is, they are representations of reality in which narrators also communicate how they see themselves and wish others to see them (Stain 1987; Volkan 1988).
(Errante, A 2004)

Other words come into play here, perhaps the word 'story' might suggest a practised and (even if only internally) structured account and as such I have rarely

used the term, 'testimony' (a word I make frequent use of) is a term borrowed primarily from Oral History which has been the genesis of my interest in interview methodology. However, here I use the term narrative to embody the notion of telling as an active process of meaning making which facilitates the emergence of complexity. Furthermore 'narrative' suggests the largely undirected nature of the exchange between interviewee/participant and interviewer. It encompasses the ranging, ruminative quality of the interview material; women variously talked about their own sexuality, their sexual lives in relation to that of their mothers, their conceptions of themselves as sexual pioneers or as tentative sexual consumers and all these complex selves were interwoven into an account of one or more shopping trips. A narrative may meander, it may stop off at various points and from the starting point of a specific context, it encompasses what it will.

One participant, unfortunately after the tape recorder was switched off, completely stumped me by asking what I intended to do with this research. She persisted and asked if I was going to feed back my findings to sex shop retailers and manufacturers of sex toys. I fumbled an inadequate answer but her questions, along with many other responses encountered during the life of this research project, have prompted an acknowledgment from this researcher that for many of my participants visiting a female sex shop is a serious business. That in seeking out these shops (sometimes literally!) in encouraging and taking friends to visit them and in making the effort to travel across London to spend an hour in a café with an unfamiliar researcher, my participants are seeking to impress upon us the importance they place on being able to express their sexuality, even if it is in the limited arena of the commodity exchange. Before I started this research I was interested in and sympathetic to, the views expressed by feminist researchers such as Oakley, in the aforementioned article, in which she argues that feminist research entails the validation of women's experience. Moreover, it quickly became apparent that it would be improper, inappropriate and inconsistent with both the subject of my research and with my research methodology not to acknowledge fully the women I have encountered as initiating both the direction of the research and the meanings that may surface from it. From the words of the participants certain themes, concerns and struggles have emerged which have both provided a focus for the content and informed the structure of this research. These themes were not necessarily those that I predicted when I when I first

embarked on research and moreover I have been forced to abandon particular pre-conceptions or imagined trajectories in order to adhere to those of my participants.

I indicated in my introduction to this project that an analysis of the process of research would be central to my thesis. I have been concerned that it should not be a 'bolt on' appendix to theory or even an account of the means by which certain conclusions have been arrived at. I visualise it perhaps, as if I am holding a tin can attached to a long piece of string held at the other end by the kind women I have interviewed who are shouting somewhat in case this rather primitive mechanism doesn't operate too effectively and I can't quite decipher what they say!

In part one of this chapter then, I will reflect in some depth on the methodological framework within which I have conducted my primary research. Starting with a brief explanation and rationale for the qualitative design of my research project and moving to a discussion of the ways in which the project has developed out of my own discovery of feminist research as well as the difficulties and paradoxes I have encountered in conducting research with women very like myself. The second half of this chapter deals with the 'nuts and bolts' of research; the sampling methods, the interview process, the coding and analysis as well as some of the specific problems I encountered, particularly those 'dilemmas of self' a useful phrase coined by Chesney (2001). I am also concerned here to emphasise the accidental, random and opportunistic nature of much of my research, and I am convinced of *many* research projects, whether or not this is fully accounted for in the text. It seems to me that doing so is in keeping with, not only an aim for and an ethos of transparency, but is an inevitable element of the research process and something that has drawn me to particular texts which gain a vitality from acknowledging and even foregrounding the subjective, the problematic and the haphazard in the research process. Stanley and Wise (1993) suggest that the research project in which the researcher maintains an objective stance and the project follows a methodical and systematic plan, is largely imaginary!:

Presenting the research process as orderly, coherent and logically organised has consequences....Most of us get a nasty shock when we come to do the research ourselves. The point at which we begin to realize that this 'hygienic research' in which no problems occur, no emotions are

involved, is 'research as it is described' and not 'research as it is experienced', is frequently a crucial one.

(1993, p153)

It seems clear that much research suffers from an aspiration to, or pretence of, scientific orderliness and that validity in qualitative research is best served by a frank and open scrutiny of the methods that have been employed by any particular project. Moreover for those of us who are conducting this research in the field it is both endearing and instructive to hear about how the researcher deals with the disastrous equipment failure in the middle of an important interview or the opportunistic sampling methodology employed by Miller, as outlined in his account of shopping focussed on two outer London shopping centres:

We desired neither a wealthy nor a particularly impoverished street, nor one that was unusual in any other way. The intention was to avoid clearly marked social parameters that would define the area, in order to allow those social classifications that were most relevant to the topic of study to emerge during the course of the fieldwork. In the end, a street was selected largely because of a previously known individual living there who offered to introduce us to some other people in the area.

(1998, p66)

Part 1

Research design

I began this research project knowing that I wanted to talk to a number of women who have visited female sex shops (as well as with retailers and possibly designers) in order to arrive at an understanding of the meanings the female sex shop holds for them. My account of the visual presence of the women's sex shop is filtered then through the voices of the women interviewed for this project. A significant aim of this research design was to move the discipline of Design Studies in territorial terms, to provide a framework which might encompass the emergence of complex consumer narratives concerning both the processes and the places and objects of consumption. The utilisation of methods borrowed from the social sciences has therefore allowed research to ask how far and in what ways, (if it all) the female sex shop allows individual women to express their sexual identity, explore their needs and desires more fully and freely and if indeed they feel the shops they have visited to be places which construct female sexuality in

terms they recognise and with which they empathise. Furthermore I aimed to arrive at an exegetical account of the collective identity of the female sex emporium, or as later became apparent a range of identities employed, not only by the women I interviewed but by the different shops that somehow fit this generic description. Miller characterises the aims of his work on the shopping habits of north London residents thus:

Our main interest is in how they (the subjects) narrate their identities, drawing on a relatively limited repertoire of available images and representations. Thus we do not seek to describe the purchasing habits of different social (family, class, ethnic or gender) groups. Rather, we are interested in the way that narrative identities are constructed by these different groups and in the different discourses on which people draw as they relate to particular types of goods in particular kinds of places.

(1998, p24)

Thus this research maps both the 'narrative identities' employed by the women who describe shopping for sex items and the narratives employed by these shops in order to advocate themselves effectively to the consumer as a site via which a woman might explore her sexuality. It strives to map the points of convergence and divergence between these accounts through an examination of the various discourses employed both by the shops and their customers and to uncover other mediating factors that have determined the shape and form of the notion of female sexuality on offer to the female consumer in the women's sex emporium.

Furthermore as Miller indicates regarding his own research, I have not sought to propose that this research reflects a range of social groups, ages, cultural origins or sexual identities, thus this work is in no way representative of a particular type of female experience. However, there is an element of self-selection here since inevitably particular shops tend to attract particular groups of customer. For example in order to shop at Coco de Mer which is firmly established at the luxury end of the market, one would need to be fairly well off and Sh! has a large lesbian clientele. Given these initial research aims I needed firstly, to arrive at a research methodology and research methods which would allow for the acknowledgement and exploration of a plurality of identities. Crotty (2003) usefully describes research methodology as a:

...strategy or plan of action...the research design that shapes our choice and use of particular methods and links them to the desired outcomes.

(2003, p3)

My research methods generally fit into and are informed by, feminist research and I will go on to explore this in more detail later in this chapter. Throughout the process certain issues were raised that I found usefully addressed by feminist research methodology, issues that I have struggled to find addressed elsewhere or have even found to be discounted and invalidated by other forms of methodology. Overall this research project is based on a broadly sociological research design and thus makes substantial use of qualitative methods. Sanders, in her 2006 study, employs a historiographic focus on those methodological strategies used in researching the various markets and sites of the sex industry. She highlights the existence of a long history of studying sexuality through field research, suggesting that this stretches back to the Chicago School in the 1920's which was radical in pioneering an exploration of 'deviant' sexual behaviours and their meaning in a social context. Sanders proposes that these early sex researchers railed against the expectations of a 'scientific and objective approach to inquiry' (2006, p450), choosing to employ methods that allowed them to arrive at a 'snapshot' of the sexual activity of men and women in the inner city. She proposes that:

This tradition has influenced those who have studied the sex industry; exploring the depths of sex work through small scale, intimate methodology. (2006, p450)

Clearly then it was acknowledged early on, that research into sexuality would require a methodology that moved away from ideals of scientific positivism. That study of sexuality would always push at the margins of qualitative research, that in 'extreme' qualitative research, reflexivity is central and an appropriate methodology must be found to deal with a subject which is potentially 'difficult'. That is 'difficult' in terms of accessing field data, finding subjects, and in establishing a rapport with participants which allows them to talk freely about something perceived as, not only personal but problematic on a variety of fronts. Furthermore, since here I wished to allow the concerns of the participants in the project to determine the themes embedded in the research, perhaps therefore the term flexible is more useful than qualitative, as Robson suggests:

all of these [qualitative] approaches show substantial flexibility in their research design, typically anticipating that the design will emerge and develop during data collection. By contrastso called quantitative

approaches call for a tight pre-specification of the design prior to data collection.

(2002, p164)

Robson refers here to the fluid and evolving nature of much sociologically based research design and fluidity has been a particular feature of this piece of work.

Nagy Hesse-Biber and Leckenby echo this from a feminist research perspective:

Much of feminist research design is marked by an openness to the shifting contexts and fluid intentions of the research question.

(2004, p211).

While my overarching research question has remained much the same since my early research proposal, changes of direction, new lines of enquiry and adaptations have been largely prompted by the narratives of my interviewees and this mutability has thus characterised the research. At the most basic level, for example, while I originally intended to confine my primary research to a few specified shops in London, inevitably the shops I have referred to and discussed have in practise been dictated by my participants (interviewees). For me this meant that my focus on London as a site of female sex consumption had to change and the primary research extended to Brighton. In turn this also involved a shift in theoretical focus since I could no longer justify an examination of the meanings engendered by a very particular geographical area. My interest shifted to a more general investigation, for instance where it was highlighted by participants, a mapping of where these shops are situated in relation to other sites of retail exchange. Interesting themes emerged that would not have done so had I applied the original restrictive criteria for inclusion in the study⁸. For example several of the interviewees mentioned the difficulty of locating Sh! in London's Hoxton as well as What She Wants which is in a tiny alley in Brighton, both somewhat off the beaten track in terms of the bustle of mainstream shopping districts. For them the inaccessibility of the sex shop and the special efforts they had made to find it, had contributed to their sense of 'quest'. Thus out of this 'accident' to the research design various further questions or themes have emerged; what additional meaning is added to the narrative of the female sex emporium by the relative isolation of the shop and how does this sense of 'quest', manifest in the discourse of some of the participants, feed into and amplify other

⁸ Or indeed any restrictive criteria.

discourses? I have given this example simply to illustrate a commitment to a research methodology that is grounded in field data. Feminist research allows:

The question to be informed by shifting power relations within the research process, methodological choices, and situational changes.

(Nagy Hesse-Biber and Leckenby 2004, p212)

A flexible design then has enabled me to follow up lines of enquiry as suggested by the participants and allowed theory to evolve as a response to themes generated by interview as well as by observation. This research then evinces a nod to Grounded Theory but cannot pretend to the particular procedural techniques and rigours of the strategy, mine is undoubtedly a populist version which utilises the underlying principles of the method.⁹ Thus, an in depth and discursive interview technique may facilitate an investigation which aims to unearth and identify stratas of discourse.

A methodological framework?

There are a lack of studies specifically in the area of female sexual consumption from which I was able to draw in terms of finding an appropriate methodological framework in which to conduct field work and analyse data. Influences have therefore been multi-disciplinary, in that those existing texts that I have found relevant and useful to my own project come from anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, fashion studies and media and gender studies and to some extent social psychology. These works come with their own history and baggage in terms of the fine distinctions they draw between the predominantly qualitative methodological strategies they employ. Early on I was drawn to feminist research methodologies, an influential article by Anne Oakley of 1981 on the politics of interviewing women has been particularly important. In terms of issues around access to 'hidden' material, the dilemmas of self-disclosure and significantly the researcher's personal response to material thrown up by the research, Sanders' (2006) account of methodological 'nuances' in the context of doing social science research with female sex workers has again been useful in terms of articulating some of my own

⁹ Grounded Theory is closely associated with the American sociologists Glaser and Strauss, it was first outlined in their hugely influential work of 1967 and later further developed by them; Glaser ((1978) and Strauss and Corbin (1997; 1998) Grounded Theory, which suggests that theory may be generated directly out of work done in the field rather than field work being used to substantiate a pre-existing theory has been not only influential but proved very attractive to researchers. However their strategy is not 'soft' but highly developed and specific in its methods of application and while it seems many studies, like this one, find the fundamental concept appealing and useful, not many adhere to its methodology with rigidity.

concerns, although my research falls into a somewhat less sensitive area, many issues such as accessing hidden communities, establishing trust and so on are apposite to this piece of work. Since I have a particular interest in research that has made interview central to thematic investigation, I have focussed on texts which are explicit in their accounts of method. Several texts emerging from studies of culture and dress and dealing with themes around resistance to and subversions of, traditional femininities have made extensive use of in depth interviews with women. In particular Holland (2004) unpicks the concerns of women who choose to express themselves through their appearance in a manner outside the norms of traditional femininity. Holland's transparency and reflexivity in her account of the methodological strategies she employed is something I have found a useful aspect of texts coming from the disciplines of dress and gender studies. Anthropology and sociology have generated several studies which focus on shopping in terms of collective identity production and have used interview and participant observation in order to map intersections between consumption narratives and place, in particular Miller (1987) (1998) has been significant here. Additionally, one of the most significant texts in relation to my work on the female orientated sex shop has been Storr's *Latex and Lingerie* (2003) which makes interview and participant observation of the Ann Summers' Party crucial and instrumental to her development of theory around homosocial constructions of femininity.

Feminist Research Methodology: A feminine 'way of thinking'?

A discussion of the methodological framework within which this research has been conducted involves some understanding of the underpinning principles and foundations of that methodology in order to provide a validation for its application in relation to my own research questions around female sexual consumption.

Underlying the nuts and bolts of feminist research methods is a discussion around the notion of a feminist epistemology. The key proposal concerning us here is the suggestion that femininity might involve a uniquely feminine *way of knowing* and thus how and why have particular research methodologies evolved, developed or been appropriated as a response to these modes of understanding? Crotty, (2003, p174) in an outline of the underpinnings that characterise our various approaches to research, identifies two understandings of feminist epistemology

within feminist theory. One which applies to those feminist methodologies and research practices that are informed by a commitment to an ideology and a second strand that suggests women perform research in a different way to men because they 'know' differently and thus the values and methods they privilege in undertaking research are the natural production of gender difference, rather than a choice to validate qualities and strategies that may have been excluded by traditional 'masculinist' methodologies. (2003, p177). Crotty's reading is a useful introduction but does not attempt to reflect the complexity and range of thinking around feminist research since its development out of second wave feminism in the late 70's and early 80's. Moreover it seems here that another major strand within feminist thinking has been excluded from the picture; that is the influence of those feminists, epitomised by Judith Butler (1990), who subscribe to a perception of gender as a '*doing*' rather than a '*being*' determined by immutable sex difference. Thus Butler suggests a feminine consciousness that is learnt and performed rather than innate and essential. I suggest that this is an understanding of femininity that has particular resonance and usefulness for a study concerned with the female consumption of sexuality, in that the action of consuming sexual merchandise may be viewed as constituting both a private and public 'performance' of gendered sexuality. Therefore, while a *feminine* epistemology which arises from out of a fundamental difference in 'knowing' ascribed to the feminine gender, sits well within an essentialist framework, indeed it perhaps serves to feed those very conceptions of femininity that spring from a masculine paradigm. On the other hand a concept of 'gender as performance' leaves space for the theorising and articulation of a strategically 'different' *feminist* research ethos; one which chooses to draw on a range of strategies from the standpoint of a rejection of a traditional and masculinist research culture. This may be seen then as a choice which is informed by an allegiance to a political standpoint rather than an approach which is fundamentally biologically determined. Thus the suggestion that there is a feminine perception, knowledge or experience that is specific only to women may perhaps be understood as essentialist and furthermore, in research terms, such claims have inevitably left feminist methodologies open to criticism in respect of 'traditional' notions of research validity. Crotty however, (2003) provides a succinct and productive way to understand what is meant by a feminine epistemology, which rather lets us *off the hook*. He suggests that women:

theorise the act of knowing in a way different from that of men. In 'doing' epistemology, they express concerns, raise issues and gain insights that are not generally expressed raised or gained by male epistemologists. (2003, p174)

In terms of this research project I suggest that although an understanding of Feminist Standpoint Research theory and ideology is central to this project, essentially it has served to articulate, theorise and extend the largely intuitive understandings that informed my research practices at the start of this project. Andrews writes of a similarly revelatory experience but clearly articulates her 'struggle' with the 'contradictions' implicit in the experience of doing feminist research:

Some time after my initial emergence into the life of research, I encountered feminist methodology: here I found an articulation of an outlook that intuitively I had already adopted in my own work. But while feminist methodology embodied much of the spirit I wished to bring to my work , ironically the one issue it did not satisfactorily address was the complexity of gender identity, both shared and not-shared, between myself and the women I interviewed.

(Andrews 2002, p57)

My use of what rapidly evolved into a feminist research methodology was fundamentally a pragmatic response to the particular demands of the project. That is not to say that in theoretical terms the ethos embedded in such a framework did not chime with my personal beliefs, or that in the course of interviewing women I was not forced to make use of those skills and processes that are often stereotypically defined as feminine and that have been usefully re-evaluated by feminist research theorists. An enquiry into the foundations and tenets of feminist research methods resonated considerably and at various levels, with my experience of working in the field interviewing women about their sexual consumption habits. My commitment to a feminist methodology developed moreover, from a desire to validate certain types of knowledge and experience. To acknowledge fully the significance and centrality of skills not always associated with social science research as well as an imperative to investigate issues that arise from encounters between women that cannot be fully accounted for within a more 'traditional' research framework.

Successful research undertaken within a sexual context will necessarily privilege those qualities such as empathy, the personal, the relationship between subject and researcher. Here it is the context, as I describe in more detail presently, which has determined this framework rather than the engaging of an explicitly female knowledge or 'way of knowing'. To test a claim to simple pragmatism one would have to investigate whether a male researcher would be impelled or *was able to* investigate male or gay male sexual consumption practices from the same standpoint. By whatever 'epistemological' route one arrives at it, feminist research privileges the emotional response. It validates interpersonal relationships as a vital part of the research process, explodes the myth of objectivity and rejects as masculinist, the desire to control and predict, to categorise and classify; activities seen as immersed in an unhelpful culture of binary opposition; theory versus practice, reason versus emotion and man versus woman.

The emergence of a feminist methodology

While Reinharz suggests that in the early 1970's it was 'radical simply to study women' (1992, p14), the late 70's and early 80's saw significant articulation of and discussion around, the necessity for a new research framework. A methodology was called for that did not simply provide a corrective to a body of social science research which failed to address women and women's concerns as a subject, but provided a revolutionary approach to the methods and practices of the research process itself. Stanley and Wise expressed it thus in 1983:

...feminist criticism has cogently argued the point that much social science work quite simply ignores women's presence within vast areas of social reality. But also where women's presence isn't ignored it is viewed and presented in distorted and sexist ways.

(1983, p13)

Kleiber and Light's pioneering early work of 1978 in which research was carried out at the Vancouver Women's Health Collective, rejected the traditional 'objective' research standpoint as being outside the group studied. It proposed an 'interactive methodology' in which the 'researched' were central to the process of formulating research questions, deciding methods, interpreting results and deciding how to translate research into action. This study has been identified by

Stanley and Wise as a ground-breaking and moreover a significantly and identifiably feminist, attempt to redress the inherent power relations of researcher and researched. However, they suggest it does not address this balance in terms of the 'means' by which material is collected 'not even the kind of information collected' (Stanley and Wise 1983:19). Lee (1993) like many feminist academics highlights the struggle to identify the nature of feminist research and those features that distinguish it from many other post positivist methodologies. Lee suggests that this agenda has given rise to:

...a tension [which] exists between feminism as a form of radical politics and as a sociological perspective. As a result, there is a disagreement about the nature and scope of a specifically feminist methodology.

(1993, p15)

While a consistent definition of the constituent elements of Feminist Research continues to be contested by numerous feminist scholars (notably Nagy Hesse-Biber and Leckenby, 2004 also Reinharz 1992), work to formulate an understanding of the constituents of feminist research continues by bringing together a huge range of projects describing themselves as feminist research and searching for the common themes and concerns that occupy them. Stanley and Wise's response to Kleiber and Light's work is illustrative of the call for a feminist methodology which works on a synergistic level to integrate epistemology, methodology and method with 'purpose'. Nagy Hesse-Biber and Leckenby characterise a feminist methodology as one in which its various strategies work synergistically towards the goal of social transformation:

There is a view of social change as a potential promise that can be worked on and through both the individual and structural levels.

(2004, p221)

Thus feminist standpoint research is broadly characterised by many of its proponents as a form of action research which corrects bias via attention to process. One which aims to expose the oppression of women and which should be used by and for women in order to formulate policy and ultimately effect change. In more general terms, just as second wave feminism espoused the slogan 'the personal is political' feminist research has 'made the world of private experience a focus for study' (Lee 1993:15). Andrews dealing with the issues inherent in research with non feminist and anti-feminist women, draws on De Vault 1999 who distinguishes it in terms of a commitment to:

(1) a shift of focus from men's concerns 'in order to reveal the locations and perspectives of (all) women', (2) a minimization of harm and control in the research process, and (3) a support of research of value to women, leading to social change or action beneficial to women.

(Andrews 2002, p56)

While I have found feminist methodology significantly useful in terms of providing a practical and ethical framework through which to carry out my research, I suggest that there is a tension contained within the last of these proposals which resonates with my own work. I found my intuitively felt difficulties articulated in this useful article by Molly Andrews who characterises this as 'The problem of the omniscient feminist'. She suggests that:

Feminist researcher[s]...feel that we know better than those who participate in our research about the underlying structures that give or deny meaning in their lives. It is argued that sexism, like other forms of oppression can be deeply internalized and hidden from the conscious.

(2002, p57)

Thus one of the most attractive tenets of feminist research is that in its quest to acknowledge and validate a diversity of feminine experience, it espouses equality between researcher and participant. Indeed the use of the term participant by many feminist researchers is indicative of this desire to move towards a co-operative form of knowledge production. Reinharz suggests that feminist research entails framing research in different terms which more appropriately reflect this ethos:

Using unconventional terms such as "participant" instead of "subject" is a signal that the researcher is operating in a feminist framework that includes the power to name or rename.

(1992, p22)

However, my predicament here is that in moving towards equality in the research process, feminist research still struggles to deal with women participants whose experience or views do not fit with those of the feminist researcher, this was something I experienced in the course of my own research. Reinharz cites the work of Susan Condor 1986 who identified this difficulty when she found herself unable to sympathize with the women with whom she was working, women she

characterised as: 'traditional women who support the existing roles of men and women.' (Reinharz 1992, p26). This experience leads Condor to suggest that:

Regarding individuals and social events from the perspective of feminism...may encourage the very tendency to objectify our 'subjects' which feminism opposes so forcefully.

(ibid)

Representing interpretations of fieldwork which differ between researcher and researched is a central problem in feminist research. Andrews neatly identifies this paradox thus:

If women who speak about their lives do not identify themselves victims of oppression, how is it possible to both represent their experiences from their point of view, and to claim for them positions that they do not claim for themselves? How can feminist researchers avoid redefining the experiences of (non-feminist) women, retaining a dual commitment to the integrity of the expressed viewpoint of the participant and to the cause of feminism in general.

(Andrews, 2002, p56)

Andrews proposes that there are several possible responses to this dilemma; firstly the construction and application of a notion of 'false consciousness', a concept in which second wave feminism made a substantial investment. This constitutes a hierarchical relationship between researcher and subject which assumes an inferior understanding on the part of the research subject regarding the structures and processes of gender oppression, and proposes the possibility of a linear development toward the enlightened position held by the researcher. Twenty four years ago Stanley and Wise acknowledged the attendant dilemmas involved in framing research with women in this way:

The idea of 'false' and 'true' consciousness, with 'true consciousness' being what revolutionaries have, is offensively patronizing. It denies the validity of people's own interpretations and understandings. If these don't match the interpretations of revolutionaries then they are false.

(1983, p119)

However while Stanley and Wise recognise the danger of being 'patronising' to their research subjects they do not refute the existence of a feminist consciousness. Although they suggest at length that there may be many such

'consciousnesses' and that these may be in a state of flux, inevitably a state of feminist consciousness is: '...preferable and in some sense better than any other consciousness' (1983, p120) Thus, in some sense, we are still in the hierarchical position of the traditional researcher: the feminist researcher who is rightly in a state of raised consciousness is seen as having a privileged position in terms of understanding the true nature of the structures and power relations that frame the experience of the research subject.

This dilemma has not been ignored by recent feminist scholars; many researchers have highlighted and explored the paradox involved in upholding the feminist researcher's resolve to validate 'different' expressions of women's experience, while maintaining a feminist standpoint involving a commitment to the exposure of female oppression. Reinharz for example cites the work of Sheryl Kleinman who encountered this problem in research involving a counter cultural setting. Kleinman (1991) describes the ways in which she resolved these difficulties by constructing a new 'story' which sat more comfortably with her feminist principles¹⁰. She describes how she:

"adopts humanist values and looks at the cost to women (and men) of trying to live out these values in conventionally gendered environments"

(Reinharz 1992, p66)

Reinharz does at least raise 'lack of fit' between researcher and researched as a dilemma and this theme can be traced through all the categories into which she draws the numerous research projects she has collected and referred to. However, ultimately she draws no definitive conclusion regarding how we theorise from field work when our interpretations of women's lives are at odds with their own. A strategy proposed by Andrews (2002:63) involves 'agreeing to agree'; a process of negotiation by which agreement is or isn't reached regarding a feminist interpretation of the research subject's narrative. This brings into question other issues that may serve to alienate the research subject from the academic 'product' which is ultimately fashioned from their account, issues that must be critiqued if not resolved, in order to facilitate this dialogic process. In particular the often obfuscating writing style of many academic texts must be paid attention to if any meaningful negotiation between researcher and research participant is to take

¹⁰ For a detailed account of her response to this dilemma see Sheryl Kleinman, 'Field workers' Feelings: What we feel, who we are, how we analyse' in Shafit, W and Stebbins, R, A (eds), *Experiencing Fieldwork: An Inside View of Qualitative Research* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1991) p184-195

place. Andrews' article only begins to suggest the implications for this strategy, which go beyond those indicated to a whole re-evaluation of knowledge ownership and the production of research outcomes of a very different character than those produced by the researcher as 'auteur'. Such a process would moreover, demand a very high level of transparency and reflexivity on the part of the researcher. How often this interesting but risky strategy is used, outside perhaps the discipline of oral history research, would be an interesting further study.

All these dilemmas resonate with particular challenges posed by my own research and became increasingly significant and insistent for me as I continued to talk to women about their experience of sex shopping. My research area has involved interviewing women who may very well define themselves as 'feminist', however this was not a question I asked them explicitly. Largely middle class, educated women between the ages of about twenty and mid-fifties ¹¹, several of my interviewees, far from being embarrassed about their visits to sex shops, evinced a sense of themselves as sexual ambassadors. Their visits to sex shops and their potential or actual purchases either compounded or negated this view of themselves, depending on both the particular qualities, 'ethos' and attributes of the shop and of the objects for sale. Thus analysis of these discussions with women leads me to conclude that the act of sex shopping as it has been constructed by some of my female participants as a self-consciously libertory act, is one that serves to define their sexual identity. Like the feminist researcher who suggests that her subjects cannot see behind the back of their own oppression I am potentially guilty of accusing my participants of false consciousness. Not because they do not have a feminist consciousness but because, I felt, they may have misplaced it. Located it within a commodity transaction which to me appears to be constructed inside the constraints and demands of a masculine paradigm rather than being genuinely outside of, or resistant to it. Thus if feminist research is a type of action research which aims to expose female oppression and by exposing it advance the cause of female liberation, in operating within this framework I must then feel impelled to expose their accounts of these shopping experiences as constructing a falsely libertarian notion. However, should the women participating

¹¹ Thus I could not hide behind the construction of the research subject as an 'other', they were not 'other' in terms of gender, age, class or culture, but women very much like myself except, in one case, in terms of the sexual sub culture she identified herself as part of. I felt strongly that the fact of our apparent similarities made it more difficult to ignore issues such as power and omnipotence in the research/participant relationship.

in the study suggest that they experience the act of shopping for sex as genuinely liberating; can one impose an understanding of their consumption which labels it oppressive? In doing so one would be moving away from a validation of their experience, one of the central tenets of feminist standpoint research, towards what must only be seen as a prescriptive understanding that ultimately invalidates women's experience and nullifies the value of the research.

What do I do then? Do I accept my participants view of their private resistance transformed into a public act of commodity exchange or do I set myself up as having a 'superior understanding' of the meanings underlying these processes? My grasp of feminist standpoint research demands that I authenticate the experience and perceptions of participants, that I do not seek to impose my own interpretation on their actions, that I do not insist that I '*know better*' than they do themselves.

Although there is a body of work that takes a critically reflexive stance regarding this dilemma, I have been surprised by the number of researchers who do not frame their research within an awareness of these issues or conversely one becomes aware of how comfortably embedded the 'omniscient feminist' is within research conducted by women on and sometimes 'for', female subjects. Merl Storr uses interview and participant observation extensively to give us a fascinating account of the ways in which heterosexuality is homosocially constructed at the Ann Summers Party. The Ann Summers party appears to hold out a potential challenge to traditional feminine stereotypes on various fronts, specifically in its take on female sexuality but also in providing a model of women working together and making money on their own terms. She describes the ways in which her interviewees, the organisers of these parties, describe their experience as giving them the opportunity to be 'business women' and imbuing them with a sense of 'inner strength' (2003, p30). For Storr this feeling is misplaced: '...a kind of compensation for women's lack of real socio-political power' (2003, p31). Storr is open and reflexive in placing herself inside the research; she documents her feeling of dismay when confronted with the comparison between her own earning potential as an academic and the 'paltry' earnings of the Ann Summers party planners. However, perhaps inevitably, Storr's conclusion here evokes the 'omniscient feminist':

In effect this discourse of 'inner strength' encourages women to feel empowered by refusing to see the many obstacles and inequalities which structure their everyday lives, including the inequalities which underlie their participation in Ann Summers itself.

(2003, p31)

DeVault describes that moment of epiphany when an oppressive system or social relation is revealed to the researcher:

The premise of feminist ethnography is that we can elicit accounts and produce descriptions of these kinds of practice and thought that are part of female consciousness but left out of dominant interpretive frames, shaped around male concerns. ...The analysis produces the "aha" or "click" of consciousness-raising that has been central to the development of feminist thinking and that serves as a pointer toward a new way of seeing the world.

(2004, p232)

Here DeVault too is describing the researcher who experiences the 'breakthrough', the 'click of consciousness raising' when a new esoteric understanding is revealed. The research subject is unaware of the fervour elicited by her predicament or its implications for an elite group of academics who have illuminated a 'new way of seeing the world' at her expense - an exhilaration comparable to discovering something valuable at a boot fair! Is it possible then for the researcher simply to map the views and experiences of research participants without taking a theoretical standpoint? Andrews cites Henwood and Pigeon (1995) who suggest that it is:

not possible to simply hold up a mirror to participants views. Data are always interpreted and made meaningful through theory.

(Andrews 2002, p62)

Thus ultimately Andrews moves towards resolution by suggesting that an understanding of the situated nature of knowledge and gender itself, can enable the feminist researcher to begin to problematise these issues through a reflexive attention to the ways in which the researchers own epistemological viewpoint is defined by her 'time and place' (2002, p68).

Understanding the thoughts of these 'others' was predicated on re-examining my own location in the historical process. Only then was I free to

explore the relationship between myself and the women who participated in my research.

(2002, p73)

While Andrews' work is with women who, in terms of age and life experience, may be conceptualised as 'other', the challenge for me was to resolve the contradiction between my commitment to reflecting the experience and viewpoints of the women I interviewed (who could clearly *not* be constructed as 'other'), while reflexively problematising and maintaining clear and transparent boundaries for, my own construction of their experience. However, alongside the process of research, in tandem with my conversations with the generous women who spoke to me, my own views and understandings of the potential meanings of sexualised consumption for women altered. I became increasingly sympathetic to the undeniably strong ethos behind many of the shops I visited and certainly I acknowledge the place that sexual consumption has played for many of the participants in terms of expressing, unpacking or becoming 'comfortable' with their sexual identity. Sexy Kitten was clear that her forays into a variety of sex shops signalled a sexual liberality that was denied her Irish Catholic mother. For Louise a single trip to Sh! had a profound effect on how she viewed her own sexual tastes, she felt 'lighter' and my research notes described her tone of voice as 'joyous'. Undeniably, it was almost as if some women, denied an outlet, in terms of expressing their sexuality in any public arena, have seized upon the consumption of sexualised products as a way to validate, explore and discover the particular nature of their preferred sexual expression (the various narratives utilised by the sex shop and its products in constructing feminine sexuality as acceptable in a public domain, will be explored in chapter six). Thus ultimately this plea for reflexivity on the part of the feminist researcher, for the researcher to be fully and transparently inside the research at every stage and process, the self-critiquing and the 'pulling up short', the acknowledgement of all its dilemmas and paradoxes is what drew me to feminist research methodology and convinced me of its usefulness to this project.

Part 2

The research process

Oakley's aforementioned article provides a framework through which to discuss in more detail some of the particular 'nuts and bolts' issues and difficulties brought to

the fore by feminist methodology. As we have seen feminist research is much pre-occupied with establishing its own methodological identity. Oakley's early and much quoted work of 1981 on the politics of interviewing women, identifies various themes and issues that have come to characterise feminist research. Thus here we will explore a number of those areas identified by Oakley that in turn I have experienced as challenging in relation to my own methodological experience in conducting this research project. I have framed these topics in terms of a number of key questions. Firstly, what sorts of issues are involved in terms of self-disclosure and reflexivity? Then, what sampling methods are useful and appropriate within the context of conducting 'sensitive' research? What assumptions and processes are involved in initial contact with participants? And finally, what issues may arise out of the interview process, bearing in mind appropriateness to both the 'sensitivity' and the challenges of the research topic?

In this significant article Oakley insists that there is a lack of 'fit' between interview theory and practice, that textbook methodologies have been established within a masculine paradigm which dominates social science research and makes a false distinction between legitimate and illegitimate interviewing methods (1981, p38) Her central thesis suggests that the values that have 'traditionally' been required by positivist researchers such as; objectivity, detachment, a clear hierarchy and scientific rigour, fit within a masculine stereotype, while those that characterise a 'bad' interview; subjectivity, involvement with the subject, the 'fiction of equality' reflect a feminine gender stereotype which characterises women as:

sensitive, intuitive, incapable of objectivity and emotional detachment and immersed in the business of making and sustaining personal relationships.
(1981, p38)

Stanley and Wise in 1983 cite Barnard (1973) on a similar theme. Barnard suggests that male social scientists are in the business of using 'hard', quantitative data in order to create 'controlled realities' from which they are able to maintain an 'objective' distance, that this type of data has more status than qualitative or soft data seen which is seen as the province of female researchers. Indeed some researchers would argue that an immersion in the 'business of making relationships' and a corresponding degree of 'involvement' with the subject are essential for the successful operation of qualitative research. Of course this is

particularly so in the field of sexuality or any other areas which may be seen as difficult, sensitive or in some respects 'hidden', both because of the delicate nature of the subject that the researcher wishes to discuss in interview and in terms of gaining access to field research sites and participants. I had some experience of this 'business of making relationships' in the context of the interview process. It became a particular issue when I read back the transcription of a telephone interview I had conducted with a designer. Without access to the use of body language, smiles, nods, leaning forward and so on, to express assent, interest and enthusiasm I had embarked on a series of explicit affirmations hoping to encourage my participant and express my appreciation of her candidness and honesty. Potentially, I had really overstepped the mark in my anxiety to let her know that I was empathising with her point of view and with her personal experiences. On the other hand there were several occasions (and this interview was one of them) in which I was aware that affirmation was sought and that not to give it would risk the interview. This was due to both the nature of the research topic, the habitual discourse of empathy that plays out in any conversation between women and the strong ethical and political commitment felt by many of my interviewees to a notion of feminine sexual expression. To retain an apparently 'objective' or 'distanced' position in the face of this would have been to inhibit the flow of their discussion. Indeed Oakley suggests that the textbook methodology established within a masculinist paradigm is inappropriate when women are interviewing women, while Hesse-Biber and Leckenby describe how the process of interview can involve:

... a strong emotional component that is drawn into research when flow is achieved and listening is part of the method. Listening empowers the participant and engages the researcher to be present.

(2004, p217)

Conducting 'sensitive' research

Lee defines 'sensitive' in research terms as research that may involve a 'cost' to the participant:

Investigating sensitive topics usually introduces into the research process contingencies less commonly found in other kinds of study. Because of the threat they pose, sensitive topics raise difficult methodological and technical problems.

(Lee 1992, p2)

This 'cost' can be constructed in various ways; participation may involve potential consequences for the subject, a 'cost' may be the result of opening up taboo areas or those that are heavily laden with emotion or a 'cost' may be the result of research that is sensitive in a situational or political context. Sanders (2006) discusses the theme of access in some detail in her account of the methods both that she used and the 'traditional' positions she had to abandon, in order to gain entry to a field located outside of a legitimate legal, and social, framework. Her research into the world of illicit commercial sex involved a substantial investment in building up trust between herself and the communities of female sex workers who were the participants in her study. Hers is an account of 'research as it is experienced', work for which a substantial degree of involvement in making and sustaining a range of personal relationships was essential in order to gain access to field sites. The degree of personal involvement entailed is illustrated by her being asked, when visiting participants homes, to collude with the stories they had fabricated in order to hide the nature of their sex work from their families. (Sanders, 2006, p456) Thus the researcher in the area of sexuality may be forced to abandon those qualities that Oakley identifies as 'masculine', qualities that characterise traditional research: objectivity, a clear and hierarchical relationship between researcher and research subject, un-involvement with the subject and so on, as much on pragmatic grounds, that is to facilitate the research process, as on ethical or theoretical ones:

...a natural process of self-disclosure and identification became an integral part of how field relations were secured.

(Sanders, 2006, p462)

In terms of my own work, conducting the research involved establishing access to participants who were willing to talk openly about their visits to women orientated sex shops and this was only possible I am sure, in the first instance, because I am female. This is an obvious, but nonetheless significant, aspect relating to access to research participants. Some of the shops I visited admit women only, or at least men may enter only if accompanied by a woman (Sh! What She Wants! Tickled). It was via leaving leaflets advertising for research participants in some of these shops, that I accessed a number of my research subjects and I think it unlikely that the owner of 'Sh!' for example, who claims a specifically feminist ethos for her

shop, would have been entirely comfortable with a male researcher leaving leaflets on her counter asking her customers to contribute potentially personal information to a research project. Moreover I feel sure that the women I talked to would not have agreed to meet me and talk so openly, had I been a male researcher.

Methods of accessing participants

While this study was originally inspired by my interest in the burgeoning market for women's sex toys, at the time of starting my research there were a limited number of sex shops in London that I understood as making a particular appeal to the female market. The shops that I initially approached to ask them to hold leaflets requesting interviewees were Sh!, Coco de Mer and Myla. I had no express criteria for including a shop in the study but had determined to let the shops be largely identified by my participants. Having said that by leafleting certain shops I had clearly identified them as the type of shop I envisioned including in the study. In the course of interviewing several participants mentioned stores in Brighton (indeed my first interviewee focused on a Brighton shop) other shops abroad were also mentioned, particularly by Annabel, Marley and Kate who mentioned shops in European cities, New York and Japan. No cities in the UK other than those in London and Brighton, were mentioned by participants, although I am aware that women focussed shops exist across the UK in increasing numbers. However, by far the most thriving sector of the market over the life of this research, has been online sex shopping¹².

In terms of accessing interviewees a leafleting technique was only partially successful as a means of gaining access to potential participants. From two shops in London (Coco de Mer and Myla) I had no result. Having obtained permission from the shop assistant to leave a pile of leaflets advertising for research participants, when I visited the shop some weeks later, the leaflets had all disappeared. Since they were inexpensively produced, simply word processed and photocopied, I wondered if they had been removed because they were perceived as not fitting into the high design ethos of the shop itself, but this was

¹² Over the life of my research the online sex shop market has grown exponentially. Early on in the research process I determined that my research should focus on women's experience of 'real world' shopping and that online shopping should be the subject of another piece of research. In the event I was somewhat surprised by how little online sex shopping was mentioned in interview. Having decided not to focus on this area I did not expressly raise it as an issue, however my loose interview style would certainly have allowed for this trajectory had it been raised by participants.

purely conjecture. However this did prompt me to produce a somewhat 'glossier' leaflet in the hope that this might be viewed favourably by those working in the shops as well as making me appear more 'professional' (fig 3.1) The second version of my leaflet seeking participants was a postcard sized, illustrated card which was more obviously 'designed'. I received several positive comments about this leaflet from shop assistants when I visited to request that they be displayed in the shop, comments along the lines of '...and your leaflet looks good', so I concluded that the changes had been worth making. For all of these businesses the 'look' of the shop which comprises the exterior including signage and window display, the interior layout, internal display design, the packaging including the bags in which the consumer's carries out her purchase (in a few of the most upmarket shops such as Coco de Mer, even the appearance and dress style of the shop assistants) is significant. In the 'look' is embodied the notion of sexuality that is being promoted to the customer. Sh! (through which I did access a number of respondents) identifies itself as having something of a political, 'feminist' remit:

Our whole existence is, has, ...was sprung from a more political, without being all kind of militant, but it was basically sprung from, it wasn't sprung from, we saw the gap in the market and we were going to absolutely you know, women are not being served and so we are..., it was much more, much more passionate than that and a lot less business.

Hoyle

This ethos is clearly embodied in an ambiance partly engendered by the design of the shop and described by one participant: Emily as:

It's slightly more – I'd call it – like the bean sprout café of sex shops. It has the kind of vegetarian, [ironic snort] lesbian feel.

Emily

One of the co- owners of Sh!, Katheryn Hoyle was sympathetic to the project and happy to talk to me, she had no objection to displaying my leaflets alongside a large number of other leaflets and flyers advertising events and giving information and sources of help and advice on sexual health matters, community events and so on. For example on a subsequent visit to Sh!, with my new version of the leaflet, the always helpful and informative staff offered to put a leaflet in each customer's shopping bag and indeed some weeks later I was e mailed by a potential participant. It does seem probable, however, that they kind of woman attracted by the Sh! ethos might also be the kind of woman likely to be

sympathetic to participating in academic research on her consumption habits. Coco de Mer, on the other hand does not characterise itself or ally itself with feminism in the way that Sh! clearly does. A design 'ethos' is particularly significant in Coco de Mer, the shop's website declares that it stocks only:

...tactile, sensuous and precious products that are made by the finest craftsmen.

(Coco de Mer 2010)

Since it portrays itself as enabling women to express themselves via the consumption of luxurious sexualised items, perhaps my project and its mode of presentation did not fit well within the particular notion of female sexuality which frames the shop. Possibly it was not only the 'look' of my leaflets that did not fit in with the rationale of Coco de Mer, but my project itself. In any case, even the newer 'designed' leaflets did not elicit any interest from Coco de Mer customers and although the shop assistant was happy to have them displayed, when I returned a week later they had again disappeared.

Other research participants were found by snowballing, that is by an initial contact introducing the researcher to other potential participants who then refers others and so on. Lee (1993) identifies a number of difficulties around the use of snowball sampling which chimed with my own experience of its use. Clearly snowballing depends on the social networks of the initial contacts and this works with more fluency in a group with developed patterns of social organisation. Ultimately, however, this can be problematic since networks can be limited, involving people who tend to be similar in their attitudes, habits, age, social class and so on. I became aware of this potentiality towards bias in snowball sampling when two initial contacts offered to put me in touch with their social networks. It had become clear that both these women were involved in particular sexual practices involving a specialised network of sexual contacts. Although the project had neither the capacity nor the aim of representing a broad spectrum of sexual consumption, I did have concerns that involving a number of participants who were a part of this sexual sub group would skew the project, in particular because their habits of consumption – the objects they sought to buy – tended to be very specific to pursuance of these sexual practices. For this reason I decided not to follow the thread of referrals offered to me.

I encountered other difficulties in snowball sampling; firstly that initial contacts may give a misleading and possibly unhelpful account of the project to their associates. Moreover, I did inevitably end up interviewing a high proportion of women in their forties as I am myself, and this might be seen as a potential distortion of the data. Partly this was as a result of accessing some participants via my existing social network so they tended to be around my own age but partly I think, it does, in any case, reflect the profile of the women's sex shop consumer. However I make no claims for and had no intention of attempting to access a representative spread of interviewees in terms of age, cultural background, class and so on. Lee suggests that snowballing, while being frowned upon by traditional positivist research, is commonly used in projects which involve 'sensitive' subjects (1993:65):

...in many instances using a snowball sample is often the only possibility open to a researcher, and normally in these cases it will simply have to be accepted that the sample eventually obtained is unrepresentative.

(1993, p68)

In a research project such as this which relies not only on the goodwill of participants but on finding women who are self-confident and open enough to talk about what may be seen as a sensitive topic, one must 'seize the day' in terms of who volunteers to participate. One advantage to snowballing, however, outweighed those possible disadvantages outlined above. In a project which may be construed as 'difficult', the trust built up between researcher and those initial participants is then passed onto those subsequent contacts. The first contacts are able to verify not only that the project is genuine, but that you do not ask intrusive questions and that the experience of interview is relaxed and enjoyable. I was introduced to several interview subjects through friends and acquaintances. Thus a casual conversation with strangers at a party would elicit: 'oh I've been to...does that count?' or 'I know someone who...'. Again this was useful in that a connection was already there – we had friends in common although there may have been one or two links in the chain between us – and this meant that a level of trust was already established. Also, I would sometimes be briefed in advance by the 'friend' about the prospective participant in terms of their job, their family situation, age, interests and their level of encounter with sex shops. This was preferable to 'going in cold', since having a little knowledge of my participant in advance made both preparation for the interview and the process of interview a little easier, particularly at the start when I was able to make a reference to

something I already knew about them; along the lines of 'I hear you used to work in...'. Ultimately finding participants through snowballing was a slow, haphazard and often frustrating process which did, in the end, prove to be the most fruitful, on a number of fronts, of the methods I employed. Other means of obtaining a sample were also tried, I advertised on a message forum on the Sh! website and although I received some responses to which I responded, ultimately I didn't access any formal interviews from this method. For a breakdown of participant sources see (fig 3.2).

Inevitably there were many failures and dead ends, some potential interviewees who had initially seemed interested, were ultimately unable to meet me. I attempted several times to gain an interview with Sam Roddick the proprietor of Coco de Mer but without success. At one stage a letter I sent was returned to me without any explanation! Inevitably these failures contributed to the course and focus of the research. Briefly at the start of the research process, I had envisaged a thesis split between a production/design and a consumption focus. Thus I initially contacted several upmarket sex toy manufacturers in the hope of getting an insight into the sexual goods market. These overtures were unsuccessful in all cases. Had I succeeded in gaining their participation research may have had an altered focus. This is an excellent example of the impact of the *haphazard* in real life research design.

The interviews

Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. In my initial contacts with each participant I told them that the interview would not last more than an hour and that I proposed to record it. I also informed them that the interview would be transcribed word for word and that they were welcome to a copy of the transcription. Only one participant took me up on this and she was insistent that she could veto any part of the transcription that she was unhappy with. I also told participants that I would be quite prepared to interview them at a venue of their choosing. I did of course give them a very brief outline of my research project, and offer my supervisors Kingston University email should they want to confirm my identity and association with the department. At the interview itself I gave each interviewee a note outlining the above in writing and asked them to sign a release form for subsequent material. (See figs 3.3 and 3.4) Throughout the process of

advertising, contacting and interviewing participants I assured them that all material would be and would remain anonymous. I invited everyone to choose a pseudonym and this was always used in referring to the material arising from interview, their identity would only be known by me. In practice from the start of the project I had a hunch that this insistence on anonymity would be somewhat redundant. I imagined that the participants would not be ashamed of their visits to sex shops, on the contrary or they would not have agreed to be interviewed. I was correct in my supposition and only one participant seemed at all anxious about remaining nameless. I was somewhat embarrassed about making these reassurances as I felt that to make a particular point of this ran counter to the ethos of my participants and possibly to the project, for this reason while complying entirely with this ethical consideration I played up the process of choosing a pseudonym and in fact this became something of a light-hearted ice breaker at the start of the interview.

Having initially devised a set of interview questions for consumers these went through a constant process of refinement as the interview schedule progressed. (fig 3.5) shows one incarnation of these interview prompts. While, comfortingly, the constant evolution of interview questions as themes emerge in the research is in line with Grounded Theory methods, the reality was that I refined them because I was never satisfied with my list of questions. Reflection suggests that it is tempting to imagine a 'perfect' set of questions which will flow seamlessly from one to the next, eliciting the level and type of information from the participant that one hopes for at every new interview. In fact every interview was fascinating and full of rich material but this had little to do with the substance of my questions. As I went on I saw that it was far more important to respond 'on my feet', to allow the participant flexibility, that probes and questions should in most cases follow the trajectory of the participant (unless they are going right 'off track') rather than abruptly bringing them back to the prepared list of 'questions'. I had a particular experience of this when I interviewed Sexy Kitten and I regretted it bitterly. I was conducting an interview that didn't start until 8.45pm, it had been a difficult week I was tired and not really on the ball. When I listened to the interview subsequently and read the transcript there was a point at the end of the session at which my participant talked about how far she had come from her mother's experience of sexuality as an Irish woman growing up in the 1950's. This was not only an

emotional point for my participant but may have been a rich seam of material in terms of how she viewed the development of her own sexual attitudes, in the context of her consumption practices and experiences. Unfortunately having listened to her point I did not follow this up but brought her back to my list of questions ignoring this personal disclosure.

Transcription and data analysis

All the interview narratives were transcribed by me, in full. While this was undoubtedly laborious and time consuming, I experienced transcription as a vital part of the process of analysis:

Despite its centrality in qualitative data collection, transcription practices remain superficially examined. It is not uncommon for transcription to be presented as a behind-the-scenes aspect of data management rather than as an object of study in its own right.

Oliver, Serovich and Mason (2005, p1273)

As suggested above, transcription is an aspect of research that is often under theorised, for example Colin Robson's *Real World Research* (edition 2002), despite the comprehensiveness of its scope, offers little on the topic. However, my first experience of interview methodology was via oral history research and its rationale and principles informed this study. Oral history prioritises the voices of its participants and as such provided useful guidelines on the transcription process:

The full transcript should therefore include everything, with the possible exception of diversions for checking that the recorder is on, having a cup of tea, or present day chatting about the weather. All questions should go in. Fumbling for a word may be left out, but other hesitations and stop gaps like "you know" or "see", should be included...The grammar and word order must be left as spoken.

Thompson, (2000, p259)

I was committed to retaining a sense of the individual speaking in the transcript, plus I felt that the transcript should, as far as possible, reflect any telling hesitation or rumination on the part of the participant. Furthermore, it is vital that the transcriber must be sensitive to the subjectivity of punctuation in that the character or sense of testimony may be substantially altered by different uses of punctuation. Careful judgments must be made even at this point, as to how

punctuation can best facilitate clarity of meaning – that is the meaning proposed by the interviewee rather than any that might be imposed on the text by the researcher. Overall, I resisted any urges to 'tidy up' the text while attempting to balance this against the need for a level of clarity and readability in the transcription. In spite of the attention I paid to preserving the individual quality of the material, I was sometimes surprised by the way in which the tenor of the transcribed text differed from my memory and my research notes of the interview. In one specific case, I had a particularly enjoyable interview experience with a woman I arranged to meet on the South Bank. My sensation was that the interview flowed seamlessly and that we 'connected' on a personal level. However, the transcript, although full of rich material, reads as surprisingly stilted, not at all reflective of the relaxed, friendly, conversational interview I experienced. Overall, the painstaking nature of the transcription process allowed me to immerse myself in the material in such a way that it formed a first step in data analysis.

Analysis itself drew on the work of Mauthner and Doucet's *Reflections on a Voice Centred relational Method of Data Analysis* (1998). Their own account draws on the work of Carol Gilligan, Lyn Brown and colleagues at the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and Girl's Development at the Harvard Graduate School of Education who developed this method of data analysis over several years in the early 1990s. Mauthner and Doucet relate their experience of using the method in their respective doctoral research projects exploring motherhood and postnatal depression and the attempts of heterosexual couples to share house work and child care. Their insightful account guided and informed my own use of this approach, for my study of feminist research methodologies drew me towards systems of data analysis which foreground transparency and reflectivity. This method appealed to me on a number of counts, initially because their account of data analysis recognises the role of the researcher in shaping the data:

The particular issue which strikes us as central, yet overlooked, in qualitative data analysis processes and accounts is that of how to keep respondents' voices and perspectives alive, while at the same time recognising the researcher's role in shaping the research process and product.

(1998, p1)

Their account of the analysis process acknowledges not only the impossibility of taking an 'objective' position in relation to data but the ways in which a potentiality for bias pervades the whole process. For example in the control the researcher has over the trajectory of the interview, following up some leads and ignoring others. My analysis of the data showed me where I had done this myself, sometimes to the detriment of the data; see for example my previous account of the interview with Sexy Kitten.

Mauther and Doucet's account of their use of the method positions the interviewees as active participants in a research process, asking the researcher to look for the story or narrative in the data, an approach that chimed with my interest in uncovering underlying discourse and participant consumption as a means of identity creation. The second 'reading' suggested by the method, looks for the *voice of the 'I'* and 'represents an attempt to hear the person agent or actor voice their sense of agency' (1998, p14). The struggle for agency in the context of feminine sexual expression is clearly a key theme for my research. Finally, the method appealed because it works to unearth the ways in which the researcher impacts on the data by taking account - not only of dimensions such as race, class, gender, and so on - but explicitly in terms of 'tracking' the 'feelings' of the researcher in response to the material: 'particularly those feelings that do not resonate with the speaker's experience' (Brown 1994, cited in Mauther and Doucet 1998 p11). This is a methodological issue that has particularly interested me and has already been discussed in relation to what Reinharz (1992) describes as lack of fit between researcher and researched and Andrews (2002:p63) as 'agreeing to agree'. I was to encounter this myself in the first 'reading' suggested by the method: *Reading for the plot and for our responses to the narrative*. At this point I will quote from my own research notes:

I was very ambivalent about doing this reading to start with, particularly when I tried to locate myself in the transcript. I couldn't really do it from the transcript of the interview and felt that there was very little evidence of any bias – a few rather leading questions and points at which I changed the subject. However when I decided to listen again to the taped interview it was quite different. I could feel and hear my lack of sympathy for the participant. I was aware that I was irritated by her rather insistent, bombastic manner and her assumption that she was speaking on behalf of

all women, particularly when my own sexual identity felt so different to hers. I realised that for this reason – that what she was expressing was at odds with my own feelings but also that [it] didn't chime with much of the other interview material - I could very easily ignore or slant her testimony.

(2010)

This was an epiphany in the life of the research process, a point at which the methodological concerns that had interested me in an abstract sense, were made concrete and challenging in my own work! Another instance of researcher bias became clear when it took me a long time to acknowledge one particular discourse in the testimony of my participants. This narrative became unavoidable when I interviewed Emily, a psychologist who inevitably utilised psychological language and terminology. However, the reason that this woman had been suggested to me (as a potential interviewee) was that she had once considered opening a women's sex shop of her own. When she described how her ideas had crystallised into a sex shop come therapy rooms, café, nail bar and so on, it became clear that her therapeutic perspective on female sexual consumption chimed very explicitly in some respects, with that of some of my other interviewees. I wondered why this discourse had not emerged previously. At this point the notion of sexual consumerism as *therapeutic* (phrased in these terms) did not even exist in my coding structure and yet it was clearly a significant and repeated discourse amongst my participants. I have concluded that this is because I was resistant to such a notion and for that reason - although in some vague inarticulate way I knew it was there – I refused to recognise it in these terms. It was Emily's testimony that required me to acknowledge the presence of this discourse and forced me to address it. Thus the method had enabled me to unearth a source of potential bias and resistance I had not previously been aware of and I was able to mine a seam of data that had been at risk of being side lined.

A change of discipline

The voice centred relation method¹³ was used by Mauther and Doucet in a project that had a sociological focus, they stress that central to this method is its: 'Relational ontology' [which] posits the notion of "selves in relation" (Ruddick 1989, cited in Mauther and Doucet 1998 p9) - a view that prioritises the notion of human beings as part of a network of social relations. While I recognise the

¹³ See Mauther and Doucet (1998, p8-9) for more information about the disciplinary origins of the method as well as further reading.

centrality of sociological approaches and research methods to my own work, my challenge here was to extend this ontological framework to a study framed by the interests of material culture - to include, therefore, selves in relation to the consumption of *things*. Clearly, from the start of my project I was aware that I needed to find a method of data analysis which would facilitate me in revealing the way participants accounted for the meanings embedded (for them) in particular objects and spaces. Mauther and Doucet stress the flexibility and intuitive nature of the method, while the first two readings are fundamental; they suggest that the third and fourth readings can be adapted to the particular interests of the research in question. However, my initial attempts to transform the third reading; *Reading for relationships* to *Reading for relationships with things* was not fruitful; somehow this seemed to presuppose or encompass only a static relationship between participants and objects. It did not sit well with the narrative account of an active encounter that was described in the majority of the testimonies I collected. I moved to the fourth suggested reading, a ruminatory excerpt from my research notes illustrates the flavour of this struggle and hints at its resolution:

This reading seemed more difficult although I am convinced of its appropriateness to my work. I scrutinised Mauther and Doucet's account [of their own research] to find a clue as to how I could relate it to my own participants shopping accounts. One of the problems with applying this methodology is that Mauther and Doucet's accounts, if not life histories, are about significant life events or aspects of participants' lives. On the surface my accounts are simply about a few shopping expeditions. However, I do strongly maintain that embedded in these seemingly superficial and flimsy experiences of sex shopping, are accounts of the way in which my participants experience, not simply their own personal sexual identity but how feminine sexuality encounters a wider social context. These sex shops are sites of exchange in that they are places in which women are invited to consume a notion of female sexuality on offer, they are also one of the very few environments in which feminine sexuality is contextualised beyond the personal. In a female orientated sex shop feminine sexuality is social, political, libortory, therapeutic and recreational - empowering, subjugatory and status conferring. So what are the cultural contexts and social structures, the prisms or frameworks through which participants experience the sex shop? It seems in Heidi's testimony that her encounters with these

shops are framed by her in terms of gender difference. The narrative thrust of her story is one of how these shops do not cater to the more 'holistic', sensual and aesthetic, needs of women... Thus my understanding of 'reading 4' looks at frameworks through which the participant 'reads' the shop.

(2010)

By focusing on shopping (or experiencing the sex shop) as an active process generative of meaning, I was able, eventually, to re-interpret the fourth reading: *Placing people within cultural contexts and social structures*, in a way that was productive to a narrative seeking to establish the meanings participants make of their shopping experiences. This reading seeks to: 'place ...respondent's' accounts and experiences within broader social, political, cultural and structural contexts' (ibid, p 17). Reading the material in this way meant that I was able to identify a number of shared discourses emerging from testimony, discourses which began to define the ways in which participants viewed the spaces of sexual consumption alongside or counter to, their identity as sexual consumers. These paradigmatic frameworks then form the focus of my analysis chapters 4, 5 and 6.

Conclusion

Thus this account describes the methodological interests of the project stressing their centrality to the process of reaching an understanding of women's accounts of sex shopping. I have stressed the ethos of a project which aims to materialise the vitality of women's voices and declines to impose disembodied meanings on the experiences and narratives they describe. Here I have foregrounded the flexibility and transparency of my research design and shown that it is responsive to my participants; moreover my research acknowledges even relishes, the problematic and haphazard. This chapter has also recognised the problems involved in researching a 'difficult' subject but highlighted my dilemmas where that notion of 'difficulty' runs counter to the construction of feminine sexuality revealed in participant testimony.

I have positioned my work in a tradition of feminist research and highlighted the particular methodological dilemmas that are fundamental to this tranche of work and that have, moreover, often resonated markedly for me during the life of this project. This chapter problematises the relationship between researcher and

participant, specifically the production of knowledge that proposes to see through the testimony of the participant to structures of inequality or subjugation of which they are unaware. While I recognise that my work has a clear relation to feminist research methods, it critiques a notion of feminist research epistemology as tending towards the essentialist - surveying the scope of the interests of feminist research and where this project engages or departs from its precepts. In addition, I have described the practical processes of research in some detail in order to reach a level of transparency and reflectiveness which chimes with the ethos of the research methodologies espoused. Finally, I have outlined the processes which have served to uncover the embedded discourses of sexualised consumption or what my research analysis notes describe as 'frameworks through which participants read sex shopping'. The next three chapters will expose and scrutinize the interview material, utilising the principal framing devices arrived at through these processes.



Have you ever visited an erotic shop for women?

I am doing PhD research based at Kingston University around women's experience of shopping in sex shops, particularly those shops aimed primarily at the female consumer or couples. I am urgently seeking women who are willing to volunteer for an informal interview/chat about their shopping experiences.

I am looking to conduct interviews as soon as possible. I am happy to conduct the interview at a venue convenient to you, they generally last between 45 minutes to an hour.

If you think you might be interested in participating in my research, please email me and I can tell you more about it (without any obligation to participate).

Hoping to hear from you!

Fran
(carterfran4@aol.com)

Fig 3.1 Second and 'improved' version of flyer I produced to call for women research participants.

Participant name or pseudonym	Means of accessing participant	Outcome	Place where interview took place	Approx. age	Occupation (as they described it)	Method of recording Interview
Annabel	Snowballing	Completed interview	Her home	50	Health service trainer	Tape
Louise	Leaflet in Sh!	Completed interview	Telephone interview	33	Freelance translator	Phone tape device
Sexy Kitten	Snowballing	Completed interview	Her home	40	Librarian	Tape
Shiri Zinn	E mail/letter contact	Completed interview	Telephone interview	37	Sex toy designer	Phone tape device
Kathryn Holye	E mail/letter contact	Completed interview	At Sh!	40s	Sex shop owner	Tape
Anna	Leaflet in Sh!	Completed interview	Tate Modern	20s	Sexual health nurse	Tape
Georgina	Snowballing	Completed interview	V&A	36	Graduated art student	Tape
Melanie	Snowballing	Completed interview	V&A	31	Artist	Tape
Marley	snowballing	Completed interview	Cafe	21	Student	Tape
Kate	snowballing	Completed interview	Cafe	21	Student	Tape
Veronica	Leaflet in Sh!	Completed interview	Queen Elizabeth Hall, South Bank	47	Unwilling teacher	Tape

Nic	E mail contact/letter	Informal chat	At her home	40s	Sex Shop owner	Written notes
Emily	Snowballing	Completed interview	At her home	37	Psychotherapist	Tape
Heidi	Snowballing	Completed interview	Café, then shopping trip to She Said in Brighton then her home!	43	Movement therapist and Alexander Technique trainer	Tape
Rachel	Chatting in the shop	Completed interview	Telephone interview	23	Assistant manager of an erotic boutique	Phone tape device

Fig 3.2 Profiles of participants.

Research Interviews

Shopping in the Women's Sex Emporium (Provisional title)

This study forms part of PhD research based in the Faculty of Art, Design and Music at Kingston University. I am looking at how the women's sex shop 'relates to' or 'feeds into' contemporary constructions of femininity. I intend that thesis will develop largely out of interview with consumers, as well as with retailers and manufacturers, therefore without your interested participation in the process there would be no project.

The interview should last approximately 45 minutes to an hour.

- I can provide you with written prompts but please do not feel constricted by these questions.
- I will transcribe the interview word for word.
- I am happy to send you a copy of the transcribed interview if you so choose.
- The interview is confidential in that while the transcript will be used as data, your identity will remain unknown. I will be using pseudonyms for all participants (which you are welcome to choose yourself).

If you have any concerns, comments on the interview procedure or anything arises out of the interview that you would like to elaborate on, I would welcome your call. I am very grateful for your participation in this project.

Fran Carter

Tel: 0208 291 0256

E mail;carterfran4@aol.com

Fig 3.3 The covering letter given to potential participants prior to interview

CLEARANCE NOTE AND DEPOSIT INSTRUCTIONS

The purpose of this agreement is to clarify that all interview material is to be used for research purposes. That your contribution and any written reference to it will remain anonymous at all times. All material will be preserved as a permanent public reference resource for use in research, publication, education, lectures, broadcasting and the internet.

If you wish to limit public access to your contribution for a period of years (up to a maximum of 30 years) please state these conditions:

I hereby assign the copyright in my contribution to Kingston University.

Signed.....Date.....

Address.....

.....

Signed (Kingston University)

.....Date.....

Fig 3.4 The release form given to participants prior to interview.

Interview prompts for consumers:

- **Could you please start by stating your name/pseudonym, age and occupation?**

Identifying the shops

- Can you tell me something about what prompted you to go to a female orientated sex shop?
- What were your expectations of a sex shop? How and why do you think your expectations have changed in recent years – if they have?
- Do you remember which shops you have visited?
- How did you know about these shop/shops?

The look of the shops

- How did the exterior look of the shop influence your decision to go into the shop?
- How did the shop advertise itself as a sex shop? On the outside and inside.
- What sort of customers do you think the shops were aimed towards?
- Was there anything particular about the shop that made it feel female (or male/gay/lesbian) orientated?
- What did you think about the design and look of the products for sale?

The shopping experience

- Can you tell me something about the experience of shopping
- Have the shops you've visited met your expectations – if you had any?
- Have you visited shops alone, with a partner or with friend/s?
- How does the shopping experience compare?
- What do you think about the concept of a sex shop aimed particularly at women consumers?

Comparison with other forms of shopping

- How would you compare shopping at a women's sex shop with other types of shopping?
- Are there any other questions you think I might have asked?

Fig 3.5 One version of the interview prompts I used for consumers, these were subject to a constant process of revision.

Chapter 4

Men in raincoats; luxurious wallpaper: Differentiation and resistance

Introduction

I can't imagine what they sell, I really can't, I can't imagine that, I don't want to imagine what they sell.

Louise

The following chapter focuses on the way that participants position their experience of visiting the women's sex shop in relation to on-going debates around women's relationship to pornography and the emergence of female orientated pornography. This is established by asking participants what first propelled them to visit sex shops and how they initially envisaged the shops. In response to these questions all participants framed their visits to the women's sex shop in terms of difference and contrast on a vast range of fronts, to what they perceived as the 'traditional' male orientated shop. Clearly, for these women it was impossible to 'imagine' the women orientated shop without a corresponding 'imagining' of the male shop and thus the masculine or traditional sex shop becomes the 'defining model' for all conceptions of the female orientated shop. Sexy Kitten, a librarian in her 40s describes the male sex shop of her imagination as:

...the kind of place that dirty old men go to in the middle of Soho... the sort of place that sort of men in raincoats might go to and you get paper, erm you get things in paper bags.

Sexy Kitten

Thus this chapter broadly takes notions of differentiation and resistance to a dominant masculine trope as its overarching theme. Over the last two decades, both academic feminists and journalists have engaged with a discourse that suggests that pornography should not be dismissed out of hand as a tool of subjectification but can alternatively be made use of as a tool of empowerment by women on their own terms. This, of course, has necessitated a project of re-framing and re-making, and has arguably been the launch pad for a discussion played out in new forms of address such as porn chic which takes some of the familiar tropes of pornography and re-presents them in a new context for a fashion literate audience. From a differing perspective, a small number of female (and male) film makers have responded by acknowledging women's potential interest in

visually stimulating material and are producing woman friendly pornography such as the films by Anna Span and Petra Joy or by Lars Von Trier's Zentropa productions. Contemporary feminist academics (McRobbie 2008, Attwood 2006, 2008, Gill 2009, Holland 2010) have extended the debate to problematise the notion of female sexual empowerment via the assertion of a forthright and unambiguous sexualised identity and expressed in participation in practices such as neo burlesque or pole dancing or the consumption of sexual commodities. Conversely, a raft of female cultural commentators such as Natasha Walter (2010) and Ariel Levy (2005) and other writers in the broadsheet press have tended to position all these things as materialisation of a sort of false consciousness. Kira Cochrane writing in the New Statesman exemplifies this position:

Especially strange is the fact that we smuggle much of this conformity to male culture under the guise of "feminism". Over the past decade it's become commonplace to define visiting a strip joint, for instance, or stripping yourself, not even just as morally benign activities, but as "empowering" choices...In fact, the truth is that buying into and participating in male chauvinist culture is something else entirely: a devil's bargain, a barter and a compromise. It's a deal, specifically that enables women both to attract men and to compete in a male world without threatening its pride and prejudices.

(Cochrane, 1st March 2005)

Thus the following analysis of testimony confirms the centrality of these debates to women's construction of the women's sex shop, examining where and how women locate these issues and in what ways, if any, these are discussions potentially resolved in the act of consumption via highly gendered environments. This is investigated through analysis of the terminology used to frame women's experience of the sex shop, in order to reveal how the women's shop is conceptualised in relationship to notions of resistance to the pornographic. It then seeks to ascertain how far descriptions of the women's sex shop and sexualised shopping, reveal an imperative to 'domesticate' female sexuality, and establishes that this notion is embedded in the recurring use of the term '*comfort*' by consumers and shop owners alike. It is very clear from the testimony of shop owners, from marketing and from representation, as well as from the voices of the consumers interviewed, that the women's sex shop both draws and thrives on this

notion that individual feminine empowerment is realizable when pursued through the medium of a judicious, libertory and 'enlightened' style of sexual consumption and that indeed this discourse frames our understanding of it. Sam Roddick is quoted here discussing her shop; Coco de Mer in an Observer interview of 2001:

We don't want to provide people with a complete fantasy: that's the ideology of consumerism – "we'll provide you with the fantasy and you can shop and take it home". We want to open the doors and allow people to create their own fantasy and then apply it.

(Smith, A, 2001)

Thus in brief, the first section examines women's conceptualisations and narratives, of shopping in the traditional sex shop which is identified primarily by participants as a masculine space and examines the ways in which the women's shop has grown out of and is delineated in relation to, the traditional male shop in the testimonies of consumers.

The second section of this chapter seeks to unearth the foundations or underpinnings of the women's sex shop by defining the nature of the dialogue between a framing concept of 'pornography' and women's *consumption* of sexuality. I will be prioritising an acknowledgement of women's interaction with pornography alongside recognizing the 'situatedness' of women's encounters with it, therefore highlighting pornography's still potent grip on masculine identified spaces and exploring it, in broad terms, as an issue of access for women.

The imagined sex shop: the male sex shop as defining model

The first half of this chapter explores the paradigmatic model of the male sex shop, real and imagined; through which all other models of sex shops are filtered. This section will consider women's experience of visiting and shopping in or conversely their imaginings of, the masculine shop. The key term here is 'resistance' as here we analyse the way in which the masculine shop is visually invoked by participants as materialisation of a hegemonic masculinity. It explores the ways in which participants account for the 'traditional'¹⁴ heterosexual male sex shop, sometimes experienced but often simply fantasy:

¹⁴ In the absence of another or more satisfactory term, I have referred to the sex shop aimed primarily if not exclusively at the heterosexual male customer, as 'traditional'. This is a term which

And being around Soho and those male kind of places, I had kind of been past them but I hadn't been in. So no, I don't think so, I think they're just my ideas of what it would be like.

Emily

Crucially therefore, it examines the ways in which participants conceptualise the masculine shop and the meaning and significance of this conceptualisation for their subsequent expectations and experience of the woman orientated shop. A construction of the masculine sex shop was generally established early on in the interview process, often in response to my asking participants which shops they had visited, but it soon became clear that the notion of the traditional sex shop looms large in the collective female. Its location on a dingy side ally in an area characterised by its betting shops, barbers shops and tagareen stores, the sweetly cloying smell of years of furtive urination around a darkened doorway obscured by a curtain of faintly fluttering, faded plastic ribbons, the grimy blacked out windows with their stuttering neon signs; the women I interviewed almost uniformly constructed the male sex shop using the terms 'seedy', 'sordid' or 'sleazy' (see figs 4.1 and 4.2 for images of the shuttered facades of the traditional sex shop). As we have seen there is a clear consensus within the testimonies around how the 'traditional' sex shop is constituted, as well as 'seedy', the shops were also described by one participant as 'hardcore', a term which may have various and complex connotations embedded within it. While some women had been inside 'traditional' male sex shops, others had not, but the male shop was still a fertile and persistent presence throughout the interview and some described their very vivid images of what they imagined them to be like:

I imagine it as being dark, my imagining is that they're not particularly clean, tidy and neat because the outsides often look so grubby, whereas Sh! ¹⁵ was very clean and spruce. Erm, my imagining is lots and lots of magazines with covers with pornographic pictures of women that would make me very uncomfortable. Erm yeah, Sh! is very big, it's a nice big space whereas a lot of these male sex shops seem to be small; I imagine them being very cramped. I can't imagine what they sell, I really can't, I can't imagine that, I don't want to imagine what they sell. I have this idea that they sell things

emerged spontaneously from interview and in which is embedded the notion of the masculine shop as being the prototypical sex shop in the imagination of most of us.

¹⁵ Sh! is a women orientated erotic shop which originated in Hoxton in 1992, this is the shop to which the participant is referring.

that would make me uncomfortable; I can't think what they would be but ...mmn, yeah.

Louise

Clearly the male sex shop, actual or imagined, forms the defining model without which the women's sex shop would not be realisable, in that it is conceptualised primarily in opposition to this notion of the traditional sex shop - its existence, its materialisation is dependent on it being '*different to*', on its '*not being*'. The women's sex shop is singular in terms of the unambiguous nature of its project of re-gendering, possibly even unique in that it is explicitly a re-assignment or making over of a space so clearly defined as masculine. And not even simply masculine in the sense that a motorbike showroom or a DIY store might be characterised as masculine – the heterosexual male shop is represented by some of my participants as 'threatening', 'male dominated' 'intimidating' and overwhelmingly, by almost all participants, as at the very least, 'uncomfortable' for the female consumer. The women I have talked to utilize a range of discourses in navigating their visits to the sex shop and in locating gendered and sexualised shopping in a larger context of their personal histories, sexual attitudes and their daily lives.

Thus this section will begin examination of the testimony of participants by exploring in detail the ways in which the women's sex shop draws on, appropriates and makes over the sexualised significations of the male shop, in order to offer its female consumers a notion of 'empowerment' embodied in the design of shops and sexualised products. The potential of a feminised, sexual consumption to deliver a version of individual feminine empowerment is a clear theme of this thesis and one that has been and is currently being, widely explored by other writers as discussed in chapter 2. The popular critique that an active, collective and politicised feminism has been replaced by a shopping trip rendered as an individual act of consumer resistance is characterised by Stephen Maddison as:

...an ideological formation in which the rhetoric of female empowerment has been assimilated by capital, and where female empowerment becomes a function of consumer culture rather than one of a structural redistribution of gender power. And in this, post feminism not only betrays the political potential of feminism but effectively forecloses the space for challenging the distribution of gender power, by displacing a collective political movement with individual and competitive instances of consumer power.

This debate is one that will be returned to in the next chapter in the context of the appeal the female orientated sex shop makes to notions of empowerment, what I will refer to there as 'the evangelist sex shop', however it is also apposite in terms of my specific focus here on women's experience of shopping in the traditional male sex shop. For several of the women I talked to, both the actuality of shopping in a masculine oriented sex shop and the 'imagined sex shop', the two of which I suggest are persistently conflated within testimony, have a significance and resonance beyond giggly or even horrified curiosity. Kathryn Hoyle, co-owner and founder of Sh!, the first (entirely) woman focussed erotic shop, is unequivocal in her account of a disastrous trip to Soho as being the catalyst for her decision to set up her women orientated shop offering a space in which women can comfortably shop for female friendly sexualised items. She is explicit, in her testimony, in making the connection between her shop and the potential for women to express an agentic feminine sexuality. Her description of this visit to the male sex shop serves to position her own shop, from the outset, as offering a challenge to the masculine orientated sex shop of the early nineties as she describes it:

The first thing I was going to ask you was why 1992 felt like a good time to open a sex shop, was there anything that influenced your decision?

Absolutely, I don't know how much you've read about Sh! but the story is, and it's true, it's a true story, that I went shopping with some friends in Soho in 1992 and just absolutely, just thought this is the worst experience, the most sort of intimidating and 'icky' experience.

Where did you go?

Oh, we just went in and out of sex shops, you know.

In Soho?

In Soho... and you kind of just think "urgh", starting out giggling, of course, and then you just think after your fifth sex shop and they're all bloody...they're all dick shaped first of all - they're all behind, they're not any more. I haven't been to Soho for a while - but at that point they're all behind glass, they're all just really, if you ask questions about anything, or could you feel it or could you see what they were with batteries? They just looked at you like you were, you know, I don't know, from another planet. It's just

really, just you know, “give us your money, get out”. And we even had comments like “oh my god don’t normally see women in here love”.

Hoyle

Clearly Hoyle’s testimony figures the heterosexual sex shop as the paradigmatic model without which there could be neither conception nor, potentially, any actual materialisation of the female erotic emporium. The erotic women’s shop, whether characterised by consumers as a special treat or a route to self-knowledge is inevitably produced through discourse as oppositional to this potent and pervasive image. Hoyle’s experience is one of entering an arena in which she is not a native and in which she is plainly made to feel foreign on a number of fronts. She describes (presumably staff) working in the shop as forthright in expressing their surprise that she and her female friends have infiltrated such exclusively masculine territory: ‘And we even had comments like “oh my god don’t normally see women in here love”’. Similarly Emily describing her expectations of an initial visit to Sh! explains that:

...I thought it was probably going to be a lot sleazier than my experience turned out to be. So I think I had all those stereotypes that people have about male misogyny, male dominated...

Emily

Here she expresses her expectation that the ‘traditional sex shop’, the ‘defining model’ which Hoyle and her friends explored (in actuality) in 1992, will be a space that materialises an exclusively masculinised notion of sexuality, one potentially even frightening or hostile to those women daring enough to cross the threshold. The term ‘threatening’ emerged several times in various interviews:

You know there’s this mentality you have about sex shops, it’s just another world and if you’re a woman and go in, it’s a bit threatening.

Melanie and Georgina

Another participant, Sexy Kitten, when asked which sex shops she has visited, talks about a visit to: ‘a couple of hard core sex shops which would be round Berwick Street in Soho’. When pressed to explain what she meant by ‘hard core’ she describes:

...the kind of place that dirty old men go to in the middle of Soho...so anyway therefore I would say hard core for me would be the sort of place that sort of men in raincoats might go to and you get paper, erm you get things in paper bags.

Sexy Kitten

These are clearly male places, which sell unspecified 'things' in anonymous paper bags to men in raincoats. She goes on to stress that they are:

Certainly more seedy [than Ann Summers] and I suppose ultimately their clientele was more, probably more male dominated, more male focussed.

Sexy Kitten

However, while Sexy Kitten stresses the sense of alienation she experiences in these shops, also using the word 'threatening' several times, she is careful to distinguish between the shops as *being* threatening and herself as not *feeling* threatened by being in that environment:

How did you feel about going into those?

I felt...urm.urm, urm.I wouldn't...I didn't feel threatened, I just felt, found it kind of more serious as far as the sex that was on offer through products, you know dvds, vibrators or whatever ...So therefore – and that added to it being quite seedy for me that's what I felt and also you know as far as I know there was no other women in the shop apart from me. It was all blokes – I mean there weren't a lot of blokes, probably about six or seven – but I didn't - as I say I didn't feel threatened and I didn't feel intimidated, I just felt it was just more male than other sex shops I've been to.

Sexy Kitten

Anna takes a similar stance in terms of disassociating herself from the potential discomfort of shopping in the traditional sex shop, citing as her reason that she is 'quite liberal' as well as that 'times have changed':

Probably seven or eight years ago when I first walked in, went to one. It was quite a seedy little shop in a street in the back of Melbourne and I was very self-conscious but I'd never been in before, I didn't know what to expect and it wasn't a particularly inviting store but now I wouldn't bat an eyelid.

Anna

Sexy Kitten explains, slightly later on in the interview and in more specific terms what it was that she constituted as threatening in this environment. This sense is for her embodied primarily in the nature and type of some of the sexual products for sale in the shop, which for Sexy Kitten, portray sex as an aggressive act 'done' by men to women and which provide an explicit contrast to what she describes as the experiential nature of the sexuality on offer in the women focussed shop:

I suppose what I can really remember about the ones in Soho were the dvds and they all involved anal fucking, you know men anal fucking women so you know that's such a, such an aggressive act of sex on a woman that I found it much more as I said, I suppose much more, yeah much more explicit and quite aggressive ultimately and there was no, none of this prettiness or femininity and you know they didn't sell any sexy underwear it was just pure explicit sex...and also no women so therefore the customers were men so much more of a kind of, I suppose really I don't know if I felt threatened as such but more of a threatening environment.

Sexy Kitten

The threat which she speaks about seems to be located in the *otherness* of the sex shop, it is 'another world' a world of men in which the version of sexuality on offer is demonstrated by the *type* of sex on offer: 'aggressive', 'anal fucking' constructed as 'pure explicit sex'. Moreover it is the shape of sex, 'dick shaped' (Hoyle) which distinguishes it from shops differently conceptualised in terms of; 'prettiness', 'femininity' and 'sexy underwear'. This discourse of disjuncture between a phallocentric notion of sexuality and an 'ideal' notion of feminised sexuality proposed by the woman focussed shop is a significant theme that emerges from testimony (see fig 4.3). However, it is pertinent to propose here that these shopping trips to the men's sex shop may well constitute a personal and in the popular second wave feminist sense, potentially political epiphany for women such as Kathryn and Sexy Kitten who, reflecting on the interview process and the issues that had emerged from it for her, ruminated:

I was trying to think if there was anything else I wanted to add really. Yeah, but for me it's been quite interesting talking about it because I hadn't kind of realised that it had as much of an impact as what it had. Especially the male one, especially the ones in Soho where it was so masculine, it was so masculine and I hadn't really realised that at the time. It was just reflecting about it made me realize how masculine it was and you know, it was really my choice for us to go you know [my partner] hadn't in any way put any pressure or coerced me at all and I kind of said I'd like to go because I'd never been to a hard core sex shop before but it was a big difference.

Sexy Kitten

For Sexy Kitten then the interview process became an opportunity re-evaluate her feelings around visiting a traditional sex shop with her partner. Her reflective

testimony reveals that, looking back, she is surprised by the effect the shopping trip had on her and moves towards a reassessment of what she now feels is the explicitly gendered nature of such shops.

A space for men

It is very apparent then, that for Sexy Kitten and the other women I talked to, the masculine sex shop is, or is likely to be, a space for men which actively excludes women. A space moreover, that is unambiguously constituted and represented visually, not only by the goods for sale in the shop, but by the physical location of the shop, the nature of its surroundings, the face it presents to the street, the arrangement and style of the interior space as well as the way that goods are displayed and the design of packaging. To engage a familiar narrative which is perhaps apposite here, in stealing the key and unlocking Bluebeards forbidden room, my participants' experience is of breaching a site which assumes and normalises a sexuality framed within a masculine paradigm. This, for some, is *visually* constituted in terms of the representational and emblematic dominance of the masculine member: Kathryn Hoyle describing her early shopping trip to masculine identified shops describes the products for sale as: '...they're all bloody...they're all dick shaped first of all...'. Hoyle is referring here to the type of toys which were available in the traditional masculine shop, prior to the opening of Sh! She states that:

When we started out it was strap ons and everything was all big, black dildos you know, veined affairs, that's not what women want at all.

Hoyle

Like Hoyle, another participant frames a polarisation of male and female sexuality in terms of the masculine member, in talking about sex shops she has visited, Heidi critiques some shops, even some of those purporting to be female friendly, by suggesting that: 'a lot of the presentation in the...even the more female friendly ones is very male', she goes on:

to me the whole symbol of the penis, the cock – this is what all these things are about, that's how males operate, that's what...[inaud: it's kind of like] I think women are much more into all the things around that.

Heidi

Thus for the women I interviewed, the various and familiar, visual symbols employed by the traditional masculine sex shop and the items for sale within it, are

constructed by many participants as signalling a very real barrier to any potential feminine consumption of the sexualised goods for sale inside. The blacked out windows, which ostensibly provide privacy for male consumers who wish not to be seen browsing the racks of R18 DVDs by passers-by, also protect the world outside from seeing the goods on sale within. These blacked out windows of the traditional sex shop are furthermore a response to local legislation requirements which controls what can be seen from the street both in terms of window display and what is visible, within the shop, from the doorway or windows. Furthermore the darkened windows, while they promise privacy and seclusion from the world outside, have surely become a feature of the traditional sex shop, that redolent with symbolism, marks it out as an almost exclusively masculine sphere to the extent that the opaque windows signalled danger for several of my women participants:

If it was completely blacked out I would probably be extremely reluctant to go in. I wouldn't like that

Why's that?

I suppose because I also want to look out, once I'm in, I want to look out. And also as a female going into somewhere where, you know, once I've gone in the door anything could happen, I wouldn't do that.

Heidi

Heidi is clear that the world of the traditional sex shop is not only an alien environment for her as a woman but also potentially a hostile or perilous one. She envisages the behaviour of men in the imagined sex shop as unpredictable and impulsive, male sexuality is figured as at once unrepressed and menacing - the shop imagined as an arena in which the familiar discourse of unruly male lust is played out. As Carol Vance suggested in the first publication of *Pleasure and Danger* in 1984, this is a persistent representation of male sexuality and one which offers a particular rationale for the existence of the women's sex shop:

A rag bag of myths and folk knowledge that the contemporary feminist movement opposed depicted male lust as intrinsic, uncontrollable, and easily aroused by any show of female sexuality and desire.

(Vance 1984, p3)

In this way the women focused shop provides what it represents as a necessary corollary to the potential threat of the male focussed sex shop, the 'safe space' in which women may consume sexual goods framed as sexual freedoms, the

consumption of pleasure without danger. This is clearly one of the myriad meanings embedded in the word 'comfortable'; a term we see emerging repeatedly in both interview and in representation - for example the Sh! website - and used to describe the 'safe space' of the women focused shop. While what Vance describes as a 'folk knowledge' of 'male lust' opposed by the 'contemporary feminist movement' may form the extreme end of this meaning arc that serves to polarise male and female sexuality, she does not fully explain what form this opposition was taking in the early eighties but it clearly involves a critique of the woman as 'victim of men who can't help themselves' mythology. Thus this 'rag bag of myths' does clearly still participate in moving the female sex shop towards a polarised position framed as a comfortable space for women away both from risk and danger and the responsibility of regulating male sexual behaviour through the self-regulation of their own sexual consumption activities:

The resulting polarization of male and female sexuality is a likely product of the prevailing gender system, which is used to justify women's need for a restricted but supposedly safe space and highly controlled sexual expression.

(Vance 1984, p4)

This is a theme that emerges very clearly and explicitly in participants' imaginings of the male sex shop, for the blacked out windows of the sex shop potentially conceal the libortory activities of the customers inside and furthermore hide whatever might be 'happening' to any woman who braves the threshold:

...I think you pointed out that in the traditional male sex shop they [the windows] are often black...

You see that would just frighten me, I think to go into a shop like that would frighten me. There is an idea that if the windows are blacked out then stuff could be happening to me in there and I would be beyond help – all right it's extreme, that's extreme, but that idea is there that yes, the idea of being up a dark alleyway somewhere urgh and probably a man behind the counter, urgh. [horried exclamation]

Louise

For other participants also, the darkened windows spell alarm as anything could be happening inside the shop, it is a world out of reach of what Vance describes in 1984 as women regulating male behaviour:

And the walls are blanked, the windows are blanked out so you can't actually see what the products are maybe that's why to me it felt like it's a place that is a bit uninviting or its very exclusive and because it's so blocked out this must be something a bit dodgy and funny in there that they don't want the world to see, yeah?

Melanie and Georgina

Annabel also characterises the traditional masculine shop as a space which is not 'a woman friendly environment' in terms of the (imagined) behaviour of the men inside the shop:

...the sort of shops that have viewing cabins for videos, you can just imagine kind of slightly unsavoury men wanking off [laughs] I don't know, it probably doesn't happen at all but that's my feeling. And the whole style of what they're selling and how they're selling it.

Annabel

Moreover, this discourse of an unfettered and overwhelmingly functional male sexuality is clearly linked by Annabel to the 'style' of what they're selling and how it is sold, the masculinised and functional version of sexuality on offer is visually constituted in not simply the products but in the 'way' they are sold. Hoyle depicts the objects on sale as:

...all behind glass, they're all just really, if you ask questions about anything, or could you feel it or could you see what they were with batteries? They just looked at you like you were, you know, I don't know, from another planet.

Hoyle

These women are proposing what amounts to a grand narrative in terms of their construction of the male sex shop, a site which constructs women in exclusively objectified form and that is therefore an arena that excludes and is even threatening to women. Moreover, this is a site that posits a particular notion of heterosexual male sexuality as essential and moreover libidinous and overwhelming; this narrative is the stuff of Bluebeards castle, a persistent and perhaps self-fulfilling narrative trope. However, I suggest that while the imagined sex shop is a familiar story in many of the accounts, we will see presently an alternative narrative which may be found lurking in the spaces left by the first; one of exploration, curiosity, the desire to purchase something for their own ends, even an attempt at feminine colonisation of a wholly masculine sphere. At the end of

her seminal article Vance is calling for the mobilisation of an active and agentic female sexuality and in some sense this, in a commodified form, is surely what has been achieved in the female friendly and (sometimes) women only erotic shop. This discourse of re-making is further explored in the following section which extends the focus on resistance and differentiation to a male defined sexuality by starting to uncover how for my participants, the women's sex shop sits in relation to on-going debate around pornography.

Beyond the 'tired binary': towards an exploration of women's *consumption* of pornography

Clearly issues around women and pornography have been framed in a number of, by now, entirely familiar ways, as Attwood suggests, over the past twenty years the dominant discourse on various fronts, has been:

The idea that the objectification of women in pornography works to effect sexual violence in society, *is* a form of sexual violence against women, and typically involves the depiction of violence...[this] has become well – established as a common sense understanding of what pornography is, largely through repetition rather than verification. It has been particularly influential in academic, institutional, and public understandings of sexual representation, working to frame and structure most discussions about this type of representation since the 1980's.

(Attwood 2004, p8)

Discussion of pornography has been intense over the last two decades and debate has broadly coalesced around the issue of censorship. On the one hand some feminists have tended to seek legislative restraint on the distribution and uses of pornography, drawing links between the notions that male power and aggression is embedded within pornographic representation and depends ultimately on the objectification and dehumanisation of women for its charge. On the other hand the anti-censorship lobby has cited the potential of pro-censorship advocates to play into the hands of the religious right who propose a credo which is antagonistic to the rights and liberties of those subordinated groups with which feminism has traditionally forged an ideological alliance.¹⁶ This tension around the

¹⁶ It is not within the scope or interests of this thesis to account for the 'porn wars' in any detail. For a history of the porn wars that have raged since the late '70s through the 80s and 90s, the polarisation of debate around intervention in the distribution of pornography, key players and suggestions for further reading, I have found S.M Shaw (1999) gives a brief but helpful, survey of relevant literature, Attwood (2004) *Pornography and Objectification*, *Feminist Media Studies* 4:1 7-

potential of pornographic representation to be characterised as either a tool of feminine objectification or a route (although potentially circuitous) to individual feminine empowerment is a concern that clearly underscores my own research into women and their experience of sex shopping in the specific site of the female orientated sex shop. Thus in the context of this research project, it is apposite to explore the ways in which debate has invoked the potential of social and legislative intervention in pornography production and consumption to inhibit the individual freedom of women to express or to empower, themselves sexually. Indeed the trajectory which holds that pornography should not be dismissed out of hand as a tool of subjectification but may be appropriated or re made as a tool of empowerment for and by women themselves, frames our own account of the women's sex shop. This paradigmatic discourse of re-making both informs our understanding of the women's sex shop and is an explicit rationale for both their inception and for their consumption in the accounts of many participants. While tensions are largely unresolved in terms of academic analysis and perhaps should remain so, I suggest that these issues are very present in the testimony of my participants and that the women's sex shop is a very particular arena in which meaning making around an active and collective politicisation alongside the exercising of individual agency in the name of empowerment - surely collides and does so in a way that might be viewed (and clearly sometimes is by my participants) as an unequivocal attempt at resolution of these conflicts or at least an attempt to move beyond what Jane Juffer calls 'this tired binary' (1998, p2). Kathryn Hoyle's testimony materialises these tensions clearly. She describes a legal battle with Hackney council in 1993 when she was accused of operating an unlicensed sex shop, a battle that later took Sh! to court:

...it's Hackney, we were the only shop of its kind and the only thing legally we could have sold within a licensed sex shop, that you can't sell in an unlicensed sex shop, is R18 porn. But R18 porn at that time was a total rip off. It wasn't anything like you think is porn, also there was absolutely nothing that we would have sold because it's all for men, it's just a, sorry, a spunk fest. Women are...well we do have a problem if it just looks like this woman is being, isn't – you know - is a receptacle.

Hoyle

19 analyses three key, differing approaches to framing explicit sexual representation and highlights the limitations of each.

Hoyle was keen at the time to distance Sh! from the masculinist image of the male sex shop, an image that defined by its marketing of pornography seen as hostile to women's interests. However, Hoyle recognises that many of her customers have an interest in the women orientated pornography which has become widely available since that time:

The whole sort of porn thing's changed and there's a lot more sort of woman friendly porn and we would actually like to be licensed now but no, you know, the local council they just refuse to do anything to actually look at any sort of individual circumstance, Because we refuse to be licensed as a total shop.

Right, you want a section licensed

We want a section licensed. Because as a total shop we would have to have no entry to anybody under 18 and that means women with their kids or babies in pushchairs, who are often in...

Hoyle

Thus Hoyle's story of Sh!'s relationship with pornography forms a distinct trajectory. Initially combative, the shop resists aligning itself with the interests of a male dominated industry which objectifies women, ultimately moving to a position of endorsement for a pornography re-made to focus on women's desires and thus appropriated in the interests of empowering its female consumers.

A discussion dominated by political concerns has left exploration around the conditions of pornography's *consumption*, particularly by women, largely out in the cold. While empirical research on pornography consumption has traditionally tended to prioritise 'scientific' analysis of the effect of pornographic material on men and has largely tended to support the feminist anti-pornography lobby concluding:

that women's lives may be seriously and negatively influenced by pornography consumption because of the reproduction of misogyny and women's increased risk of becoming a victim of sexual violence.

(Shaw 1999, p198)

Shaw (1999) and Wilson Kovacs (2009) highlight the lack of experiential research around individual women's attitudes to and experiences of pornography and the ways in which pornography consumption impacts on women's lives:

In order to develop our understanding of women's sexual consumption, sexual agency and intimacy, we need to document how women use and make sense of the various resources available to them – from top shelf magazines to Ann Summers merchandise and erotic fiction.

(Wilson Kovacs 2009, p147)

While both writers agree that there is a lack of empirically based work dealing with women's consumption of pornography, Kovacs stresses the difficulties women may have in negotiating their own complex feelings about both their own and their partner's, use of pornography. She suggests that the contradictory responses inspired by pornography use, the sense that they may be letting the feminist 'side down' for example, inhibit women from being able to speak openly about the topic. On the other hand Shaw suggests that there is an absence of this type of research because:

Research on pornography raises some difficult issues, perhaps especially for feminist researchers. This is not only because of debates over social policy and legislative initiatives, but also because of the lack of consensus about how pornography should be defined, and because of other associated conceptual and theoretical complexities.

(1999, p199)

Overall, Shaw's re-framing of pornography within the study of leisure consumption is useful in moving us some way towards the possibility of a more empirically based analysis of women's engagement with, access to and consumption of, pornography. While fully acknowledging the problematic nature of much pornography in terms of its traditional relationship to women, her perspective does assist in shifting perceptions of pornography as something purely objectifying of and therefore harmful to women, to an acknowledgement and 'normalising' of women's use of pornography as a means of achieving pleasure for and by themselves.' Attwood (2004) furthermore, cites a number of studies which do place consumption of pornography at the centre of this discussion and from which:

consumers emerge..., not as victims, addicts aggressors or misfits, but as sexual subjects whose experiences and understandings of porn depends on a wide range of social and cultural factors.

(2004, p 23)¹⁷

¹⁷ See also Maddison (2009) for an alternative view which suggests that revisionist accounts of pornography fail to attend to the violent and objectifying nature of much hard core pornography.

In *"Other" or "one of us"?: The porn user in public and academic discourse* (2004) Attwood gives a wide ranging analysis of current literature as well as popular and academic discourse around pornography. She surveys work dealing with the ways in which porn is figured on various fronts via stereotyping and panic around porn consumption, the development of porn studies and the significance to this of a postmodern interpretive approach which reaches beyond its supposedly well documented effects; violence, harm, abuse, contamination and addiction. Drawing on the work of Rojek (1991), Green (1998) and Scraton (1994) She draws attention to the limitations of a polarisation in perspectives, that is, either a prioritisation of the collective and political which tends to presuppose a commonality of female experience or on the other hand a focus on individual and subjective experience and meaning making:

Feminist theories of leisure, based on a structural or modernist perspective, have been criticized for focusing too much attention on power relations and for assuming a common experience of oppression for all women (Rojek, 1991; Scraton, 1994; Green 1998). Postmodernist approaches, on the other hand, while placing emphasis on diversity, personal agency and multiple subjectivities, are subject to the danger of ignoring or down-playing gendered power relations.

(Attwood 2004, p8)

Attwood is making a similar point to Shaw regarding the feminist anti-pornography approach, suggesting that while it is vital to acknowledge the ways in which pornography may be 'hostile' to women: '...its tendency to close down other ways of making sense of sexual representation remains deeply problematic' (2004 p8). Furthermore, Juffer (1998) suggests that pro pornography academics have interested themselves in pornography in terms of what has tended to be seen as its potential as transgressive text, a position which again entails some closing down of the visceral pleasures of sexual representation to those who are lacking in the cultural capital needed to de-code it or who are not in thrall to the possibilities offered by the breaching of a new academic frontier. Thus the primary significance of Juffer's analysis to this research is in her move to 'domesticate' or re-situate pornography within the 'home', her use of this term being best understood, perhaps, in a metaphoric sense. Her aim is to embed scrutiny and analysis of sexually stimulating material in a context of the ways and places in which it is consumed and incorporated within the reality of women's everyday lives

and '(s)experience', as well as to draw attention to the ways in which women may be realizing the integration of their domestic, everyday roles with their autonomously sexual selves - on their own terms:

Such a focus shifts the emphasis away from pornography as a discourse of either universal power or individual appropriation (both of which transcend specific places); rather, it emphasizes pornography as a discourse of everyday significance, shaped by its relations to particular sites.

(1998, p8)

Thus in terms of both rationale and methodology my own discussion with participants has had a clear focus on women's engagement with sexual consumption and with the site of consumption, as part of an individual meaning making process. A process which inevitably, for each of my participants, involves a negotiation of the relationship between pornography and other sexualised consumption and a coterminous conciliation between two opposing discourses embodied in the accounts of pornography as either female oppression or potential female empowerment. The accounts of my participants reveal, if not always explicitly or self-consciously, a real engagement with the continued legacy of the 'porn wars' as each carves out a liminal space between 'pornography as a discourse of either universal power or individual appropriation' (Juffer 1998, p8). Thus while participants do not frame these forays into the world of the traditional sex shop as *overtly* political acts, there *is* evidence of both a bravado curiosity in Sexy Kitten and Annabel's testimony and a functional consumer imperative in their account of how they came to be shopping in the male sex shop which chimes with the tone in which Hoyle, Anna and Veronica describe their shopping experience. For Sexy Kitten and Hoyle, and for one or two of the other women I talked with who had actually visited, or would discuss having visited, traditional male sex shops - far from being furtive flaneurs in the clandestine world of the sex shop they describe their shopping trips as largely functional, an attempt to purchase something which meets their sexual needs:

But when we did go to see the other hard core ones we went there to try and find some porn, it was a deliberate mission as it were.

Sexy Kitten

Annabel a fifty year old Health Services Trainer, describes occasional visits with her partner to: 'the sleazy end of sex shops' in various Western European cities,

when they might: '...have a look at the videos and see if there's anything that I think that I might enjoy'. It is surely not insignificant that these women are making forays into a masculine space that they themselves characterise as 'threatening' in an attempt to find aids to sexual stimulation that meet their requirements. In Sexy Kitten and Annabel's case they described searching the more traditional sex shop for visual pornography, a space in which, one might assume from their description of the event, they would have difficulty finding something they deemed appropriate! Maddison (2009) critiques Linda Williams (2004) where she suggests that mainstream pornography is responding to female demand for explicit material by becoming less focused on purely masculine pleasure. He offers a counter argument to this in his analysis of the brutal objectification of a porn actress in a contemporary hard core porn movie. However while any brief perusal of Youporn¹⁸ will clearly move towards substantiating Maddison's argument that a phallogentric and objectifying construction of sexuality still dominates the market, it is undeniable that there has, in recent years, been an expansion of visual pornography aimed towards the couples market and women¹⁹. Whether, as Maddison suggests, this development merely constitutes a sort of false consciousness in the sense that this commercial expansion of a market is cited as indicating the flowering of an agentic female sexuality, is not at question here. He is suggesting, along with others (McRobbie 2009, Sonnet 1999, Gill 2008 for example) that this is a form of 'empowerment', which in the sense that it is purely individualistic rather than collective and thus politicised, is primarily limited in its reach, vulnerable to exploitation by market interests and impotent in terms of its influence on gender power relations, Sonnet makes a similar point:

I would suggest that those shifts centre on the re-positioning of commodified pornography to align with current notions of post-feminist women's 'personal empowerment' and of sexual pleasure as a form of capitalist consumer 'entitlement.

(1999, p2)

¹⁸ Interestingly You Porn, a hugely successful free porn sharing website, is recommended to women on *Violet Blue: an open source sex blog* (an American women centred blog focused on sexual matters), as being women friendly. This is presumably because it offers an enormous range of sexual scenarios from which one can choose and therefore there is the possibility, at least, that not only are some clips more women friendly than others but that women can find something that meets their particular needs. However, that is not to say that the site does not contain examples of phallogentric sex in which women are clearly being objectified.

¹⁹ See particularly Anna Span. Also Lars Von Trier's company Puzzy Power, an offshoot of his mainstream production company Zentropa, has produced a number of films with the express rationale of providing sexually stimulating entertainment that is female centric.

While my own thesis is not concerned primarily with issues around pornography and gender politics, it does have a clear interest in individual women's *access* to an expression of agentic sexuality. As Sonnet (1999) suggests, post feminism figures: 'a new female heterosexual identity [as] articulated around the active consumption of erotica' (1999:p170) and Sexy Kitten and Annabel's search for visual pornography, via a site they themselves construct as so at odds with the ways in which they constitute female desire, is at the heart of this issue :

Suffice it to say here that the terms upon which women can negotiate an autonomously defined sexuality in relationship to *conventional* representations of sexual fantasy have been profoundly conflicting. The question raised therefore is whether women can renegotiate the terms upon which western erotica has functioned – are women able to use erotica as part of a feminist project of exploring independent sexual subjectivity? Or must women's use of pornographic fantasy fiction always be compromised by the traditional power relations held to structure male-defined pornography?

(Sonnet: 1999, p167)

Here Sonnet is problematising the potential of female centric erotica, in this case women's erotic fiction, to facilitate an agentic sexual expression, her question '...can women renegotiate the terms upon which western erotica has functioned...' is apposite here. Sexy Kitten, Annabel, Veronica and Hoyle are enacting a narrative trope, one which is popularly held to act as a metaphor for gender and sexual power relations, they are entering Bluebeards locked room, clearly, like the unfortunate young wife, out of curiosity, as Sexy Kitten describes because she is: 'quite interested and intrigued to go along and see what they were like'. For Annabel and Sexy Kitten it is also an attempt to buy sexually stimulating material. However, for Hoyle in particular, the shopping experience *is* framed as a 'political' epiphany, one which prompts her to set up her own shop for which she is clear that there is a sex positive 'feminist' rationale. In opening the door and crossing the threshold, these women are clearly exercising an express imperative to 'renegotiate the terms' which stipulate that this room is firmly locked to them.

The 'Other Shops' Which Sell 'Huge Dildos': erotica, hardcore and pornography as situated terms

While there is a high level of consistency in terms of use of the word pornography in the accounts of participants, this is a term which seldom appears in testimony and is almost exclusively used by my participants in connection with 'traditional' male orientated shops and then usually in connection with visual material, although on one telling occasion Anna, a sexual health nurse in her early 20s, uses it to describe a particular brand of DVDs on sale in a *women's* shop:

And in terms of videos, I know they sell kind of pornography made by the only female porn director in England or something.

Anna

Anna is highlighting the lack of visually explicit material made by and aimed at, women and she clearly identifies the industry as overwhelmingly male. None of those sex shops that market themselves as specifically or primarily woman orientated are licensed to sell pornography if by pornography in this context we are referring to sexually explicit visual material in the form of R18 DVDs. Sh!, Coco de Mer, Nua and others do sell 'erotic' material such as books, magazines and soft core DVDs. Sh! for example sells a number of erotic films that are 18 certificate, including those made specifically for a female audience by Anna Span and Petra Joy.

Thus discussion here of the nuances suggested by the terms erotica, hardcore and pornography prioritises how consumers and shop owners name the female orientated sex shop, how research participants have themselves used the terms, how they might differentiate between a range of terms and in what circumstances and contexts these demarcations might be situated. In the specific context of tracking the intersections between the male and female orientated sex shop I tend to use the word pornography to refer to highly sexually explicit visual material which has an R18 certificate. However, since the interests of this research lie in how the gendering of store and commodities impact on women's potential to inhabit or to access the sexuality on offer, I broadly follow the lead of Jane Juffer whose primary concern in discriminating between the words pornography and erotica is framed within an examination of women's potential to *access* explicitly sexually stimulating material:

We must not dismiss the erotica/porn distinction – as many critics have – but rather analyze how it works to determine women's access to sexually explicit materials.

(1998, p4)

It is clearly imperative to consider in what ways the branding of goods for sale in these shops as 'erotica' shapes their potential use by women in a project of sexual identity production. For Juffer, pornography's distinguishing characteristic lies in its 'location' and the conditions of its locality - a location which tends to privilege its use by men:

furthermore, access to erotica or porn depends on conditions of women's lives that have nothing to do with erotica or porn – child care, housework, leisure time, knowledge about new technologies – all of which contribute to porn's continued male address and greater access; simply put, men generally have more time and mobility to access and consume porn than do women.

(1998, p6)

Wilson Kovac's (2009) study of the ways in which women use pornography is also apposite here in that it shares a methodological focus on women's actual experience of pornography and prioritises the meanings that the women interviewed ascribe to sexual materials as well as the significance of the site where pornography is encountered. She suggests that there is little coherence in the way women make use of the terms erotica and pornography, these terms are assigned in line with personal experience of sexual material encountered in different contexts and locations:

...a significant factor in articulating the difference between pornography and erotica was the circumstance in which materials were presented, purchased and consumed and more generally the routines and practices through which the participants became accustomed to them.

(2009, p150)

While the word pornography (or porn) is a term rarely mentioned in testimony in connection with the female orientated shops, it is, however, used repeatedly in reference to women's experience of heterosexual male orientated shops. Annabel a fifty year old health service trainer, for example, only uses the term pornography in connection with sex shops in European cities that cater to the 'men only market'

For my participants there is a 'taken for granted' differentiation between the pornography that they envisage or have experienced as being found in a male sex shop and the designed environment and ambience of, as well as the goods for sale in, the women's erotic shop. When Sexy Kitten, a librarian in her 40s, describes a trip with her boyfriend 'to look for some porn', he takes her to traditional sex shops in London's Soho and Sexy Kitten explains the way in which the shop signifies itself as a porn shop:

...I didn't know until recently – until my boyfriend – that sex shops in Soho always tend to have art books, art bookshops above them. And that is sort of – so I wouldn't necessarily have known before I met him that sometimes if you see an art bookshop in Soho that it automatically has a sex shop underneath it and so therefore I'm not sure if it needs to say "sex shop" for me to know that it's a sex shop.

Sexy Kitten

Sexy Kitten makes a clear contrast in terms of the rationale for her trip, between the story of going to Soho buy porn with her boyfriend and another trip with a female friend when they happen on a female orientated shop (She Said) in Brighton:

I kind of went along to titillate my fantasies really and also I managed to get my friend a good birthday present at the same time.

Sexy Kitten

It is clear that both Sexy Kitten's rationale for visiting and her conception and experience of what she considers to be a porn shop is vastly different from her experience of Ann Summers, She Said or other female orientated sex shops she has been to and she articulates these differences very clearly in describing the visual appearance, ambience of the shop and the quality of service she received in each: 'the hard core porn shop's much more, you know, no frills, I would use that word'.

'Hardcore' is a term used more extensively in testimony in discussing both masculine and feminine centric shops, it is used to describe shops or goods aimed at the male consumer but often also to describe some goods for sale, or conversely not for sale, in the women's shop as well as in terms of differentiating whereabouts in a shop particular types of product might be located:

Say Harmony for example, I mean that's on different levels but on the ground level it's quite um, I guess it's got the more timid products, the more fun side of, you know, toys...things for hens dos, clothes. The more hardcore things or the dominatrix things and the videos etc are on separate floors, so when you first walk in you're not bombarded by hard core porn on shelves or whips and chains and what have you.

Anna

Similarly, Emily locates 'hardcore' goods as part of a more masculine identified environment. Asked what sex shops she has visited, Emily also describes a trip to Harmony:

Yes, it's all just a little bit 'blokeish' isn't it? There's no attention to the relational stuff and there's lots of images in your face which are more hadrcore, quite fast, like DVD covers and it's darker.

Emily

Conversely, the interview with Anna refers to the woman friendly Sh! as selling:

...more sort of small feminine, put it in your purse, or streamlined modern, modern products...more subtle than the more sort of pornographic, huge dildos, rampant rabbit things that are in the other shops.

Anna

While, it is unclear which shops Anna is comparing it to here, it *is* clear that it is *other* than the explicitly female centric Sh! which sell 'huge' pornographic sexualised objects. Thus, for Anna the commodities on sale in Sh! are not 'hardcore' and she makes a very explicit link between the lack of 'hard core' goods and the female centric nature of the shop's ethos. Anna describes the goods for sale in Sh! as:

a little bit softer not quite as risqué as other shops, whether that's because they feel that women may not want that extra risqué element, I don't know.

Anna

Anna uses the word pornographic to describe male focussed visual imagery that is *not* to be found in Sh! Later in interview Anna is discussing which shops most meet her needs and she makes a similar connection:

I guess it depends on how hard core you want to go and if you wanted sort of everything from one extreme to another, I guess you should go to a store that has everything – that's not necessarily all female orientated. If I was to go back to a store out of the three it would be Harmony.

Anna

Anna prefers Harmony because it has 'everything from one extreme to another', she does not link this to it being a licensed shop (at the time Anna was unaware that the shop was licensed or of the significance of this) but to the fact that it is not 'female orientated'. Louise, a 33 year old freelance translator, makes the same point but from a different perspective: 'I can imagine if it was harder core no, I'd probably turn my nose up at it' this is because she sees herself as 'rather on the soft end, the vanilla end of all that kind of thing'. Furthermore, later on she refers to the packaging at Sh!: 'it was quite tongue in cheek, cartoony packaging, so it wasn't hard core at all. It was fun.' Again the term is used in a situated context to refer not only to 'the circumstance' but to the place and style 'in which materials were presented, purchased and consumed' (Kovacs *ibid*). It is clear that the use of this particular word shows a level of shared understanding between consumers, even between participants of different ages or between consumers who consider themselves 'vanilla' in their sexual tastes, as Louise does, or those who identify as more extreme such as Veronica. Moreover there is also some coherence in how 'hardcore' is used spatially, often to describe spaces within the shop that are conceived as selling more highly sexualised items. Louise uses the term 'hardcore' to describe the goods for sale downstairs in a shop, this is a theme we will return to in chapter 6:

The products that they've got downstairs are a bit more hardcore I think yeah, yeah. And of course it's not natural light and it felt a little bit more hard core yes.

Louise

Erotica branding

The terms erotic and sex are used fairly interchangeably by consumers, while erotic does appear more strongly in marketing material for the shops and on their websites, it is used very seldom in testimony and then only in reference to 'erotic stories' (Louise). However, we will see that the women's sex shop tends to characterise *itself* initially as an erotic shop (certainly when looking for women's sex shop sites on the net, search engines for example 'Google' throw up the description erotic shop) indeed Sh! names itself a 'women's erotic emporium' although the website does go onto declare it 'the UK's first women's sex shop' [my italics]. Coco de Mer in the 'philosophy' section of its website says: 'We, at Coco

de Mer, are unashamedly about sex' and She Said describes itself as an 'Erotic Boutique' Therefore, while the banner used for many of these shops utilises the word 'erotic', elsewhere their descriptions of themselves on the web use the terms 'sex' and 'erotic' fairly interchangeably. Overall, the shops Sh!, She Said, Nua, Coco de Mer and so on, pride themselves on being spaces that are accessible to women, clearly by naming themselves and the goods they sell as erotic they are positioning themselves in terms of difference to the male orientated 'porn shop' a uniquely masculine space that excludes women on a number of fronts. The porn shop is a site in which many of the women I have interviewed report feeling 'uncomfortable' or 'intimidated' while alternatively the term erotica confers a legitimacy on the woman orientated sex shop which has been co-opted by sexual consumption in the form of the discourse of sexual 'empowerment', Juffer confers that erotica is sexual representation which is both: 'legally and aesthetically legitimated' (1998 p7). Emily, a 37 year old psychotherapist describes a visit to Coco de Mer:

...they have luxurious wall paper don't they, which is very beautiful and their knickers are very beautiful and the vibrators are very beautiful. You know it's the same stuff but it's very beautifully designed and it's posh. And posh means that you can walk into anywhere.

Emily

Emily's description of Coco de Mer clearly invokes an aestheticisation of both the shop interior and the commodity: 'Women's choices are also circumscribed by a judgement of taste: pornography is regarded by [Kovac's] participants as a less tasteful medium...' (Wilson Kovac 2009 p161). This discourse is echoed repeatedly in media representation of the shops which (particularly in the case of media coverage of Coco de Mer) describes the shop and its goods primarily in terms of luxury and aesthetics as Andrew Smith does here, writing for The Observer in 2001:

There are the lilac mink lined crotchless panties – which get better the more you think about them, I find – and elegant lingerie and silk garments with flowery patterns that turn out not to be flowers at all and are unexpectedly, almost movingly beautiful. There are wonderfully louche dressing gowns and green fox tails and ...strange wooden implements with tags explaining their provenance and suggested use, and a case full of stunning glass dildos, like mini oil lamps...

(Smith, A 2001)

Erotica is also sexual representation which is able to circumvent the problems deeply embedded in the term pornography, in a sense it professes to be sexual representation without the need to reconcile decades of debate around pornography and female objectification. Certainly for both Nic Ramsey, (owner of She Said), Roddick and Hoyle's shops as well as those other shops which profess to have a 'similar' rationale, participation in the on-going discourse around women's alienation from the means to access pornography might be viewed as an expedient strategy, allowing them to locate themselves in the market as 'ground breakers' in terms of facilitating access to erotica for women. However, while there has been much popular critique centred around the commodification of the notion of female sexual empowerment (see Ariel Levy 2005, Natasha Walters 2010, Imelda Welehan 2000). Juffer stresses that in order for pornography to be 'domesticated' in other words re-situated or re-examined in the context of women's experience, it *must* go through a process of commodification:

because domestication is a matter not just of textual content but also of publication and circulation...Indeed, commodification is a necessary component of domestication; the process of domesticating a volume of erotica, a vibrator, a garter belt or an adult video depends on the item's availability as a commodity.

(1998, p25)

For the woman who has the required cultural capital to engage with the commodified popular appeal of 'sexual self-empowerment' discourse, the 'erotica brand' authenticated and validated by a designer label, price tag or a Pucci style pattern and colour way, is a licence to consume. Moreover Wilson Kovac citing Juffer suggests that written erotica is both more available and more culturally acceptable than pornography in that it is published by mainstream publishers as a female friendly alternative to porn and easily available in high street book shops. The domesticating potential of erotica branding is clearly illustrated by one of Wilson Kovac's research participants, Tanya, who tells the story of picking up a book in the women's section of Waterstones and becoming sexually stimulated by the erotic material she was reading: 'I was so turned on. In the middle of the book shop' (2009, p161) here the site is the significant partner in the process of stimulation, Tanya's stirring encounter with sexual representation is situated in the banal environment of a major bookshop chain. In Juffer's terms the sexual

commodity has been domesticated because it is freely available and incorporated into Tanya's everyday existence, as Kovac goes on to propose: 'The sexual self is formulated through the circulation and management of available resources.' (2009, p161).

Hoyle, in telling the story of how she first sourced suppliers for her new women centred venture is clearly framing porn in terms of difference to what is offered by her own shop in the sense that not only is porn masculinist, organized by and for men, but geographically situated:

some of those sex shops, well most of them, are run by the big boys of the sex industry who are also trolling out porn out of east end warehouses.

Hoyle

Conversely, Sh! is described by Veronica a 47 year old who describes herself as an 'unwilling teacher', as being in a:

little place so it's like, it was a bit of a trek to get there, difficult to find, but once we'd located it once it was fine.

Veronica

While Veronica does not identify Sh! as selling erotica, she is clear that it is a shop 'for women', in which she expects to feel:

quite comfortable with, you know, talking to people about it [her sexuality] what kind of products there were and you know their range and different things like that, I felt I would be more comfortable doing it.

Veronica

Veronica seems to link the prettiness of the area and the 'hidden' situation of the shop to her feeling 'comfortable' in discussing her needs in terms of sexual commodities. Annabel, however, is one of several participants who discuss Sh! in terms of its geographical location somewhat off the beaten track and as somewhere that requires a special trip for a particular purpose, unlike Ann Summers which she suggests:

is on every high street where anybody can just pop in after they've been to Boots or after they've been in Primark or after they've been in Marks and Spencer's, Sh! you have to go to you have to know about it and that must affect who goes there, it must do.

Annabel

For Annabel then, 'comfortableness' is provided on another front. While she has visited sex shops on trips abroad with her partner, sex 'is primarily and desirably, an activity which is fitted easily into her daily routine, for this reason she tends to do her sex shopping in Tickled which is located in a busy shopping area of Brighton populated by modish independent shops and boutiques:

I might well pop into Tickled because I might be in Brighton and wandering about in the North Lanes and I'm passing and I'll pop in to see what they've got just out of interest.

Just to have a look round...

Yeah, just to have a look round, see if they've got anything new that I haven't come across before just kind of as you might go into any other shop that you, you know just to see what's new things – I might not buy.

Annabel

Clearly testimony reveals differentiation between pornography and erotica to be a situated as well as significantly a gendered practice. That is, the social contexts and social spaces in which sexual material is circulated and consumed are significant in defining how it is perceived as either pornography or erotica (or hardcore or 'naughty') - and vice versa in a circular process of classification and meaning making.

The Beansprout Café: sexual consumption and women's everyday lives

Juffer writing in 1998 acknowledges the significance to the porn industry of the internet, yet in 2013 given the enormous growth in internet use, arguably fuelled at least in part by the consumption of pornography, her comments around women's lack of potential to access pornography and/or erotica initially seem a little outdated if not simplistic. Moreover, many feminists have pointed to the internet as affording new opportunities for women which allow them to experiment with their sexuality in new ways. Cyber sex has allowed women to play with persona, gender and a plurality of sexual performance in the safety of their homes, as well as providing: 'opportunities for women and for minorities to make contact, and to produce and distribute their own representations' (Ciclitira 2004, p284). However, while pornographic material, including some that promotes itself as 'woman friendly', is undoubtedly freely and readily available via technology, the Sh! website contains a lengthy diatribe bemoaning the fact that the shop is not

permitted to showcase women friendly R18 films in a section of the shop without the cost and various repercussions for their clientele, of obtaining a licence:

Incredibly conservative, the porn industry knows that traditionally men have the money, permission and places to buy porn so it sticks with its "winning formula" and for the most part shoots with (a certain breed of!) men only in mind...With over 16 years' experience of talking to women about female desire, pleasure and fantasies, the Sh! Girlz know that whilst women do want porn, they want GOOD porn and the very least this means is seeing proper pleasure in the faces and bodies of porn stars.

(Sh! Website accessed 29th June 2011)

Thus Sh! too is structuring discussion of women and pornography around the issue of *access*, men have: 'money, permission and places' to meet their needs. Sh! is participating in a discourse which claims the majority of heterosexual pornography is framed within a sexual paradigm that privileges the masculine and that the dominant discourse of pornography subordinates women's pleasure to male desire, a tendency as Kaja Silverman describes in her analysis of the 'Histoire d'O to portray: 'a discourse that dramatizes with unusual clarity the disjunction between the speaking (male) subject and the spoken (female) subject' (1989 p327). Furthermore the female orientated sex shop makes use of the notion (and must do so in order to claim their position in the market) that women may find it difficult, not only to find suitable sexual material to meet their needs but to give themselves permission to pursue sexual pleasure without shame or embarrassment:

the "Sh! Girlz" dream was to create an inviting place with clued-up, sensitive staff, where women could shop for good quality, erotic playthings without feeling awkward, unwelcome or embarrassed...As the UK's first and only store exclusively dedicated to women's sexual pleasure, we're helping to create a world where women can express and enjoy their sexuality to the max.

(Sh! website accessed 12.8.11)

Hoyle's testimony is clear that she sees access to pornography (as opposed to soft core erotica which can be sold without a license) as having been and still being, denied to women. Having explained that not long after the establishment of Sh! in 1992, the shop owners were engaged in a legal battle with Hackney Council

who demanded that they obtain a sex shop license, she would now like to facilitate women sampling pornography before they buy:

...it makes me so angry because you're just like... You're two men in my effing shop telling me that I can't let women see a snippet of these things before they buy it...and you're two men in my shop denying women...Just absolutely bloody annoyed me, because why they can't just look at an individual circumstances and think "no, it's not a sex cinema, these women are not all going to be sitting there wanking off" [laughter].

Hoyle

For Hoyle then the issues are twofold. She wants her shop to provide women with access to sexualised goods, including visual pornography, which meets the needs of women; firstly because the goods on offer there are 'woman focussed':

it's vitally important that for porn to appeal to women's heads, mostly those women have to be enjoying it and then we can...

Hoyle

Secondly, while Hoyle's position is clearly that much of the pornography currently available is not 'women focussed' - and so then presumably '*we can't*' - her testimony reveals an additional concern around women's *access* to the consumption of such pornographic material as may potentially meet the needs of women. Hoyle maintains that the site where this material is encountered must therefore be one that is 'comfortable' for women to inhabit. Emily a 37 year old psychotherapist, when asked about the design and layout of Sh! describes it as:

...nice and homely and grounded and earthy.

What makes it seem grounded and earthy?

Just because I think it's really ordinary, you know.

Emily

This focus sits well within Juffer's key theoretical enquiry around the ways in which pornography might sit within women's domestic lives and responsibilities. For Hoyle, as she states in interview and echoes on her website, one of the chief concerns around getting a license, alongside the cost of it, is that it would mean that women cannot come into the shop with their babies:

...the whole sort of porn thing's changed and there's a lot more sort of woman friendly porn and we would actually like to be licensed now but no, you know, the local council they just refuse to do anything to actually look at

any sort of individual circumstance. Because we refuse to be licensed as a total shop.

Right, you want a section licensed?

We want a section licensed, because as a total shop we would have to have no entry to anybody under 18 and that means women with their kids or babies in pushchairs, who are often in.

Hoyle

This statement is substantially echoed on the Sh! website which includes an item explaining to its clientele why the shop will not consent to obtain a license enabling it to stock R18 DVDs. The website makes clear that they would be required to have a warning sign outside the shop and that while they may be willing to comply with this particular legislative stipulation - superficially at least :

What we can't do is comply with the second rule of never allowing anyone under 18 into Sh!. Of course we don't allow kids to wander into Sh!. But this rule also means women wouldn't be able to bring their babies in. Apparently mothers are not entitled to sex-lives? Nor are they able to judge that Sh! (in all its pretty pink and totally - non-graphic glory) is a suitable atmosphere for their tots? We had some great impromptu mother's meeting's at Sh! and are not willing to ban women with babes-in-arms from entering the Sh! store.
(Sh! Website accessed 15th July 2011)

Thus the women orientated sex shop aims to provide women with validation, permission and a forum in which to consume material to which women have traditionally been thought to have little or limited access. Making its appeal to the female consumer by providing a designed environment, which by its utilization of myriad visual codes; prioritises on the one hand a principally domestic context where the consumer is encouraged to sample the goods (Sh!) or conversely a luxurious one foregrounding the trappings of a designer lifestyle (Coco de Mer):

Didn't they [Sh!] have little cards attached to them like? That made it more easy to pick them up I think, because they all had a little thing attached to them saying what they did or what their power output or noise level (fig 4.4). Oh yeah, yeah it had a whole rating thing which kind of made you interested in what they were saying even if you weren't interested in buying one kind of thing. Yeah you know like the questionnaires in magazines and stuff. So that was quite interesting, that made it more approachable I think.

Georgina

Both shops participate in a discourse which emphasizes the ways in which sexual consumption is a practice which fits comfortably into the experience of women's lives and is materialized in the presentation of goods and design of interiors which prioritise either 'everydayness' or conversely a notion of 'specialness' and 'escape' from everyday domestic responsibility (fig 4.5). Initially in response to reading Juffer's text I was sceptical that the women's sex shop evidenced any attempt to reconcile its products within 'everyday routines'. It was not until I analysed the interview transcripts in depth that I realised that several women testify to being engaged in exactly this – a project of reconciling the potentially alienating 'discomfort' of sexual consumption with the far more ordinary practices of their everyday life:

Do you remember that after all the little lubricants and things there were a few vibrators and things you could look at and we took so much time looking at them and you know examining them and then turned round and then low and behold there's so many more on the table and automatically you gravitate towards the table to know see how they work properly and what I find interesting about that as well is that you do feel encouraged to fiddle and see how they work and read about them and talk about them because [inaud: they all saw the people doing it] and I don't know if it's because you know that it's a shop for women but there's something about, it's like being in a women's gym bathroom.

Georgina

Another participant, Louise, also describes her shopping trip to Sh! in terms both of 'treating herself' and escape from the demands of everyday life. While this statement primarily fits into a highly significant discourse around the meaning of the women's sex shop as therapeutic 'journey of self-discovery' –which will be discussed in chapter 5, it also reveals another way in which participants incorporate sexual consumption in their lives, that is as 'time out' a space carved out from domestic or everyday responsibilities. Louise ruminates about how sexual consumption fits into her life:

Well in a way it did feel a bit like going into Lush because Lush is where I go to get my – to get treats; the bath bombs and things, I have them as a special treat. So it's treating myself erm and I suppose it was part of, as I said before, exploring myself and that's how it fitted in with me being a

complete person and finding out about myself. Mmmn, which kind of goes in with my working life, you know, in my work I try to reach high standards and I try to learn how to do new things and I'm constantly looking at ways I can do things better or I can be happier with what I've done and find more interesting things to do and it was part of that too. Urm yes.

Louise

Louise utilises a metaphor around the bathroom, for her sex shopping is a little like buying luxurious bath products a form of consumption which like the chocolate shopping referred to by Heidi is stereotyped as overwhelmingly feminine:

So you said it was like any other shopping, how does it compare with other types of shopping...?

Yeah, apart from chocolate. Yes, there's no difference really.

Heidi.

Georgina and Melanie situate their visit to Sh! within other familiar discourses of feminine consumption, here for example; the spa and the exercise class:

M: The other thing I thought really interesting was, they had the little board outside remember? And it had all the little...

G: Classes...

M: Classes.

G: I know! [Voice rising in disbelief]

M: Like bondage and stuff like that and it could have been like going to a health spa and they were advertising all the little sessions they had or a gym and things this and that massage. So that again changed the atmosphere for me because already it makes it seem like it's a very normal place to go that also feeds into your life through these activities and it's something that you're supposed to take home and be very open about and feel like you're part of another community that involves itself in whatever these little classes are and that sort of thing and I was a bit taken aback by that - I had a bit of a giggle "come and learn how to do bondage properly".

Melanie and Georgia

In the excerpt above Melanie is explicit that the advertising board signals, for her, a re-assuring openness and familiarity that enables her to assimilate sexual consumption into the practices of everyday life. This normalising of sexual consumption by locating it within sites already associated with the everyday, clearly sits well within Juffer's notion of women's domestication of pornography:

women's domestication of pornography has historically involved the taming of a traditionally male genre – including erotica, with its foundation in canonical male writings – and rewriting/reworking it within everyday routines.

(1998 p5)

My shrewd participants are quick to recognize the little tropes employed by the women's sex shop in order to characterise it as at once inviting and inclusive. In foregrounding the ways in which the women's sex shop borrows from familiar and therefore '*comfortable*', discourses of feminine consumption, participants are themselves utilizing a discursive model which is persistent in both their own narratives and the designed narratives through which the shops carve out a singular identity. While Hoyle maintains that the 'look' of Sh! has developed more or less haphazardly, she describes the way in which she feels Ann Summers has changed since the inception of Sh!, connecting the shop's recent aesthetic transformation, including wooden floorboards, to a shift in attitude towards the potential women consumer:

Ann Summers has totally changed since we opened, totally, totally. And we know that they've been in, which is great, we know that they've been on rekkies and that they've almost designed their shop [around us] they've become very much more organic in there, you know the stuff that they sell, just things like the wooden floors and the shelves, they've absolutely changed totally towards women.

Hoyle

Emily another of my research participants, has a strong personal interest in identifying those factors that allow women to consume sexual products as a form of sexual identity production, particularly given both the nature of her profession as a psychotherapist and the fact that she once considered setting up a sex shop of her own. While Emily is clear that the male orientated sex shop is an arena which it is difficult for women to negotiate because:

there's a difference between sex shops for men which are kind of much more straight away explicit, hard core pornographic images usually aren't they?

Emily

She maintains that, by contrast Sh! is 'palatable' (Emily's term) to women because it is the: 'bean sprout café of sex shops' a phrase which she repeats later in

interview adding: 'what I like about it is that it's nice and homely and grounded and earthy'. Generally the accounts of my participants suggest that Sh! is highly successful in creating a retail environment in which women feel able to peruse sexualised objects in 'comfort' and that embedded in this notion of 'comfort' is, in the case of Sh! in particular, a sense of the familiar and the everyday. Hoyle's testimony repeatedly constructs a link between shopping in Sh! and shopping in the domestic environment of the supermarket:

in terms of how the shop looks, it is totally designed so people feel comfortable. And that they can just sort of wander around and pick everything up. I mean it's sort of designed around women's...women are very practical shoppers you know, you know we go to Tesco's and we squeeze stuff, you know what I mean? And it's the same, the same sort of thing, erm in that we want, we want to have testers, we want to have tasting things, we don't want to be sold something out of a brown paper bag, there's no way you can do that for women...

Hoyle

It is pertinent from the perspective of Juffer's (1998) theory around the necessity of integrating study of pornography into the domestic context that the success of this particular shop is characterized by two participants via the use of metaphors around food consumption, specifically the supermarket. Thus representation of sexualised consumption is foregrounded as an area of everyday household and leisure consumption. This notion of integration between women's sexual lives and their domestic lives as mothers was echoed by another interviewee, Heidi a 43 year old who describes herself as a movement therapist and Alexander Technique teacher:

...so my dream of a shop is a sensual shop where you could take kids in and they wouldn't even notice. You see here it's also very separate you know "this is a sex shop, mustn't have children in a sex shop" why not? Sex is a part of life...

Heidi

While Heidi is talking primarily here about her conception of an 'ideal' sex shop which would be 'an overall sensual experience' a shop which is clearly differentiated on a range of fronts from the male porn shop, it is significant here that even *this* dream of a shop which makes its appeal through luxurious colours, tastes, smells and so on is also one: 'where you could take the kids in'. Thus as

an idealised shop it is one that would clearly allow the female consumer to integrate pursuance of their sexual and sensual selves alongside their daily domestic routines and childcare responsibilities.

Conclusion

Thus testimony reveals that for some of my participants it is desirable that the everyday or domestic should be integrated into their experience of consuming sexuality in order for consumption to be seen as part of an agentic and autonomous expression of sexual identity. While this discussion has moved away from pornography towards sexual consumption as a whole, it is clear from testimony that the women I have interviewed make a distinction between pornography, which is largely identified as located within a masculine realm, clearly on one level because it *is* - the women orientated sex shops are not licensed - and the material and goods they may be seeking or have encountered in the female oriented sex shop. Furthermore, the facilitation of this integration between everyday life and an autonomous sexuality is framed as a key factor here in determining women's access (via the women's sex shop) to the potential pleasures of commodified sexuality:

Women's domestication of pornography has historically involved the taming of a traditionally male genre-including erotica, with its foundation in canonical male writings-and rewriting/reworking it within everyday routines. The goal may be, however, not to render pornography invisible within daily routines but rather to carve out spaces for its consumption and for fantasy within these daily routines.

(Juffer 1998 p5)

What is more, women's experience of pornography *is* clearly filtered through, not simply a process of re-making or the appropriating of masculine tropes, but through resisting, re-situating, re-framing, re-naming, and as we are beginning to see the *re-designing* of pornography. Thus new contexts are created that are integrated in some form or other – as trip to the supermarket, as visit to a whole food café, as well deserved luxury, special grooming treat or as journey of self-discovery - into women's everyday existence. Furthermore, this conception of resistance to a hegemonic masculine regime is materialised by and embedded in, representation, in design, in customer service and so on, and is replicated in the consumer's understanding of the meanings of their consumption in terms of sexual

identity production. Having unpacked participants ideation of the sex shop – the frameworks via which it is imagined and the contexts through which it is understood – the following chapter begins to uncover the various paradigms through which the shopping trip itself is accounted for.



Fig 4.1 Traditional men's sex shop (2009)

Frontage of 'traditional' men's sex shop in Soho, London, displaying the grimy blacked out windows with their stuttering neon signs.



Fig 4.2 'Private' shop (2009)

Frontage of one of the 'Private' chain of sex shops in London's Soho with the familiar blacked out windows.



Fig 4.3 Back entrance to a branch of She Said in Brighton (2013)

The potentially dingy back doorway is feminised and glamorised by the trompe l'oeil curtains and foliage as well as the fake roses in pots.



Fig 4.4 Display table in of vibrators Sh! (2009)

Didn't they [Sh!] have little cards attached to them like? That made it more easy to pick them up...

Georgina.



Fig 4.5 Display in Sh! (2009)

Display case in Sh! showing the explanation of products. Note the juxtaposition of anal beads and butt plugs next to vintage style cushions, a juxtaposition which serves to normalise a sexually 'challenging' object and place it within a context of 'everyday' feminine consumption.

Chapter 5

A good morning out: Going sex shopping with the girls

Introduction

I heard about it because my friend was talking about it and she suggested and said 'why don't we go and have a look at this place?' and I thought 'ooh yes, that'd be...[laughs]. That would be a good morning out!

Veronica

The previous chapter established that participants consistently framed their expectations of the female sex shop in terms of opposition and resistance to the male sex shop, a style of shop many of my participants imagine as 'sleazy'. Throughout my text I refer to this as a *traditional* shop in acknowledgement of the paradigmatic role it plays for consumers and shop owners alike. Questions around expectations of the female orientated shop often elicited responses such as this from Melanie and Georgia:

G: I knew it was for women, because that's what Melanie told me. I suppose I expected it to be more approachable, more kind of open. Erm and I suppose I did expect it to be pink, which it was, quite. And that's all that I really thought about it to be honest.

M: I wasn't...I thought it might be, still a bit weird, bit kinkified, but only women allowed in. You know there's this mentality you have about sex shops, it's just another world and if you're a woman and go in it's a bit threatening but you know this would still be another world but women are allowed in. So it's...and also I wasn't quite sure what to expect. I thought it would be in some little basement somewhere.

Melanie and Georgia

Melanie and Georgia neatly introduce the key themes of this chapter, for them the nature and meaning of the shop may be read off the way it *appears*. They have a clear expectation around the way a women's sex shop will relate physically to the street, where it will be located, its colour and so on. This is an expectation that is framed by their experience or imagining of, the traditional sex shop, and what's more, their expectation of it is articulated in primarily visual terms. However, this chapter seeks to locate the female orientated sex shop as it is accounted for, not

only in terms of difference to, but also re-appropriation of, this reading. Overall, analysis has revealed tensions between the shop's promise of personal and sexual empowerment for the consumer and participant experience of consuming a version of gender identified sexuality - both read from and ascribing, designed objects and spaces. How do consumers negotiate contradictions between the sexual narrative proposed by the shops themselves - articulated both through representation, interior and exterior design, the narrative proposed by the designed goods for sale and women's own understanding and accounts of feminine sexuality?:

...the way consumer objects acquire their cultural meaning is within local settings, where participants confer objects a social life through offering active, creative accounts, or narratives. It is stories and narratives that hold an object together, giving it cultural meaning.

(Woodward, 2007 p152)

This chapter then focuses primarily on narrative, on the 'stories' told by participants around their shopping trips, asking the questions how do the women account for the activity of sex shopping and are there ways or frameworks for telling this story that are shared by participants? The succeeding chapter extends this approach through examination of the narrative embedded in objects and spaces. Utilising a material culture perspective Chapter 6 looks at the social meanings of things, meanings inculcated via design but read, transformed and appropriated by my participants.

In line with the order that themes have tended to emerge from the interview process (a sequence which often got side-tracked, forgotten or completely disintegrated!), '*A Good Morning Out: Going Sex Shopping*' focusses on the ways in which participants account for the *act* of shopping, as well as investigating the various ways in which shopping for sex fits into a model of female consumption as social and leisure activity. The chapter divides into three sections. Firstly it explores how women identify the women's sex shop and their initial descriptions of going shopping. This begins a probematisation of the framing of sexual consumption via the polarised notions of hiddenness and visibility, public and private, in the light of current debates on the sexualisation of culture. The second section; *Solitary Shopping or Shopping with the Girls* investigates the ways in which participants account for sex shopping as a social activity interrogating Merl

Storr's investigation of the Ann Summers party as an arena in which a notion of femininity is homosocially established. This section endeavours to establish whether and how the 'sex shopping trip' may be used to construct a version of female sexuality arrived at through a process of social consensus. The final section; *The Ideal(ised) Sex Shop* seeks to examine in more detail two significant and linked discursive modes which have emerged strongly and consistently from women's accounts of sex shopping. To assist identification of these narrative themes during analysis of interview material, I named these 'personal journey' and utilising a term derived from testimony, 'evangelist narrative'.

'A good morning out': going sex shopping

Partially in order to establish which shops were under discussion, how the women might interpret my question and partly as a warm up, I asked participants by what means they knew of the existence of female orientated (or centric) sex shops and which shops they had visited.²⁰ One participant, Veronica, sought to define my question thus:

Yes, I think by female centric sex shops you mean ones that are specifically for women or where they perhaps don't want to have men in there unaccompanied, that kind of thing, is that right is that what you...[mean]?

Veronica

Clearly, Veronica had 'hit the nail on the head', that was what I meant and overall, I was somewhat surprised by the uniformity of responses to this deliberately rather ambiguous question. The women generally listed independent shops not located on the high street, predominantly Sh! Coco de Mer, She Said, others in Brighton and some abroad. Of course, this consensus around which shops might be termed 'women centric sex shops' and why, can largely be accounted for by preliminary discussions with participants about the focus of the interview as well as by the ways that participants were sourced. However, I will propose that to varying degrees, the shops described by participants as fitting this description are predominantly those which present themselves as explicitly woman friendly in both their publicity material and in the media coverage that has been generated around

²⁰ This has been discussed more fully in my methodology section, which describes the way that shops were selected for inclusion in the study. However, I think the point is worth making again here, that there was a remarkable consensus in interview material around which shops were seen to fit the criteria of female orientated sex shop. Criteria I did not stipulate in any explicit way to my participants at the start of this process in order to allow a definition of the woman centric sex shop to emerge primarily from interview.

them, as well, of course, in terms of their design and through the products they sell. It is significant here that although several women discussed Ann Summers, later in the interview and from other perspectives, only two participants, Sexy Kitten and Annabel, mentioned Ann Summers in the context of this particular question:

Which woman centric shops have you visited?

I've been in a couple of Ann Summers, do they count?

Annabel

Later in the interview, perhaps Annabel answers her own question:

...I don't know who goes to Ann Summers; I mean personally I almost never go into Ann Summers. Ann Summers seems to be like almost a different category of place, I don't know why.

Annabel

All the remaining consumers I talked to also made clear distinctions between how they understand Ann Summers and their experience of Sh!, Coco de Mer, She Said and so on. Kate and Marley, two students of 21, were interviewed together, Kate said that she had been to Coco de Mer and 'the Brighton one' but then both went on to discriminate clearly between 'woman friendly' sex shops and Ann Summers and Harmony²¹:

And we've been to all the general, well I've been to the ...I've been into the high streety ones...Like Ann Summers and the ones on Tottenham Court Road²².

Marley

Kate and Marley distinguish between these and independent shops such as Coco de Mer and She Said in terms of whether or not they are 'high streety', which seems to entail a range of factors including location, whether they are part of a large chain of stores and whether they sell a preponderance of novelty products (see fig 5.1):

You walk into Ann Summers and you know that there's a million of them and they're the same everywhere...it's a bit kind of like immature, giggly, I mean I know, I think that pink plastic and funny toys...

Kate

The next chapter will take up this theme and focus on a more detailed analysis of the meanings made by participants around the versions of mediated female

²¹ Harmony is a chain of adult shops with seven stores in the UK.

²² Marley is referring to Harmony here, which has a large branch on Tottenham Court Road.

sexuality embedded in women's accounts of designed products and spaces, including how participants differentiate between those on offer in both 'high street' shops and women centric shops. Here, I seek to establish how participants themselves categorize the women's sex shop and it is in this context that intersections between notions of location and visibility begin to reveal themselves as key factors. Attwood suggests that traditionally:

...commercial sex has been consigned to the sleazy backstreets of culture and sex for its own sake has been presented as meaningless, objectifying and alienating. But today the places, products and performances associated with sex for its own sake are becoming more visible...

(2009, pxiv)

Attwood is suggesting that a sexualised culture is moving sexual practices into the mainstream and certainly, although she is speaking figuratively, the traditional sex shop has tended to be located literally in the: 'sleazy backstreet'. However, Attwood glosses over any distinguishing factor in terms of the location of Ann Summers versus the 'elegant expensive boutique', they are uniformly 'more visible':

...Porn shops have been joined by the cheap and cheerful sexual paraphernalia of the Ann Summers empire and by elegant and expensive boutiques selling lingerie, toys and erotica.

(2009, pxv)

Of course Attwood is right, they are more visible both in material terms and in the media as part of a ubiquitous debate in both academic and the popular press around the pervasiveness of an overly sexualised culture. However, it is worth noting that some of what Attwood might potentially be describing as 'elegant and expensive boutiques' are described by participants in rather different terms.

Veronica describes her first trip to Sh!:

And a very, very pretty location it is as well, it's really quite discrete and a really pretty little place so it's like, it was a bit of a trek to get there, difficult to find, but once we'd located it once it was fine.

Veronica

In contrast to Attwood's emphasis on the visibility of sexual consumption, Veronica stresses that Sh! is 'discrete' and 'difficult to find'. Annabel also describes Sh! in this way:

Sh! is really out of my way. To go there I've got to make a special effort or really care about going to it. So it's partly about accessibility and convenience for me...

The slightly obscure location, off the beaten track, of some of these shops surely adds to the sense of exclusivity, offering the consumer a sense of esotericism and 'in the knowness' which is of course, for some shops, one effective way of positioning themselves as exclusive in a wider market. But this might also be read as a making over of a masculine trope; a subversion of the conventional notion of the sex shop on the 'sleazy back street'. In the case of Sh! the street may not be sleazy, it is, after all, in Hoxton an area with a reputation for being populated by the stylish and fashionable, nevertheless it *is* situated in a back street removed from any significant shopping area. Like the mackintoshed man who must know that the Soho book store has a sex shop secreted upstairs or downstairs, in order to make his covert purchases, the potential consumer of a gaily coloured, 'Pucciesque' strap on must have the required cultural capital to locate Sh! round the corner from White Cube or She Said down an shadowy alley in Brighton. This re-appropriation is concluded when, instead of an anonymous carrier bag, the purchaser exits the shop as Louise did, with: 'a big bag of stuff [laughter] wrapped in pink paper' or as Emily describes, having bought a present for a friend in Myla:

layers of packing, it had a little silk bag and then tissue paper and then a box and then the bag and then the ribbon on the bag.

Emily

Kathryn Hoyle, owner of Sh!, describes why Sh! was originally located (in 1992) in the backstreets of Hoxton:

It was absolutely bloody awful there was no shops [in Hoxton] we just happened to know...a guy...and we were like "we'll have that shop then" and we literally we spent, we got together seven hundred quid, which was fifty quid on the paint six hundred and fifty quid on stock, which was nothing and just opened really and that was it.

Hoyle

This might be interpreted as a slightly disingenuous account in that inevitably, Sh! has acquired a kind of cachet by association with the area in which the original shop is located, a point also made regarding Sh! by Kent in his survey of erotic retailing post 1963:

It is situated in a back street in Hoxton, in the east end of London, an area reminiscent of early shabby sex shop locations, but one that is rapidly being gentrified by speculative developers.

(Kent 2006, p203)

While maintaining its gritty, urban credentials Hoxton was already known as the centre for an alternative arts and clubbing scene by the early '90s, although White Cube was not established in Hoxton Square until 2000. Massey proposes that the identity of a place is:

...always formed by the juxtaposition and co-presence there of particular sets of social interrelations and by the effects which that juxtaposition and co-presence produce... the identities of places are inevitably unfixed. They are unfixed in part precisely because the social relations out of which they are constructed are themselves by their very nature dynamic and changing.
(1994 p168)

Thus the presence of Sh! in Hoxton may be said to have contributed to a dynamic shift in Hoxton's identity over the last two decades, certainly the shop received substantial press coverage focussing, in part, on its location. It is irrefutable that Sh! and Hoxton historically forged a symbiotic relationship which is co-productive in terms of identity formation for both shop and location:

Back then Hoxton was all boarded up buildings. We used to get these women in from Kensington wearing their Manolo Blahnik shoes traipsing up and down these uneven pavements trying to find us. It felt like a crack den. Luckily Hoxton has grown up around us. We fit in now.
(Hoyle quoted in The Hackney Post, 13th March, 2012)

Clearly, while in material terms Sh! lacks the visibility of a high street location, the shop has accrued a certain level of capital from its refiguring of the 'sleazy back street' as chic and avant-garde. She Said in Brighton exploits a similar set of codes, its location down a narrow alley is almost ironic in its self-conscious utilisation of the masculine stereotype for sex shop (see fig 5.2):

I think one of the reasons people like She Said is because the whole shop's quite hidden and it has a kind of - and that maybe gives it an illicit extra that people quite like. But also if people just don't, you know, don't want to visit a sex shop where they might bump into people they know, then that's quite nice.

Rachel, Shop Manager, She Said

Rachel makes this signification very explicit; the shop makes use of the familiar codes for sex shop. Shopping is 'illicit' and this is part of the thrill but the shop is also 'hidden' allowing consumers to shop privately – a significant theme pervading our understanding of sex shopping both traditional and, as we begin to see here, in its appropriated and feminised form. Thus Attwood's assertion that the places 'associated with sex ...are becoming more visible' (2009, pxiv) necessitates a more nuanced response to what appears to be axiomatic. For in material actuality, and here we have been introducing a key theme via a discussion of location specifically, the women's sex shop utilises notions around *in*visibility in order to upend a familiar trope of sexual consumption practice. It is their position outside the mainstream that has contributed to the appeal of shops such as Coco de Mer, Sh! and She Said. This is clearly a self-conscious and successful strategy for positioning themselves in the market as both exclusive and esoteric (rather than 'high street') but is also a strategy that draws on or inverts, a well-worn cliché around masculine sexual consumption in order to make over these shops - to create a newly feminised paradigm from the old.

Most participants, including Veronica and Louise, described having some knowledge about a women centric sex shop prior to their first visit, either because they had read of it or because a particular shop had been recommended by a friend. Louise for example 'just popped in' to the sex shop (Sh!) when she was 'passing' but had heard about it previously and was intrigued:

Can you tell me something about what prompted you to go to a female orientated sex shop?

Erm I'd seen it – that particular one – advertised in magazines before. I'd seen it in the listings when products are mentioned in magazines and I thought 'ooh that sounds interesting' and then I was just passing and I thought 'ooh yes, I recognise that shop' so I popped in.

Louise

Louise mentions having read about Sh! and that this is why she recognised it when passing. Both Sh! and Coco de Mer have received a lot of attention in the popular press, mainly broadsheet and magazines and both Louise and Veronica reveal an excited curiosity about their first visit, clearly expressed in their retelling and illustrated by an enthusiastic 'ooh'! This is echoed by Heidi, who when asked how she had discovered her first female oriented sex shop says:

I just know because the actual building is owned by one of my clients and she had a beautician in there and she told me “oh it’s very funny the people that went in my building are... yup”. I first went upstairs in Tickled, not downstairs, I didn’t realise that – and it was like “what’s this?”

Heidi

For some, these accounts seem to frame first visits to the women’s sex shop as ‘a good morning out’. The shop, for the women above, appears to be constructed initially as a site of curiosity and amusement, a notion which is underlined by its function as a site for heterosexual female social bonding:

...For some reason we’ve been to a lot of sex shops together. But I think that’s just because we’re friends and we shop together and we’re walking together always and really most of the times that we would go into a sex shop would be just because we were walking past and be like “oh, let’s go in there”.

Marley

For Marley and Kate (interviewed together), because they generally shop together in other contexts, when undertaken together sex shopping is normalised in that it becomes just another everyday shopping trip. This suggestion was echoed by Georgina and Melanie, who were also interviewed together:

...because I went with Georgina, you know, when you’re going with a friend it’s something different and we’re chatting as we went in. It just felt like we were going into any other shop.

Melanie

This process of normalisation and moreover feminisation - because of course the ‘girls only’ shopping outing is well established as a signifier for femininity:

You were expecting it to be pink?

Yes, and well, it was.

Georgina (fig 5.3)

- is further compounded by, not only the ‘prettiness’ of much of the shop interior but by what Melanie and Veronica describe as the ‘prettiness’ of the setting and its location in relation to other leisure pursuits, gallery visiting, café culture and so on. They emphasise that it is situated in an area not associated with sexual and by implication *masculine*, cultures:

Well to begin with it’s in a very pretty square, it’s a nice place that I enjoy going to, there’s a nice little coffee house nearby and because it’s not in a

district that, [say] in the middle of Soho where you feel you have to duck in quickly

Melanie

For Melanie the prettiness of the square confers, if not respectability, a sort of reassurance conveyed via its association with other and non-sexualised pursuits. Melanie is explicit in locating the site as one not associated with masculine sexual cultures and for her this contributes to making Sh! a 'comfortable' environment in which to shop:

...the identity of place is in part constructed out of positive interrelations with elsewhere.

(Massey 1994, p169)

Hoxton retains its edgy, urban aesthetic, but overlaid on this are the trappings of a cosmopolitan café culture which contributes to encoding the area as familiar and therefore *safe* for Melanie and Veronica. Evans, Riley and Shankar (2010) draw on Foucault's concept of heterotopia in their examination of the spaces in which Ann Summers operates, utilising the notion to describe the tangential and co-existent relationship of 'safe and seedy' within the sex shop site. Their analysis stresses the 'normalcy' of shopping at an Ann Summers store conveniently located on the high street and surrounded by other mainstream and non-sexualised shops, Evans, Riley and Shankar cite Smith (2007) in describing the desexualised nature of Ann Summers in comparison to the traditional sex shop:

Whereas the stereotypical male sex shop requires "furtiveness, secrecy and anonymity" in a society where "sexuality is a problem to be kept within guarded environs" [Smith, 2007:170] female friendly spaces appear as having little to do with sex, with the focus on the normalcy of shopping.

(2010, p220)

However, as we have seen, while several of my participants describe sex shopping in the context of the social shopping trip, several of the shops (Sh! and She Said in particular) rely on their position somewhat outside the 'normalising' environs of the high street for their very particular charge. These tensions between the normal and the exotic, the domestic and subversive, the social and the individual, are clearly manipulated and exploited by the women friendly sex shop. These are modes of discourse uncovered in the narratives of the consumers represented here and as the women reveal, embedded in the design of

products and spaces. The third of these dialectical models of understanding the women's sex shop is dealt with more fully in the following two sections.

Solitary shopping or shopping with the girls

Not all participants viewed sex shopping as a social activity or indeed something undertaken as part of a relationship with a partner. Louise described her first visit to a women orientated sex shop as something she particularly wanted to do alone:

I was with my boyfriend and another friend and I was slightly embarrassed about saying to this other friend "excuse me I'm off to the sex shop" or "do you want to come too? I want to go to this sex shop" and I was a little bit embarrassed about that and I was also a little embarrassed when I came out with a big bag of stuff [laughter] wrapped in pink paper.

Did the friend not go in with you then?

No she didn't, she had just finished a relationship and she, she just didn't feel like going in and I said "well you know it's not about being in a relationship, it's for my own fun and pleasure" but she still didn't feel like it. So I was a little bit embarrassed about that.

Louise

While Louise describes feeling self-conscious about entering the sex shop, she is clear that this is a form of shopping that is purely selfish. Although her boyfriend is present, she is careful to explain that she is shopping for her own pleasure and well-being:

I didn't really want him there, as I say, it was for me [rising tone – joyous] I did buy something for him, but it was about me – it was great.

Louise

Veronica also differentiates between going shopping with friends on a girl's 'night out' and shopping alone with what she describes as a rather more functional imperative:

If you're going to look at erm, if you're going to, if you're going for the experience of, you know, like a giggly girls night out when you might want to try on things and just generally have a fun night out, that's different to if you're going to buy something which you're going to use and is going to be quite pleasurable, hopefully be quite intimate with, quite a different thing.

Veronica

Pleasure then is a solitary activity for Veronica and Louise, a form of personal exploration and individual satisfaction. This chimes with Feonna Attwood's perception of women's sexual pleasure as sitting within a peculiarly post modern framing of sexuality as individual experience, a project which Attwood describes as 'self narration': '...there is ... a perceptible shift towards the notion of sex as self-pleasure – as indulgence, treat, luxury and right'. (2006, p87) Indeed, Louise expresses this notion quite explicitly:

So it's treating myself erm and I suppose it was part of, as I said before, exploring myself and that's how it fitted in with me being a complete person and finding out about myself. Mmn, which kind of goes in with my working life, you know, in my work I try to reach high standards and I try to learn how to do new things and I'm constantly looking at ways I can do things better or I can be happier with what I've done and find more interesting thing to do and it was art of that too. Urm yes.

Louise

Of course, there are other markers for postmodernism here – a view of the consumer as independent and self-fashioning, a vision of sex as autonomous yet technologically assisted, indeed a focus on the object as the source of both consummation and gratification, rather than on the act itself or on the act as a mutual exploration. Clearly Emily and Louise's prioritising of the value of sexualised consumption as part of a personal or therapeutic journey may be seen as part of this project of feminine self-work and this is a strategy discussed later in this chapter. Suffice to say here, that Emily, Veronica and Louise are making a distinction between a project of individuation, which Emily described as 'about exploring different sides of myself and getting out of certain patterns' and their predominantly *social* trips to Ann Summers. Indeed, my research reveals that for some of the participants, the social aspect of sex shopping is paramount to the experience. Sexy Kitten describes her first visit to a sex shop, also Ann Summers, explicitly in terms of the way in which it was an occasion for female bonding:

And do you remember when you first visited a sex shop of any kind, what was that like?

I think erm the first one I ever went to was probably in about 1993 and it was Ann Summers and it was on – the one on Tottenham Court Road and I went with one of my friends and – a female friend and it was quite a kind of interesting event actually because it was with a girl I went to polytechnic

with – who I didn't really get on with at poly. But I went to a poly up north and she was - I was back in London, she was from the north but moved into London and we kind of got together one night and with other friends and we sort of said: "oh, let's go to Ann Summers and see what it's like in there". So we both went there but we both brought a vibrator each and it really kind of- that was the beginning of a really positive friendship that we had from that point onwards. It was sort of like a date that we had and from then onwards we were really good friends. We'd got over the kind of rift we'd had at Polytechnic so erm I always remember that for that reason.

Sexy Kitten

For Sexy Kitten, the sex shopping trip is immediately characterised as a significant part of a relationship, either as we see here where it signals a turning point in the relationship with a female friend or later in the same interview as part of her sexual relationship with her male partner. In fact, Sexy Kitten conflates the two, the shopping trip with her friend from Poly is 'sort of like a date that we had'. Potentially, the experience of buying sex toys together has, if not *sexualised* the relationship, generated or exposed an intimacy not previously present. Later in interview Sexy Kitten describes the difference between sex shopping with the girls and shopping with her partner:

Being with friends is more kind of fun, it's more of a girly thing, it's more about female bonding erm and a bit if a giggle and probably not very sexual however going with my boyfriend, I think it would have been more of a sexual experience i.e. the actual process of being in a sex shop would turn me on whereas – because I'm with my boyfriend looking at sex toys. Whereas being with female friends it's just kind of having a laugh and pulling things out and stuff like that – giggling.

Sexy Kitten

For Sexy Kitten the shared emotional context of sex shopping has been paramount as well as pleasurable and for Veronica, and Marley and Kate it is also (at least at times) a collective or 'homosocial' activity. Merl Storr, paraphrasing Fuss (1995) defines female homosocial settings as:

...by definition a forum for gender identification *between women*, identification is a *process* rather than a state of being, and as such is constantly under negotiation and revision.

(2003, p51)

Here Storr's definition neatly encapsulates the emphasis of this chapter, in that the female sex shop does function as a locus for a gendered representation of sexuality which must be negotiated (and may indeed be revised) as we see later in this chapter, by its female consumers. Indeed an aim of this thesis is to make explicit this process of negotiation between those meanings embedded in the designed environment and those expressed by the consumer. Storr's participant analysis of Ann Summers parties, however, proposes a model of female homosociality which she suggests is primarily about women positioning themselves in alliance with men's interests:

Heterosexual women's interests are often closely bound to those of men precisely because of the social, political, cultural and economic inequalities between women and men.

(2003, p49)

Storr is describing a scenario in which women, inescapably perhaps, support the interests of men, for example by using their earnings as party planners to supplement the family food budget or by purchasing erotic lingerie to re-ignite their sex lives with partners. This chimes with Miller et al's (1998) account, where the language of leisure conceals the day-to-day slog of shopping and shopping as pastime or leisurely occasion for female bonding is often an unrealised ideal. But while my previous chapter establishes that there is evidence of a functional imperative in the shopping trips of Hoyle, Anna, Veronica, Annabel and Sexy Kitten who all describe sex shopping with a purpose in mind and while Louise, Sexy Kitten and Annabel describe going shopping with a partner - there is no evidence here that my participants conceived of their own visits to sex shops as (sexual) 'work' – performed for, or on behalf of, the men in their lives. Conversely, early on they establish a narrative around sex shopping which prioritises a range of positions; curiosity, pleasure and self-fulfilment, a pleasure which is only amplified within a social context and not only serves to normalise shopping for sexualised objects but facilitates a style of shopping which is exploratory and discursive:

...we were very interactive, because we kept mentioning things and laughing at things and showing each other things and if we were alone we wouldn't have had, you know, probably think it to yourself and then put it down and maybe not want to look like you've looked at every single one of them by yourself.

This social aspect to sex shopping is one that is revealed in several testimonies. Clearly shopping has traditionally been seen as: 'linked with the female role and thus is itself seen as in some degree a "feminine" activity' (Campbell 1997, p167), furthermore it is not regarded as an: 'activity that is only justified by the presence of an unsatisfied "need" but as also having an intrinsic "recreational" value'. (ibid, p169). ²³ Here we have the shopping trip described by Veronica as a leisure activity - a 'good morning out': '...when I do go with friends it's usually urm...sightseeing'. Veronica's explanation sits well within what Bowlby describes as 'part of a newly legitimate - politically acceptable - "postmodern" interest in pleasure and fantasy (1996 p382). Miller et al, in their participant research on shopping in Wood Green and Brent Cross shopping centres also find that the language of shopping as social and leisure activity is utilised, but begin to problematize this construction in terms of the realities of gender roles:

Although our focus group participants often employed the language of tourism in phrases like "shopping trip" or "day out"; at the shops, our evidence suggest that the idea of shopping as recreation is currently over-drawn. Once the sexual division of labour and the gendered nature of shopping are recognised, the notion of shopping as leisure is much harder to sustain.

(Miller et al, 1998, p94)

Miller et al found that their focus groups stressed the gendered nature of the: 'work' of shopping and the 'skills' it required:

Many commentators would dispute this emphasis on shopping as leisure or entertainment, arguing that, for most women, shopping is hard work, a regular and routine job of domestic reproduction as well as a reinforcement of familial bonds.

(ibid, p93)

Clearly shopping for sexualised goods in any sex shop, while it is unquestionably a gendered consumption experience, *cannot* convincingly be described as 'routine' or 'domestic' shopping. Emily, when asked about visits to sex shops, prior to her visit to Sh!, begins an emphatic framing of Ann Summers as 'tacky and disgusting' by emphasising the very different contexts of her shopping trips to each. Ann

²³ The construction of shopping as primarily a female activity is a notion that is well established and extensively theorised. See for example Victoria de Grazia (1996)

Summers she visited: 'only in the context of having a laugh with people really'. Those shops identified by my participants as women centric are largely located outside of the hegemonic framework characterised in the previous chapter by their descriptions of the traditional male sex shop. However, in this context, two of the women did make a clear distinction between the shops identified as women centric, such as Sh! and the 'high street' shops; Ann Summers and Harmony, in terms of the offer they make to women around self-directed pleasure:

I think the big difference is, that they're selling stuff that they think men want to use on women, [Harmony and Ann Summers] it's not the kind of place where you could pleasure yourself it's not got the kind of ...whereas Sh! very much has that kind of thing that it's about female pleasure and I think Harmony and Ann Summers is about male pleasure.

Veronica

Emily is also clear that: 'Ann Summers is marketed towards women who are driven by what they think men want'. (fig 5.4) Clearly Emily and Veronica identify 'high street' sex shopping in a way that fits well within Storr's model of homosociality, since this type of shopping is represented as shopping in the interests of men, while in its social aspect sex shopping *is* characterised as a marker for female friendship and bonding. Heidi, while she is keen to downplay my questions about how sex shopping compares with other types of shopping, inadvertently codes it as a signifier for femininity, invoking a cliché of female consumption:

you know it's like any other shopping isn't it? But yeah. Oh yeah, I've been with a few women.

So you said it was like any other shopping, how does it compare with other types of shopping...?

Yeah, apart from chocolate. Yes, there's no difference really.

Heidi

Heidi's reference to chocolate shopping here seems to be a reference to that stereotypical alliance of femininity and chocolate, in other words the part chocolate plays in the process of female gender identification - a process Storr identifies as being 'one of the girls':

In this sense Ann Summers parties may be typical 'girls' nights out', organised around culturally coded 'feminine' preoccupations with clothes, food - especially chocolate – shopping and relationships. The feminine

gender identifications involved in these pursuits are of course thoroughly circular: chocolate and shopping make you 'one of the girls' while at the same time women's investments in them make chocolate and shopping 'feminine'.

(2003, p63)

Storr characterises 'being one of the girls' as a privileged performance of femininity, one around which gender identification is established in the context of the Ann Summers party. Indeed the notion of 'being one of the girls' was also echoed in the suggestion that sex shopping was viewed, by some of my own participants, as a 'bit of fun' or a 'dare', although this was primarily apparent in intonation and facial expression rather than being present in the interview transcripts. Marley says:

...the reason we went in, the reason a lot of people go in, was because we were walking past.

Marley

She describes a visit to one in Tokyo in more detail:

... the one in Tokyo, I was with like – it was not to buy anything obviously – and it wasn't a planned trip or anything, it was, I was with two guys and a girl who are friends of mine and like only friends, and we were walking past and well I remember it was called 'Condom' and it was in big lights and we thought 'ooh what's this?' and we went in more as a joke.

Marley

Georgina and Melanie also used this framework when asked what may have influenced them to go into Sh!:

G: ...if we had gone out for the day and not agreed that that's where we were going, how would you have felt if I'd said "oh look, let's go in here!" [laughs].

M:I like a good dare, if you'd have said that, I'd have thought "oh alright, let's have a look" but also maybe not...maybe I would have had even more preconceived notions and been expecting something rather than just going to see what it was just like out of curiosity. I'd have been up for it, I think.

Georgia and Melanie

This description of going to the sex shop as a 'joke' or a bit of a dare potentially chimes with the tone of the word 'naughty' used to describe aspects of the feminine sex shop and which we began to investigate in the previous chapter.

Naughty is a term primarily associated with children but is also used in descriptions of a particular type of 'up for it' young woman (in other words *one of the girls*) as well as to describe the sexual practices and predilections of such a woman. Indeed, an internet search for academic work featuring the word threw up only theoretical writing on the subject of children and childcare and one piece of work around representations of female sexuality in pop videos but no *analysis* of the use of this word in the context of female sexuality. Clearly naughty is a term that encompasses elements of the forbidden and of transgression but is, in line with its association with children, 'soft' rather than 'hardcore' in its scope. Marley uses this term in accounting for the childlike interior and presentation of a women focussed Tokyo sex shop which she struggles to describe:

[It] might be a culture difference but, it was definitely aimed at kind of – it was focussed on the naughtiness of what was in the store.

Marley

This sits well with a positioning of the women's sex shop – particularly Ann Summers according to the testimony of my participants - as a risqué shopping destination for groups of girls. While it is an effective means of positioning the female orientated sex shop within a feminised market, it clearly characterises it as different from, as well as less threatening and uncomfortable for a female consumer, the traditional male orientated sex shop.

'Why should it just be me who visits these sorts of places?'

An alternative mode of framing visits to the sex shop as social event was evident in two accounts where participants described how they functioned as escorts or guides for less bravura female friends. Veronica tended to position herself as an initiator of others into the sex shop experience - a sort of pioneer discourse!:

I think sometimes you're going in just to browse or just to look or [if] that other person has never had that experience before then they might feel a little bit shy or self-conscious.

Veronica

When asked about how going into a sex shop made her feel, Anna revealed that she finds sex shopping 'liberating' and wants to help other women have the same experience:

And it's quite nice because people who haven't been in, and I work in sexual health, like it's...everyone I work with is quite, to a degree, quite

liberal and we all get along, we all chat. Even other friends that don't work in the area but are curious and know that I've been to stores and tried things and what have you and they'll go "ooh can you come along" "oh come on, sure" and that's quite nice as well because if they're too embarrassed and you're not embarrassed you're... They're more likely to feel relaxed about going in and buying something or having a look or asking questions and I think it's great why should it just be me who visits these sort of places?

Anna

Veronica also sees herself as something of a trailblazer, when asked early in interview, if she has visited other sex shops (other than Sh!) she says:

Yes, in fact I can do a whole Saturday evening in sex shops in Soho; I can actually make that a night out with people. For example if somebody's coming to London, you now, from where they might not have access to that kind of thing, then we can just spend the whole evening just visiting different places and not just places where they do sex toys, but also places where they do different kinds of clothing, maybe pvc or rubber. I'm not particularly into that but it's quite fun. It's an alternative sightseeing tour.

Veronica

This account clearly uses the language of leisure and even tourism and while, unlike Anna, she does not specify that that she is describing visits by female friends, Veronica is clearly describing sex shopping as a social experience. While Storr proposes that gender identification is key to an understanding of female homosociality, neither Anna nor Veronica account for these trips in terms of a feminist solidarity, although Anna, acknowledging that for some women the sex shop is potentially a place of 'embarrassment', explicitly frames her sex shopping trips in terms of challenge to those regulatory forces that she feels may describe her as a 'dirty girl':

You know it's quite liberating like "yes, I am a sexual being and I'm in your store and I may buy something and I may not and if I pick that up it doesn't mean I'm going to buy it"....I don't feel ashamed, I don't feel dirty or...

Anna

Both Anna and Veronica show a real desire to spread their own enlightened and unapologetic style of female sexuality to those who are uninitiated or who don't have 'access' to sexual consumption and Anna is explicitly demonstrating this

rationale by taking embarrassed women friends sex shopping: 'why should it just be me who visits these sort of places?' While Storr critiques those studies that seek, somewhat over enthusiastically, to uncover signs of subversion and struggle in women's daily lives²⁴, her work on Ann Summers parties is concerned to highlight the mechanisms by which women cope with the everyday realities of gender power relations which, while not feminist in intent or challenging to hegemonic gender regimes, nonetheless show that women may be 'resourceful' in finding ways to support each other in negotiating a patriarchal regime:

I would argue that female friendship groups, [such as those discussed by Oliker (1989) and Harrison (1998)] in which women compensate one another for and support one another through heterosexual inequalities, may be regarded as a variety or subgroup of female homosociality.

(Storr M, 2003, p53)

I suggest that we might locate Veronica and Anna in this structure. They are surely using their own specialist knowledge and sexual self confidence in what they understand as an 'evangelist project' which seeks a homosocial assertion of female sexuality through an act of initiating others into the liberating project of sex shopping.

:

Overall, it is clear that my own research departs somewhat from Storr's model of homosociality:

...female homosociality promotes the interests of women who promote the interests of men – or, to put it slightly less tortuously, *female homosociality helps heterosexual women to further men's interests.*

(2003, p51)

While Storr proposes that her subjects participate in the Anne Summers party to serve the interests of the men in their lives, whether this is to augment the family income as a party planner or to make themselves attractive to a partner, Veronica and Anna seek to introduce others to a consumption experience they view as positively empowering for women. My participants do account for sex shopping as, at times, a leisure and social activity and we see that this is a well-worn structure applied to feminine consumption which serves, for those who utilise it, to normalise an activity that might for some be 'uncomfortable'. Sex shopping is also

²⁴ In the way for example that Radway's ground breaking *Reading the Romance* frames the reading of romance novels as a performance of cultural resistance for women. See my earlier discussion (lit review)

sometimes discursive and exploratory, acting as a locus for negotiation around sexual representation and materialisation as suggested by accounts from Melanie and Georgina and Sexy Kitten. In addition we saw that sex shopping may provide an opportunity for female bonding and this emerged explicitly from Sexy Kitten's testimony. On the other hand it is sometimes an altruistic endeavour designed to initiate the less confident into sexualised consumption, as Anna and Veronica described. However, overarching all of this is a narrative that identifies shopping in the women centric sex shop as consumption in the pursuance of an autonomous female pleasure – a 'story' the women tell of their consumption activities that prioritises notions of self-work, personal exploration and at times an active resistance to a notion of sexuality defined in masculine terms. This is discussed in more detail in the following section of this chapter.

The ideal(ised) shop

Two discourses emerge very strongly from analysis of transcript material around women's motivation for and experience of, shopping in the women's sex shop. Several of my participants approached discussing their experience of sexualised consumption in the women's sex shop as part of a narrative of individual exploration, in the case of Louise and Sexy Kitten this was unambiguous. Other participants, in particular Heidi, Kathryn Hoyle, Emily and Shiri Zinn position themselves in an explicitly ideological relation to the sex shop. However, analysis revealed that both these framing discourses intersect with perceptions around the personal and sexual identity of the participant. In response to the above, the final section of this chapter positions sex shopping as it intersects with individual sexual identities in terms of what I have overarchingly named the '*ideal(ised) shop*' a theme that has emerged strongly from women's accounts of sex shopping and which itself subdivides into two more key themes. Firstly the notion of the '*therapeutic*' shop, includes a significant narrative of shopping as 'personal journey' and to which the notion of an individual empowerment is key. Secondly what I have named the '*evangelist*' shop which is vital to the notion of a more collective and potentially or explicitly feminist, empowerment which features strongly in some interviews:

I basically think people have woken up to the fact that women are strong consumers in whatever it is they're doing and within the sex industry as

much as anything else. And that's fabulous because that gives us real power as a group.

Hoyle

A key point for me in my use of Mauther and Doucet's analysis method is that while it is a method based on sociological and psychological frameworks, I am utilising it in a cross disciplinary study which, takes largely and specifically in chapter 6, a Material Culture perspective. For me this has meant that I have had to find a way of utilising the method to understand participants meaning making relationship with *things* as well as the women's identity in relation to other people and to a wider social framework.²⁵ However, it is apposite to highlight here that the method clearly facilitates an understanding of the ways in which women express their own sexual identity in relation to sex shopping. The Mauther and Doucet method involves 'reading for the voice of the "I"' which: 'represents an attempt to hear the person, agent or actor, voice their sense of agency'. (1998, p14) This aspect of the approach has clearly assisted an investigation of the female orientated sex shop as it materialises a view or style of sexuality which for my participants does or does not, chime with their need to express an agentic sexuality. For example, on analysis, one transcript; Heidi's, featured the word 'I' repetitively and the analysis of transcription revealed that her testimony was very largely preoccupied with how she saw sex very differently from the image of feminine sexuality offered, in her view, by the design of shops and products. When asked at the start of interview about her general impression of the first sex shop she had visited, Heidi retorts:

Plastic, just very sort of – don't quite get it. It's all plastic – don't like plastic.

That was my general...and I find nothing in those shops erotic or – in any way at all. Nothing.

Heidi

The style of display and the design of products in Tickled do not fit with Heidi's own ideation of female sexuality. Heidi is very critical of the design of most female centric shops which she sees as promulgating a masculinist version of sexuality inappropriate to her own needs and desires:

a lot of the presentation in the...even the more female friendly ones is very male...to me the whole symbol of the penis , the cock – this is what all these

²⁵ This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

things are about, that's how males operate...I think women are much more into all the things around that.

Heidi

This view of female sexuality as essentially holistic and context driven contrasts perhaps to that expressed by Anna who was surprised by the 'softness' of Sh! compared to other shops she has been in (she is comparing it to Harmony which is licensed while Sh! is not²⁶), suggesting this may be because it is woman focussed:

[it's] just I think a little bit softer not quite as risqué as the other shops, whether that's because they feel that women may not want that extra risqué element I don't know.

Anna

While both Anna and Heidi's testimony position their own sexuality as opposed to that represented by and on offer in, most of the women's sex shops they have visited, for Louise, a visit to Sh! prompted a new acceptance of her own sexual interests:

...actually I have...there are things that like, like the nipple clamps and you know part of me thinks "oh no, this is really dirty and disgusting and I'm such a pervert and how can I like that kind of thing" and actually my attitude to my own sexuality has changed a bit since going in there:

Oh really that's interesting.

Yeah, there were these kind of you know whips and stuff like "ooh right that's quite interesting" and I actually bought a few things and have been trying the out and mucking around and it's kind of made me feel much more light and playful and accepting of my own sexuality seeing these things just there.

Louise

Emily too differentiates between the social function of 'having a laugh' in Ann Summers and the 'therapeutic' nature of her later trip to Sh!:

I went in the context of a relationship, which was different to relationships I'd been in in the past and part of choosing that relationship I think, was about exploring different sides of myself and getting out of certain patterns and wanting to explore things with the person I chose.

Emily

²⁶It emerged during the interview that Anna did not realise that Sh! was not a licensed shop, nor the implications of Harmony being licensed.

Thus both Louise and Emily's visits to Sh! may be said to sit within a context of 'working' on the self – an attempt to move on from 'certain patterns' and 'explore' their sexuality in new ways. Both accounts fit within a discourse around feminine consumption which frames it as a work on the self rather than on the domestic front. Celia Lury (2011) alludes to a trend within analysis of feminine consumption which points to:

the growing importance of the *work of femininity*, Other writers too²⁷ have argued that consumption practices have become an increasingly important source of the creation of a feminine self.

(Lury 2011, p125)

Lury frames this perspective within a context of lifestyle, she suggests that women are encouraged to consume goods as part of a project of self-fashioning, using goods as a means by which to create a unique and original display of selfhood:

I think they [women's sex shops] tell a story coherent with how women feel their sexuality fits within their life. So either they tell a story coherent with the way they feel it is or coherent with how they think it should be. So they either are re-telling it or confirming a story. So [laughter] if you're re-telling a narrative, you're telling a story about sexuality being palatable and beautiful and part of a relationship that's feelings based.

Emily

When asked how she feels the women orientated sex shop makes its appeal to the woman consumer Emily explains the function of the women's sex shop in terms of it providing a narrative around sexuality which is dialectically opposed to her (assumed) perception of the traditional male shop. For her the women's sex shop is differentiated from the traditional shop because it provides an alternative 'story' about sexuality. She seems to be suggesting that this account sits within a highly ubiquitous discourse which proposes that female sexuality is dependent on and located in narrative, part of an emotional relationship –romance even. However, overall Emily's testimony goes further, to assert that it is the very luxuriousness of the women's sex shop which underlines this particular feminine sexual narrative and thus confers acceptability and validity to sexualised consumption.²⁸ Juffer too notes that this particular embodied discourse of

²⁷ That is, other writers besides Janet Winship 1983 to whom Lury is referring here.

²⁸ Emily's testimony throws up various methodological issues discussed in chapter 3. This relationship and her discovery of an agentic sexuality is clearly seen through a therapeutic framework. Emily has an interest in female sexuality on two fronts she is a psychologist and once considered setting up a sex shop of her own. Her testimony is highly considered and at times

feminine sexuality is one that is both acceptable and therefore accessible. Here she is discussing the commodification of feminine sexuality and starts by acknowledging that all forms of sexual representation must be commodified if they are to circulate or indeed to be domesticated and that to deny this process of commodification is to invoke debate around a distinction between 'high and low art:

in which the "good" form of sexually explicit material is available only to an elite few, while the masses wallow in their low-brow porn.

(1998, p25)

While this thesis takes as axiomatic that female sexuality is and will be commodified, it stresses that such distinctions are flourishing and widespread and embodied in the designed objects and spaces of the women's sex shop, although attempts to represent the sex shop as either stylish, highbrow or therapeutic may be viewed as strategies to 'de-commodify' the object and thus increase its status. Juffer recognises the pervasive discourse highlighted by Emily, as a necessary address to women if increased commodification and therefore circulation of erotica is to occur:

a more instructive approach is to inquire into the relationships between making a product palatable for relatively widespread marketing, the content necessary for that commodification to occur, and the possible uses that result. Such an approach reveals that some products do well precisely because they are easily assimilated into a mainstream politics that valorises sexually explicit products as long as they reinforce certain dominant conceptions of love and marriage (such as the John Gray texts²⁹) or the pursuit of feminine beauty (such as the Victoria's Secret Catalogue).

(Juffer 1998, p26)

Georgina and Melanie succinctly identify this discourse embodied in a game for sale in Sh! In fact they are quick to correct my immediate assumption that the game was overtly sexual:

M: What else was downstairs? They had some odd [inaud: bits] and then they had videos and then games as well.

appears to take an objective perspective however, using the Mauther and Doucet method, her testimony reveals a strong element of a style of personal journey narrative. See Methodology chapter for section on the notion of expert interviewer and non-expert interviewee.

²⁹ Author of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus: A Practical Guide for Improving Communication and Getting What You Want in Your Relationships: How to Get What You Want in Your Relationships* published 1992 by Thorsons.

G: Oh yes, they were quite interesting. They were like card games weren't they. Just like er...there was...I remember the one we looked at was something like fifty two...a whole year of romantic things.

So like if you get an ace you get a...blow job sort of thing, was it like that?

G: No, no it was less crude than that, it was more for couples, more romantic sort of, so...

M: Things to do with dinner, like a candlelit dinner and something else, it's more...

G: It was a thing for him and a thing for her, so she had to do something for him and he had to do something for her.

Melanie and Georgina

'The Love Game' which appeals to Melanie and Georgina as putting feminine sexuality into a context of relationships, also sits within a clear discourse of work. We can see in (fig 5.5) that the work suggested here by both the game and the dressing up costumes, the sexy stripper gloves and the feather boa, is work to be done on 'spicing up' a relationship, but this is work clearly coded as feminine, there is no sign here of dressing up clothes for the male partner in this project. This project of improvement to be carried out on behalf of a couple's sex life, is a task which constantly features in women's magazine culture and one in which women are represented as taking the active part. Gill (2007) investigating the relationship between contemporary magazines and feminism, points to magazine cultures as exemplifying the injunction to work on the self, not only bodily, psychologically, emotionally but sexually:

The work ethic is central – whether it is applied to dieting hair care, career or sex life (in the generation of magazines launched by *Cosmo* sex has become a new kind of work and a key source of identity).

(2007, p199)

While my own research suggests that this individualistic discourse of self-work in the context of sex shop shopping was very present in testimony, at no point do the women I interview characterise their trips to the women's sex shop in terms of making themselves more attractive or sexually stimulating for the delectation of a partner or potential partner. To return to Lury's analysis, while she cites women's magazines as offering an individuated lifestyle maintained via the consumption of

carefully chosen commodities, it is the tone of a magazine such as *Psychologies*³⁰ that most chimes with the narratives of sex shopping I have encountered.

Psychologies magazine promulgates a style of self-work based firmly around the notion of self-empowerment and self-expression, a sort of popularised feminism that has provoked a range of responses within the feminist academy. Simmonds (1992) points to a raft of feminist academic critiques which have discussed self-help literature as:

evidence of a backlash against feminism [Faludi 1991] a reflection of general unhappiness on the part of women...

(1992, p3)

Lisa Blackman's 2004 study investigates the way in which women's magazine culture situates itself between the ubiquitous and contradictory discourses that frame popular manifestations of feminine self-work; that is on the one hand the 'self-empowered' autonomous woman and on the other, a woman whose self-work is performed on behalf of her relationship:

..what is sanctioned or valorised as that which must be avoided, regulated sought after or worked upon...these dilemmas...are managed within the pages of women's magazines primarily by presenting women with the necessity of self-transformation and psychological reinvention as the means for improving satisfaction and success in intimate relationships...This project of self-transformation is also subsumed within a consumer discourse wherein diet programmes, fitness, cosmetics, health orientated foods, cosmetic surgery and other body techniques are promoted and valorised through a vocabulary of choice that addresses the (female) reader as being able to achieve success and happiness through her choice from a range of options and preferences.

(Blackman2004, p230)

Samantha Holland's (2010) work on pole dancing classes explores this notion of self-work carried out within a context viewed as potentially problematic for feminism, a context which has some significant parallels with my own investigation of women's sex shopping. Pole Dancing originated in lap dancing and while pole dance classes may promote themselves in terms of the physical workout they provide, the sociability of a shared class and significantly the sense of empowerment felt by those who participate, the image of the pole dancing class

³⁰ *Psychologies* is a monthly magazine published in Britain by Kelsey Publishing group. It is aimed at the female reader and focuses on personal psychological development and well-being.

still retains more than a vestige of its 'sleazy' legacy, a reputation it has in common with the traditional male sex shop. As we have established, the equally 'sleazy' male sex shop lurks beneath all the accounts I have collected around the women centric sex shop and, as I suggest elsewhere, gives sex shopping both the frisson and sense of subversive challenge which are germane to the appeal it makes to the female consumer. This problematic ancestry does not however detract or perhaps contributes to, what Holland (2010) and Roach (2007) identify as part of a project of self-actualising or self-empowerment:

...according to the participants, attending a pole class (which has its roots in lap dancing clubs, where young women perform under the male gaze) has restored in them a sense of self –confidence, a reconnection with their physicality. This is indeed, balancing on a fine line. In chapter 4 I [Holland] considered whether pole classes can be said to 'mend' something in some women's lives and it would seem from these accounts, that it can. Some feminist scholars would argue that this is the result of women defining themselves only as sexualised beings, as lacking consciousness, and I am not trying to deny that either. But does that mean that we should not enjoy being sexual beings, should not enjoy feeling desirable...Isn't that what feminism would want?

(Holland 2010, p99)

Holland flags up a contradiction here, a woman who is working on her sense of feminine empowerment may also be inciting the criticism of traditional feminists. The difficulty at this juncture and I suggest that it is resolved in some of the testimonies discussed in my own work, is that in the excerpt above Holland is defining feminine sexuality within the parameters of 'feeling desirable'. Thus here Holland aligns the pole dance class to what Lury (2011) suggests is a project of self-improvement in the interests of others. Louise, Sexy Kitten and Emily however, account for sex shopping as an autonomous project for which the worked on object is the self (in or out of a relationship) rather than a working on the self in which the object is a sexual relationship. In fact, Louise makes a point of visiting Sh! without her boyfriend who she leaves outside:

I didn't really want him there, as I say it was for me [rising tone- joyous] I did buy something for him, but it was about me- it was great.

Louise

Louise, Emily and Sexy Kitten were perhaps the participants who most clearly represented sexual consumption as part of a 'personal journey'. Towards the end of the interview Sexy Kitten reflects on the way in which she has become less embarrassed about sex shopping which has indeed been a kind of liberation: 'I do feel quite erm liberated by the fact that I do go into these – do go into sex shops when I feel like it'. I asked her which type of shops made her feel that way and she replied:

I'd say it's going to either. All of them, that I'm going into sex shops. Because I'm living the sort of life that my mother would have been really... number one, she'd have been disgusted at and secondly there's just no way ever in a million years, that she would have gone into a shop like that. She would probably have not known that shops like that existed. But it's more to do with her own sexual experience and the way she was – the way women of her generation being Irish would have experienced sex.

Sexy Kitten

For Sexy Kitten the difference between the life she is leading and the life of her mother, an Irish woman bringing up her children in a working class area of south London, is striking. The experience of talking about her visits to sex shops has been a chance to reflect not only on these differences but also on how she has been affected by the shopping experience:

Yeah but for me it's been quite interesting talking about it because I hadn't realised that it had as much of an impact as what it had. Especially the male one, especially the ones in Soho where it was so masculine, it was so masculine and I hadn't really realised that at the time, it was just reflecting about it made me realise how masculine it was and you know , it was really my choice for us to go you know [my partner] hadn't in any way put any pressure or coerced me all and I kind of said I'd like to go because I'd never been to a hard core sex shop before but it was a big difference.

Sexy Kitten

Shiri Zinn also invokes her mother in talking about her rationale for sex toy design.

My mother was my muse because she was a frigid woman. That when she...all she ever told me was "as long as you love the person and it's clean" I mean, that's the only two words she ever said about sex to me.

Shiri Zinn

In Zinn's testimony two narratives intertwine to produce a complex story of her sexual identity and the ways in which this intersects with her identity as a designer. She brings to this narrative a sense of the personal journey she has undertaken in relation to her own sexuality and her design work is characterised as part of a project of personal resolution in terms of her own sexual contradictions. While Zinn also identifies as a feminist designer, her exaggeratedly 'feminine' and high priced designs are perhaps the most 'post-feminist' dildos on the market!:

My stuff is more about the shock value and that what that does to the psychology and what that does – how far you can push boundaries by what is acceptable and unacceptable for public in inverted commas 'fashion consumption' because my pieces are like a big pink dick with diamonds ...or the whip is like massive...but the one that got so much attention was specifically that carrot looking thing...Being a woman enables me to look at things, because ...everything is through experience with my own body. So when I've experienced [orgasm] with the crystal dildo, for the first time ever I experienced female ejaculation on myself. And that was very interesting because that was only through my own tool.

Shiri Zinn

Zinn's narrative is idiosyncratic and at times contradictory, but at points during the interview, like Louise and Emily, she too prioritises sexual consumption as a route to an autonomous sexuality – exemplified by her proud declaration that she achieved ejaculation, not with a partner (men appear rather poorly in her testimony), but with her 'own tool'! However, while Gill's primary criticism of the brand of 'feminism' found in the contemporary woman's magazine (2007) lies in the message of *individualistic* self-improvement it promotes, and similarly this is undoubtedly prioritised in the accounts of my participant's relationship with sexual consumption - there is also clear evidence here of a more collective, active feminist voice at work in the context of shopping in the women's sex shop.

Zinn's testimony uses discussion of her own sexuality to emphasise her commitment to women's collective fulfilment. She too is 'evangelist' in her promotion of women's right to sexual pleasure, unequivocally characterising her own design practice as rooted in women's needs. Moreover, Zinn is outspoken concerning the alienating ambiance of some of the more up market women's sex shops, and the absence of a genuinely 'politicised' commitment to female sexual

expression shown by some high end fashion brands who have jumped on the sexualised merchandising bandwagon: 'it's insipid , it's luke warm'. Zinn's testimony repeatedly calls for women's right to sexual fulfilment and she is overtly critical of practices such as burlesque that she sees as signifying a retrograde step for female empowerment:

it's shocking...it's got nothing to do with the strength of and the demand that a woman should have for her orgasm or her pleasure...

Shiri Zinn

Kathryn Hoyle owner of Sh!, explains her openly politicised and collective rationale for setting up the first women focussed sex shop. Early in the interview I asked her what influenced her decision to set up a woman focused sex shop. She tells the story of a trip to Soho and fixes this narrative within the wider context of media representation of the AIDS epidemic in the late '80s:

....when all the icebergs were crashing through our telly with the whole aids alert, all the big drama about that.

Hoyle

Thus in the following excerpt Hoyle sets sexual consumption within an explicitly politicised context around the impact of AIDS on women's capacity to access sex which fulfils their needs:

I do think quite a lot about stuff and I am quite political and I started thinking that actually it's the one time, the first time for women, that we actually get to talk about the sex that we want to have...for the first time in our entire history we'd been able to control our fertility. So that had been one sort of freedom that we'd had and this whole aids thing was another potential freedom to talk about the sex that we're going to have, rather than this "oh you know" and actually negotiate and say "well" and possibly not to just have it as penetrative sex , do you know what I mean? It could be a massive, fantastic thing for women...we're meant to be young women dealing with our sexuality, talking about , being up front about the kind of sex we're having, keeping ourselves safe by communicating and you go and you want to buy a sex toy or actually go into ...buy into the sex, into something like that and it was really intimidating and alienating and I just got more and more angry about it.

Hoyle

Hoyle's suggestion that HIV/AIDS provided an impetus in the late 80s for a reassessment of the conventions and practices of heterosexual sex has been discussed in similar terms elsewhere; McNair's cites the epidemic as a factor in the development of porn chic:

To these hypothetical causes [1960s permissiveness and consumer capitalism) and consumer can be added the sexual epidemic of the 1980s (HIV/AIDS) and the tendency which it produced towards more frank and direct sexual discussion in the public sphere. This development collided at the end of that decade with the accumulated impact of what had by then been twenty years of second-wave feminism and gay rights activism. These latter were not campaigns for pornography as such (indeed they often opposed it) but they created publics – particularly amongst those generations reaching adulthood in the 1980s and 1990s.
(2002, p64)

However, Hoyle extends this position suggesting that media frenzy around the dangers of AIDS/HIV gave women an opportunity to explore new models of relationship and modes of exploration and sexual practice with their male partners. Moreover, she makes a link between this new culture of open discussion around both heterosexual and gay sexual cultures and a new willingness on the part of women to engage in sexual consumption – implicitly to purchase a new safe sex alternative to penetration. Hoyle's account of the inception of Sh! clearly forms a significant part of her 'evangelistic' representation of the shop, and indeed we will see in the next chapter that Hoyle's underlying principle is read by many of my participants off the exterior and interior design, the products and the display of her shop.

Conclusion

Overall, analysis of transcripts has revealed a level of consensus around which shops might be designated 'women's sex shops'. This unanimity is disrupted somewhat by discussion of the high street shops, identified as Ann Summers and Harmony. These shops were differentiated on various fronts, significantly by some participants as proposing a version of sexual consumption which is primarily in the interests of men. This chapter has introduced a number of modes of discourse or narratives, utilised by participants in describing the act of going shopping in the female orientated sex shop. It is, on occasion, viewed by participants as a social

activity, a framing which I suggest normalises sex shopping and firmly codes it within a feminine context of leisure shopping with 'the girls'. However, for most of my participants, this was predominantly a way of conceptualising shopping in Ann Summers (or perhaps Harmony) a shop which clearly inscribes itself as prioritising a populist version of 'girlie fun'. Conversely, some women described sex shopping as a productive and usually solitary activity, part of an individual project of making over, in which feminine pleasure is framed as a working on the self – a theorizing of sexual consumption which Attwood proposes as significantly postmodern in character. In addition, sex shopping is framed as an altruistic project. A social outing, but one with the express aim of sharing the liberated pleasures of sexual consumption with the uninitiated, what might be called 'shopping with an alibi', that is shopping with a political purpose albeit one of spreading this individualistic message of self-fulfilment - it is this aspect of sex shopping which I propose is truly homosocial in its scope. Finally, this chapter introduced two further perspectives via which sexual consumption collides with notions of personal identity production, showing how sex shopping has been ideated or encountered by consumers as narratives of both 'personal journey' and 'evangelism'. In confirmation of women's descriptions of the contrasting imperatives of shopping alone and of going shopping with friends, we saw that overarching discourses of sexual consumption are characterised as both individuated and collective in scope. While sex shopping emerges as a project of personal female empowerment, paradoxically it contains traditional messages around feminine sexuality as part of a narrative of relationships and feminine sexuality as a project of self-work. In contrast, sexualised consumption is also foregrounded by some participants as a task of collective empowerment that aims to bring the commoditised promise of autonomous sexual fulfilment and self-expression to a wider community of women.

The following chapter extends analysis of the narratives utilised by participants in describing sex shopping, to embrace the ways in which the design of spaces and objects are encountered and accounted for.



Fig 5.1 Ann Summers exterior (2009)

Ann Summers Wardour Street, Soho. 'You walk into Ann Summers and you know that there's a million of them and they're the same everywhere' Kate. While I was forbidden to take photographs inside any branch of Ann Summers, the focus on novelty and dressing up products is visible from the window display.



Fig 5.2 Exterior She Said (2009)

She Said which is almost parodically situated down an ally in Brighton. However, this reference to the traditional shop is in contrast to the stylised signage and the banner 'erotic boutique'.



Fig 5.3 Interior Sh! (2009)

You were expecting it to be pink?

Yes, and well, it was.

Georgina

Overall the interior of the shop is clearly coded as feminine, not simply in its 'pinkness' but in terms of the replica flowers, the paper cut out streamers, the heart shaped wall decoration and so on. This image of the interior décor shows clearly that embedded within Sh!'s offer of sexual self-empowerment is a traditional representation of femininity in line with Georgina's expectations.



Fig 5.4 Ann Summers window (2009)

Ann Summers is about male pleasure'

Veronica



Fig 5.5 Interior display Sh! (2009)

'*The Love Game*' described by Melanie and Georgina clearly sits within discourse of feminine work carried out on behalf of improving or invigorating, a sexual relationship.

Chapter 6

‘Posh means you can walk in anywhere’: windows, layout and things

Introduction

According to participant testimony, the shops under discussion operate or manage a process of differentiation and appropriation through the ‘upmarketing’ and/or domestication of space and product, more or less successfully but to different degrees. This section focusses on the shops themselves in visual terms, accounting for the ways in which participants describe the sex shop and seeking to draw out the uneasy symbiosis between aesthetics and the notion of empowerment which is at the centre of the appeal it makes to the female consumer. This chapter asks the question, how did my participants respond to, or construct, the embodied narrative of gendered sexuality on offer via goods and spaces in the women’s sex shop? It will examine the re-appropriation of a style of mediated sexuality by a market which aims to re-position the traditional sex shop in terms of acceptability, luxury and female empowerment – what many participants describe in terms of the aestheticizing or ‘poshing up’ (on various fronts) of the traditional sex shop paradigm:

...today the places, products and performances associated with sex for its own sake are becoming more visible, Commercial sex is gaining a toehold in the high street and being gentrified. Strip joints have become gentlemen’s clubs.

(Attwood 2008, pxiv)

In addition this chapter prioritises the theme of access which underscores women’s accounts of sex shop shopping. I endeavour to establish whether and how far these various markers of the women’s sex shop – aesthetics, humour, glamour, and so on - serve to facilitate women’s access to agentic exploration of their own sexuality. I propose moreover, that the coding of objects and spaces in this way may work to provide an *alibi* for the consumption of sexualised objects, a type of consumption which emerges from testimony as semantically complex and for some problematic:

...long-standing notions of sex as dangerous for women, and of women’s passive positioning within sexual representation and practice have made the depiction of sex ‘for women’ immensely problematic.

(Attwood 2005, p395)

In conclusion here I am asking the question, do the various images and imaginings of feminine sexual fulfilment on offer in the sex shop correspond to participants' understanding of female sexuality as well as to their own sexual needs and identities?

Chapter 4 established that participants construct the women's sex shop in terms of difference, primarily to the traditional male sex shop but also as we have seen in chapter 5, to the high street shop in terms of its ethos, aesthetics and the shopping experience it offers. However, in response to current debates about the increasing visibility of sexual cultures, this chapter continues a discussion around what I suggest is the appropriation of one of the key markers for the sex shop; 'hiddenness' – what participants identify as the hiddenness of some of the shops themselves, concealment in terms of the organisation of products within the shop but also perhaps the hidden consumer – who may or *may not* be hiding themselves or their purchases from what they perceive as disapproving eyes:

Well there is that whole kind of, not quite checking up and down the street but sort of feeling a bit like 'mmn where am I going?' and going in rather than walking in as you would any kind of shop.

Georgina

This chapter focuses on the ways in which participants account for and identify difference and appropriation in *visual* terms, in the context of their response to the design of shops and products. Thus, here we will continue to investigate strategies by which differentiation is established and appropriation utilised via things and spaces in order to re-make and primarily re-gender, the meanings embedded within the sex shop.

When asked what might have influenced her decision to go into Coco de Mer, Emily replies:

I don't remember what the exterior looks like. I think it's erm it must just be about money, isn't it. What looks posh basically and what's well designed. So they have luxurious wallpaper don't they, which is very beautiful and their knickers are very beautiful and the vibrators are very beautiful, You know, it's the same stuff but it's very beautifully designed and it's posh. And posh means that you can walk into anywhere.

Emily

Here Emily has identified several key strands or themes within the framework of re-imagining the sex shop, strands which form the overarching concerns of this chapter. The 'upmarketness' or luxuriousness prioritised in the design of sex shops such as Coco de Mer or She Said and of course of the goods for sale in them, has been key to media discussion and representation, of the female sex shop:

the more expensive the better, since this is what defines and elevates it, what wipes away the sleaze.

(Anna Moore, The Observer Sunday 20 July 2003)

Overwhelmingly, as Moore identifies, design is used as a key strategy in differentiating the women orientated shop from the 'sleazy' traditional men's shop discussed in chapter 4, but how is design used in re-assigning the sex shop as a site of female empowerment rather than female subjugation and how do my participants read the visual meanings materialised by these goods and spaces? Furthermore as Emily makes very clear, it is axiomatic that a prioritisation of luxury and high end design will also entail a discussion around issues of access for the consumer to the purportedly 'empowering' style of gendered sexual expression on offer in the women's sex shop. Citing Stephanie Genz, Sparke outlines the dialectic embedded within any discussion of gendered consumption asking if the 'pink' revolution is:

...yet another capitalist plot that had led to the exploitation of (some) women's new-found spending power? Or was the ability of women to buy goods that had been designed with their (albeit stereotypical) identities in mind and to use them to negotiate and define their own femininity – at least in the terms through which society collectively understands and expresses that attribution – truly liberating?

(2010, pix)

Emily maintains that '...posh means that you can walk into anywhere'. However, the gender model signposted by purple, flock, designer wallpaper might be utilised as a strategy in re-coding a shop as exclusive and upmarket, expunging the shady reputation of its dodgy parent the traditional sex shop, but it may also signify to some consumers, that they lack the cultural capital required to access the type of empowerment endowed by a designer vibrator or crystal anal probe.

The first section of this chapter '*The Shop Window*', deals with the implications of shop windows, focussing on concepts of visibility and hiddenness in relation to windows. Here we necessarily draw on some of my participants' ideation of the design of the traditional sex shop window as previously discussed in chapter 4 to discuss the ways in which the sex shop window is both differentiated and appropriated to signal a re-gendering of the space. The second section '*Upstairs, downstairs and round the back: The significance of women's sex shop layout*' examines participant responses to designed layout in the women's sex shop in order to draw out the same themes of visibility and hiddenness. The third section '*"It wants to make it look like there's nothing wrong with it": Pushing up the products*' foregrounds what participants identify as the upmarketing of products and spaces as a way of investigating how women negotiate the meanings embedded in sexualised commodities. Finally '*Fun in the Sex Shop*' explores the function of the various discourses of fun identified as being on offer in the women's sex shop.

The Shop Window

...I suppose that's the sign of a sex shop really. The fact that things – there's nothing for sale in the window and it doesn't say 'sex shop' like it would in Soho... so therefore it was just a bit more, you know there was no kind of statement about it's what its purpose – about what it was.

Sexy Kitten

In the previous chapter I introduced the theme of visibility in the context of popular discourse around the increased prominence of a progressively sexualised culture and suggested that visibility is a more complex and nuanced component of sex shopping than this ubiquitous discourse might suggest. We looked at visibility as it is materialised in the actual location of some of the shops under discussion and if we continue to follow the loose structure of interview testimony, having located the shop our consumers are now standing outside. So now my participants have got to the shop what is their reaction to the face it presents to the street?:

Well maybe Coco de Mer, you wouldn't necessarily know that it was a ...yeah, you wouldn't necessarily know that it was a sex shop.

Kate

Kate is describing her reaction to the exterior façade of Coco de Mer (see fig 6.1) and She Said, Nua and Coco de Mer all have window displays carefully coded to

differentiate themselves from the familiar markers of the traditional sex shop. (see 6.2) For some of my participants this means that these façades conceal their sex shop function but this concealment is predominantly read off by consumers as a sign of 'upmarketness' and sophistication in explicit opposition to their reading of the secretiveness of the traditional sex shop with its shuttered windows and obscure nomenclature:

...Coco de Mer and like the higher end ones, like the ones I went to in Paris, which are actually like, you wouldn't really from the outside, [think] that they were a sex shop necessarily.

And later...:

It's more like a boutique or whatever.

Marley

Coco de Mer is located in London's Covent Garden close to other mid to high end shops although not in a street that sees very heavy consumer footfall. Its tactic is clearly to break with the stereotype of the traditional sex shop by aligning itself with other forms of upmarket gendered consumption but with the added frisson that consuming at Coco de Mer establishes the shopper as displaying a refined and stylish form of sexually liberated feminine identity. Thus here we begin to establish a tension between sex shopping as embodying notions of concealment or hiddenness and the possible 'status' implicit for some women in going sex shopping, which necessarily requires a measure of visibility. In contrast to the shuttered aspect of the traditional shop exterior or even the subtly sandblasted windows of Sh!, Coco de Mer makes a feature of its windows, employing codified strategies such as fin de siècle style typefaces, dummies displaying risqué designer lingerie or neo burlesque style costumes and signals to the liberated literati such as a hardback copy of Anais Nin and so on. (see fig 6.3) Heidi discusses Coco de Mer's windows:

They're beautiful windows, nice colours, but you wouldn't necessarily always recognise it as a sex shop. Interesting. Sometimes you do, sometimes it's very clearly one and sometimes not at all.

So you may not realise it was a sex shop

Sometimes you don't and sometimes you do. It depends what they've got in the window. I've looked at it and it could have been anything. A clothes shop and then they're quite explicit so they change. They've got a nice window yeah.

Heidi

Heidi's positive reaction to the aestheticism and commodity ambivalence that she has located in Coco de Mer's windows fits well with the overall tone of her testimony. Heidi is very explicit in defining her conception of how a women's sex shop should visually and materially manifest her particular notion of feminine sexuality, she is clear that she likes the equivocal quality of Coco's windows, that they sit well with her own construction of female sexuality. Several other participants also commented on the façade of Coco de Mer as well as some of the other women's sex shops:

...you go in not knowing what it is. Some of them you could just walk in thinking they were just selling underwear or something.

Kate

Again we see that this ambiguity is a strategy used to mark out the female orientated sex shop from the explicitly codified traditional male shop - to code it as not only 'posh' but feminine in its very ambiguousness. While the masculine shop is clearly identified by its darkened windows, its neon signs and its 'no under 18s' signage (see fig 6.4), the female oriented shops tend to be more abstruse in terms of advertising themselves to the street:

Kate: I don't think I'd heard of it before I went into it [Coco de Mer] but I think I came across it by accident, by not realising that it was a sex shop... Yeah, it came across as a high end, a lovely women's luxury boutique that anyone...

Kate: Luxury.

Marley: That anyone, that you would go into.

Kate and Marley are making the point that for many women there is potential embarrassment in walking into a shop that explicitly advertises itself as a sex shop and this has already been discussed in terms of the way in which, for some of my participants, this discomfiture is obviated and the practice normalised by sex shopping with a friend. But clearly, the women's sex shop must position itself on the margins between being attractively risqué and not so explicitly sexual that women are inhibited from walking in the door. Veronica suggests that:

Coco de Mer is very much like the astrology shop down the road... Yeah, I think it's on Monmouth Street, there's an astrology shop and that's kind of got like strange things [laughs] in the window and I always think that's very similar to Coco de Mer.

Oh, I'm going to go and look at the astrology shop!

[laughter] There's kind of like crystals and stones and things and the same kind of aura about it.

Veronica

While Veronica's meaning is not entirely clear here, she seems to be in agreement with Heidi, Marley and Kate that Coco de Mer's frontage tends to obfuscate the nature of its merchandise. For here the exterior of the shop serves to normalise sex shopping by blurring the distinction between high end 'boutique' and luxury sex shop. Clearly Emily's comment that 'posh means you can walk in anywhere' is apposite, the shop window is central to our understanding of the women's sex shop, significantly because the less the shop looks like a sex shop the easier it is for some women to enter it. Kate confirms this view below:

It wants to make it look like there's nothing wrong with it but it is quite a private thing, like it's not trying to advertise the sex shop, but it's saying there's nothing wrong with it, it's not pretending that it's not a sex shop, it's trying to make it a bit more upmarket

And how does that make you feel about going into it, the 'upmarketness'?

I think for some people it probably makes them feel more comfortable going in.

Kate

As discussed in the previous chapter, sex shop windows are subject to regulation by local council licensing officers who must check the appropriateness of window displays to the character of the surrounding environment. Additionally the nature of any products for sale near the entrance to the shop - or which can be seen by passers-by - may come under scrutiny from local licensing authorities which prohibit any sexual products from being visible from the street. These regulations, as we will see, may also impact on the interior layout of the shops:

...I think there are practical issues around having sex toys in an accessible area, um I think there might be licensing issues as well, so you might have to, you might have to have a bell system if you had sex toys on display, you know in an accessible area.

Rachel, shop manager She Said

The differing demands of regulatory forces in different boroughs or areas and streets within a borough, clearly accounts in part for the diverse faces that

women's sex shops presents to the street. While none of the shops under scrutiny here are licensed, clearly owners must deal with the varying requirements of each local authority as it must take into account the immediate surroundings of each shop and the potential objections of local residents and businesses. Rachel described the variable responses of different local authorities to shops within their remit. As she has worked in two differently located Brighton sex shops, I asked her about her experience of licensing restrictions:

Do you happen to know if the licensing authorities ever paid any attention to Tickled³¹ because that is more on the beaten track?

When I first started working there I know they'd had some complaints about their window display and there was an occasion when they'd been asked to remove a whip from their window display. I think really it might be different in a different city or town, I know there's a lingerie shop in Lewes which is quite similar to She Said in that it's quite sort of burlesquey and it's got a similar kind of vibe and she was asked to remove her 'A' boards which feature a woman in lingerie and a kind of gown and she'd had complaints about the 'A' boards and the council actually removed her 'A' boards because – but that just wouldn't happen in Brighton you know.

Rachel

Clearly Rachel's testimony is underlining the differing tolerance thresholds of various boroughs to a shop which openly displays itself as risqué. While Coco de Mer and to some extent Tickled, Nua and She Said in Brighton make their initial approach to the consumer via elaborate window displays marking the notion of sexual consumption as not only socially acceptable but stylish, exclusive or humorous - in Hoxton, Sh!'s windows are opaque. However, for Kathryn Hoyle, owner of the shop, this is a self-conscious strategy to guard the privacy of her female consumers, to allow them to browse without the scrutiny of curious passers-by. For her this is a significant manifestation of her 'woman friendly' ethos for the shop and thus Sh!'s windows neatly encapsulate those tensions between the meanings ascribed to notions of public and private in representation from both sex shop consumers and owners. Both conditions are harnessed in the service of a notion of woman centricness, for example ideation around both are, at varying points in testimony, utilised in discussion around women feeling comfortable with their own sexual consumption. Here testimony shows that Hoyle feels her tactic of

³¹ Tickled in Brighton is situated in the busy North Laine shopping area. This part of Brighton has a slightly alternative atmosphere and a proliferation of independent shops and cafes.

ensuring privacy for her customers has been hijacked by regulatory concerns that seek to position her shop within the very masculine sexual framework that she seeks to subvert. For both Hoyle and for the local authority who seek to regulate the design of her shop, the windows are a physical conceptualisation of the meanings embedded in the notion of sex shop – meanings that are similarly manifested but differently inscribed. Hence, we see again that while a familiar strategy of concealment is being appropriated by the women's sex shop, at this juncture the owner explicitly lays claim to the windows being a materialisation of the shop's rationale; the windows are obscured in order to make women consumers feel 'comfortable' away from (potentially male) voyeurs. (fig 6.5) On the other hand, for the legislators the opaque windows protect passers-by from inadvertently observing the potential dangers of both goods and goings-on inside the shop. When asked about the impact of legislation on the design of Sh!, Kathryn Hoyle says:

They talked to us about the windows, that was it.

But you didn't want the windows?

Oh, we just had this ridiculous, you know when you just get into...you feel yourself descending into some childish argument: "well, I didn't want it anyway"... "Well you're not going to have it". It was really like that [laughter]. They just had this kind of thing: "you must cover your windows"... "We are covering our windows because of our customers"... "No, but you must because of passers-by"... "We are covering them... ". It just got like that – ridiculous.

Hoyle

Thus Kathryn Hoyle's attempt to re-claim the cultural meanings of the blacked out sex shop window was somewhat spoiled, for her at least, by the demands of the local authority which failed to understand the nuances of this re-appropriation. Janice Radway's seminal text *Reading the Romance* has prepared the way for this notion of re-working or 'appropriation' of a patriarchal text. Hoyle constructs the blacked out windows of the woman friendly Sh! as a: 'declaration of independence' (1991, p7) The sex shop window is subject to the reading of what Radway ³²(citing Stanley Fish) terms an 'interpretive community' (1991, p8) the interpretive community here being those consumers who read the blacked out window of a traditional sex shop as oppressive of and hostile to, women but when

³² From the introduction to the 1991 edition of *Reading The Romance*. The text was originally published in 1987.

differently located on an explicitly women centric space (and like the interior of the shop, the exterior of Sh! is a vivid pink) the windows are understood in opposition to this patriarchal reading:

whatever the theoretical possibility of an infinite number of readings, in fact, there are patterns or regularities to what viewers and readers bring to texts in large part because they acquire specific cultural competencies as a consequence of their particular social location. Similar readings are produced, I argue, because similarly located readers learn a similar set of reading strategies and interpretive codes that they bring to bear upon the texts they encounter.

(Radway 1991, p8)

In part this proposal neatly pre-figures a forthcoming discussion around access to the empowerment purportedly offered by the women's sex shop, in that this access is determined by the consumers' ability to read off the particular cultural codes embedded in products and spaces. However, it also has a bearing on my proposal that the women's sex shop can only be and *is* only, read off the traditional male sex shop, as we have established in chapter 4. In actuality several of my participants understood Sh! as so vastly differentiated from the obscuration (characterised as 'privacy') understood by the traditional male sex shop that they failed to read the windows as blacked out at all:

...it's quite bright you know, nice light windows, you can see into the shop, go up a few steps and you're there, there's nothing hidden or...

Veronica

Louise also remembered Sh! as not having blacked out windows:

It's decorated ...it's painted pink round the windows and things... erm it has glass windows and things, not blacked out windows.

Louise

As did Melanie:

The font on the shop front is really nice and it's very girly and it was very open, like I said the door was open and the windows were not blacked out or anything, because of that it feels like you're walking into any other shop.

Melanie

The windows of the Hoxton branch of Sh!, while they are not literally 'blackened', are very definitely obscured, (see fig 6.6) however these consumers have collectively based their understanding of Sh! on a culturally produced idea of sex

shop so cohesive that they have incorporated this into their visual understanding of the façade of the shop. I am stressing this exchange of meaning in the sense of Tasker's account of feminism's re-discovery of the popular in which:

ideology becomes a lived relation and meaning a contested area, so that audiences gained the power to negotiate ideologically with the text.

(1991, p86)

In a sense this mis-reading or mis-seeing of the Sh! windows is strongly emblematic of, what this thesis suggests, is my participant's ideological engagement with the text – in this case the Sh! shop windows. For the very *nature* of the shop, expressed and materialised in design terms, positions the consumer in an ideological relationship to it. It is clear to my participants that Sh!'s windows are 'meaning-full' and this meaning, this 'woman- centricness', is collectively understood even while the windows are visually 'mis-read'. Thus we see that the concrete actuality of its façade does not threaten the security of their reading of Sh! as a woman friendly space – for the women I interviewed Sh! is female orientated therefore you can see into it!

The ideological power of these shop windows is underlined by Hoyle's argument with the local authority whose understanding of these windows is embedded in another framework, even while being informed by the same cultural and visual understandings of the traditional sex shop as my participants and Hoyle. The shared nature of this understanding is further underscored by Emma Casey's analysis of another masculine defined space – the betting shop – which reveals that removing opaque frontages and improving visibility into the interior of the shop has been a strategy used to encourage more women consumers to participate in betting. (Casey 2008, p38) Indeed, as we have seen in the previous chapter, so powerful are the meanings attached to the window, that it is the notion of being behind those darkened windows (of a traditional masculine shop) and invisible from the safety of the street, that most inhibits some of my participants from shopping there:

If it was completely blacked out I would probably be extremely reluctant to go in. I wouldn't like that.

Why's that?

I suppose because I also want to look out, once I'm in, I want to look out. And also as a female going into somewhere where, you know, once I've gone in the door anything could happen, I wouldn't do that.

Heidi

Heidi's fear expressed above, underlines the ideological power of the window and it was in discussing the sex shop window that participants first revealed the significance of a framing discourse which polarised meanings embedded in ideas of openness or hiddenness or public and private. In simplistic terms, openness or visibility is *good* because it is woman friendly and hiddenness is *bad* in that it signals a masculine paradigm which threatens women on a number of fronts, including, as Heidi suggests, their safety. However, while these meanings initially appeared clear and straightforward, further analysis of testimony revealed complexities and tangents which served to problematize these apparently oppositional structures. It seems that in the liminal space lying between the visible and the hidden, the public and the private, are other implications and other imperatives some of which, according to participants, serve liberatory female interests and some which serve a model of sexuality which is inherently masculine. The ambiguities around these notions rooted here in discussion of material objects, serves to invert the thrust of broader current popular and media debates around the sexualisation of culture, which rest on the notion that increased visibility is essentially bad and some measure of hiddenness - good. Obviously, this discussion is ubiquitous and can be seen for example in recent attempts to institute automatic limits to accessing internet pornography in the interests of children. However, as we have already established, this discussion also centres on the ways that the increased visibility of sexual consumption and representation - for example the popular adoption of porn chic as both style of representation and practice (pole dancing and stripping classes for example) - might work in the interests of women by facilitating their access to a sexual realm previously denied them. Brian McNair characterises this notion, in the title of his 2002 text, as the 'democratisation of desire':

porno-chic...might be viewed as an index of the sexual maturation of contemporary capitalist societies, rather than a measure of their degeneration into sleaze.

(McNair 2002, p87)

The following section problematizes this dialectic further by investigating how participants represent visibility and hiddenness via layout design in the women's sex shop.

Upstairs, downstairs and round the back: the layout of the women's sex shop

Marley: Is that the one? At the back you can go downstairs, it's all underwear upstairs and the first time I went in I was with my...

Kate: I've been there and downstairs is like a little dungeon bit.

Marley: It's like a tiny little, and you wouldn't know from upstairs... The first time I went in ... I think I was with my grandma, we went in because you wouldn't know and we went in and it was underwear and really lovely like ladies wallets and things like that.

For my participants the design of sex shop windows embodies a raft of ideas focusing on the reassignment and re-coding of the sex shop as a feminine (and women centric) space. While we found tensions and contradictions in terms of both practice and interpretation, we found a high level of cohesion between the women in terms of how ideas around 'openness', expressed as being able to see in or out of the shop, are understood as a desirable component of a feminine mode of sexuality. For the women I interviewed the shop windows are a key factor in differentiating the women's sex shop from the masculine model and thus their design impacted on how the women experienced visiting a sex shop or indeed on whether they visited a sex shop at all. This section will continue an investigation of the ways in which notions of hiddenness or concealment are moreover endemic to the design of shop layouts, looking at how these ideas are appropriated or repositioned to embody a representation of feminine sexuality. Furthermore, just as the shop windows of sex shops are affected by potential legislative intervention, so to some extent is the arrangement of the interiors of the shops – shops may be inspected in terms of what can be seen from the street, not only through the window but also through an open doorway. In most shops, both those shops that are licensed and those that are not such as those that are the object of this thesis, the more explicit goods such as vibrators, dildos, visual merchandise such as explicit magazines, dvds and so on, tend to be positioned away from the line of sight of passers-by. Veronica describes her experience of the layout of Harmony, a licensed shop:

Harmony's a bit strange because the one in Charing Cross Road, I've got a feeling that the others might be the same, you kind of walk into like a corridor and you can't see anything until you get round the corridor, there's still that kind of "ooh, there's something very naughty here" and the windows, I think the windows are also mostly blacked out, if I remember correctly.

Veronica

Even in Soho, in Ann Summers which is not licensed, the more explicit goods are located towards the back of the shop or behind a shop fitting which hides them from the doorway, so that all that can be seen through the windows and from the door is lingerie. This type of arrangement can be seen at its most explicit in licensed shops such as Harmony as outlined by Veronica above, in which the main door opens onto a small area selling lingerie and the softer fantasy wear such as rubber nurses uniforms. Sexy Kitten also describes a visit to Harmony:

I found it a little bit odd the way, to get into it, you have to go, you have to kind of go in a door and go behind a, you go in a door and you get into this little sort of small hallway and then you have to turn right to get into the shop and obviously that's because it's obscuring the contents to passers-by.

Sexy Kitten

In order to see the 'harder' goods; toys, dvds, magazines, dolls and so on, the consumer must go through a curved corridor which prevents this 'illicit' area from being seen from the main entrance - as well as negotiate an 'over 18s only' warning sign. (fig 6.7):

Those kind of places are not dungeons or basements but they are much more erm...closed. So there's like the way you walk in there's kind of a screen, and you have to sort of walk round it and then into a door rather than just being able to walk in. It's still kind of almost hidden a lot of the time.

Georgia

This bifurcated layout design is also apparent in many of the women friendly shops. In some cases, such as Tickled and She Said, explicitly sexualised merchandise is located not just at the rear of a shop but up or down a flight of stairs. Several participants suggested that the goods displayed upstairs or near to the door in women's shops are humorous or in some other way 'lighter':

Did you go downstairs?

Yes, yes I did. I got a whip downstairs. You mean the fact that it's not so open and light and it's a bit more hard core down there?

Did you feel it was more hard core downstairs?

The products that they've got downstairs are a bit more hard core I think yeah, yeah, and of course it's not natural light and it felt a little bit more hard core yes, And the stuff that they've got on display on the top floor is much more fun, you know all these odd coloured dildos and the gels that you can taste and the wonderful corsets it's a bit more "light".

Louise

Other participants highlighted a style of sexualised 'novelty' product which plays on a discourse of 'naughtiness', or perhaps a traditional style of 'seaside' humour. In relation to layout this style of product is generally strategically positioned near to the entrance to the store, possibly, as Kate suggests, during a discussion of packaging design, in order to relax the consumer who may be uncomfortable on entering a sex shop (fig 6.8):

...are they trying to make it into a joke? Or are they trying to make you feel like "it's totally fine to buy this"?

Kate

Annabel describes the layout of Tickled which takes this approach to shop layout, where 'jokey' goods are positioned at street level while the customer must go downstairs for the sex toys:

Erm upstairs it's very much more kind of jokey really, it's jokey little bits of underwear, jokey books, jokey postcards, its jokey I'd say and bit kind of flippant, slightly tongue in cheek. That seems to be how they market their...with their window it's often slightly kind of jokey as well, the stuff they've got in their window and that's the kind of , the tenor I'd say of the upstairs. Downstairs they've got lots and lots of vibrators and dildos and butt plugs and stuff like that...

Annabel

The following extended exchange between Melanie and Georgia on their experience of going into Sh! suggests that utilising the language and products of other and more familiar types of shopping might be another tactic used to make the feminine consumer feel more comfortable walking into the potentially *uncomfortable* environs of a sex shop:

G: I remember walking in [to Sh!] and...were there candles or something first? I know, there was all those lubricants.

M: There were things like tampons and actual... and natural [inaud] towels and stuff like that and you thought "oh"!

G: Yeah, that was weird.

Recyclable ones?

M: Exactly. And those cups, [laughter] it's disgusting! Those little cups that you use instead of, you know. And it felt like you were walking into a chemist you know, because it has all these things that you would find in any supermarket, with at least a shelf with all the you know sanitary towels and things and then it went on to these lubricants and...

G: [interjects] They were expensive though weren't they?

M: They were [inaud]

So are you saying Melanie that as you first walked in, it didn't feel particularly sexual?

M: No, not at all. Because it just had products such as women's toiletries and then the next shelf afterwards had erm lubricants that had a big sign saying "try me, taste me" that was interesting and..

Did you?

M: Yes, because it's again, like a dare. You think "I've got to, it says I must"
Melanie and Georgia

For Melanie the products encountered immediately inside the entrance to Sh! normalise the experience of sex shopping by referencing a chemist or supermarket. However, the shop's invitation to 'try' and 'taste' the various lubricants on offer echoes a social discourse already noted around sex shopping as a 'dare', a challenge posed by female friends. She Said in Brighton sells primarily luxury lingerie and burlesque wear on the ground level floor of the shop, while the majority of the sex toys are located in the basement (see fig 6.9), Rachel, the shop manager, explains the rationale for the layout, one which is primarily dictated by licensing requirements:

We have a policy, it doesn't really need to be brought into force very often, but that downstairs is over eighteen only. We'd need to have probably a bell system if we were to have toys upstairs because of licensing, because otherwise anyone would be free to walk in and it might not be appropriate for people who are under eighteen to be able to freely walk into a sex shop.

Rachel

Clearly the notion that sexual consumption is best conducted in private is one that has traditionally been adopted by the traditional and masculinised sex shop and is a representation of male sexual consumption encapsulated by the ubiquitous chain called 'Private shops'. While for Rachel this type of designed layout has an advantage for the female consumer in that women can browse discreetly and in private, this notion of privacy is constructed via a discourse around women feeling 'comfortable' in the environment of the shop and therefore, we may infer, comfortable with their identity as sexual consumers. Thus this layout has been largely adopted and appropriated in the design of women's shops and again, while I suggest that displaying the 'lighter' or softer goods near the entrance is a self-conscious tactic used by shops to ease a cautious consumer's passage into the sex shop or encourage a more confident woman to progress towards the rear of the shop, it nevertheless represents an appropriation or a making over of the tropes of the parent - and masculine - design aesthetic which privileges notions of the hidden and concealed.

Sexy Kitten, describing a visit to She Said, unintentionally highlights that while there are similarities in layout design between the Soho shops she has visited with her boyfriend and the women centric She Said, her response to and reading of the two types of shop is hugely different:

...but comparing the two I would say that...because they're in basements and I think that being in the basement adds to the sort of seediness of it all and the fact that it's a subterranean world and stuff like that and no daylight, there's no sunlight, no windows and She Said in Brighton you know you have two floors in She Said and you've got nice shop windows and sunlight comes through. And the same in Ann Summers – they've got the upper floor and you obviously have the down floor but I think the two hard core ones I went to in Soho – and the gay one as well – were downstairs which obviously is very common, But it's that, for me – and also a thing of claustrophobia about it as well, restriction I suppose.

Sexy Kitten

For Sexy Kitten the women's shop is much more 'female, feminine and so much more less threatening' and clearly for her one significant contributing factor to this sensation is what she describes as the light filled upstairs section with 'nice shop

windows' which she enters from the street, a section filled with upmarket lingerie which must be negotiated before going downstairs to more explicit 'over 18s only' section that Rachel describes. Interestingly, Sexy Kitten goes on to explain that:

Ann Summers doesn't have that kind of – it's open you just walk in and so does She Said there's none of this sort of not knowing what you're going into type of thing and you can't see what's inside.

Sexy Kitten

In the same way as the opaque shop windows of Sh! are read by some participants as transparent, so Sexy Kitten reads the women friendly sex shop (and she includes Ann Summers here) as revealing the nature of its wares to the street. On first meeting Heidi and asking her about her initial visit to a women centric sex shop, she immediately focuses on segregations between upstairs and down:

I first went upstairs in Tickled, not downstairs, I didn't realise that – and I was like what's this? I didn't realise there was a downstairs.

Heidi

Already in Heidi's narrative the 'downstairs' of the women's sex shop has assumed the mantle of a Bluebeard's room! It is in these spaces that are 'upstairs, downstairs or round the back' of the sex shop that the public space of the shop-front which may be seen by anyone from the street, collides with the more private sexualised space that is restricted or obscured from the view of the casual observer. Thus this spatial complexity of the sex shop, in terms of how it engages with notions of the public and the private, is revealed in the juxtapositions and tensions between the space of public consumption that may in some cases be seen through a door or window and the semi-private consumption space which is hidden away below street level or at the end of a twisted corridor. Bell's (2006) study of 'dogging' sites examines the collisions between the public space of park or layby and the sexual activities that take place there after dark. His examination of these spaces and of the technologies that facilitate the practice, also raises questions about the complexities of fixing or coding the relationship of such places to notions of public or private. While Bell reports that other texts have examined dogging sites in terms of how they are 'appropriating' public spaces for 'alternative' leisure activities which challenge the practices of normative sexual behaviour, he suggests that a more nuanced and 'fluid' understanding of such spaces may be more revealing:

...the public/private distinction is much more complexly 'folded' in these spaces, and that 'a more fluid and topologically complex interpretation of public and private space is necessary to understand the changing geographies of sexuality.

(Bell, D 2006, p402)

While the sex shop is not a site in which explicit sexual practices are generally seen to take place, this complex, 'folded', relationship between public and semi-private space does feature in the testimony of my participants. The divisions between public and private, permissible and transgressive space, are relatively clear cut in participant's descriptions of the traditional and licensed sex shop:

I didn't know until recently – until my boyfriend- that sex shops in Soho always tend to have art books, art bookshops above them...so I wouldn't necessarily have known before I met him that sometimes if you see an art bookshop in Soho that it automatically has a sex shop underneath it.

Sexy Kitten

However, we see that in terms of the meanings participants ascribe to the layout of the women's sex shop, the 'vanilla' sections of the shop co-exist in a state of tension with those areas identified as harder core and therefore semi hidden or concealed. Shiri Zinn a designer of upmarket sex toys tells the story of how she was commissioned to design a sex toy for a well-known fashion house:

It was so obvious it was just for press impact, it was so obvious and the fact that they put it behind a curtain in the store. In every store it was, even if you go and look at their store off Bond Street, it's behind a curtain. Now what does that say?

Shiri Zinn

Zinn's narrative works at several levels, presenting her at once as an ethical designer with a strong and even 'feminist' rationale but furthermore she appears to be questioning the subversive power of a dildo hidden behind a curtain and interrogating the motives of the fashion house for including it as part of their display. Testimony suggests that accounts of this layout scheme materialise other profounder tensions between the public nature of sexual consumption in Sh! , Coco or Nua and a socio normative account of female autoerotic sexuality as a very private practice:

publicity and privacy co-join differently in different spaces, and it is in sites that are imagined as not solely public or solely private that new identities will emerge.

(Bell 2006, P403)

Heidi is very clear that she is antipathetic to the segmented design of the majority of the shops both women centric and traditional. For her this separation between the permitted or acceptable and the transgressive space suggests a bifurcated approach to female sexuality sanctioning some practices and critiquing or censoring others:

I don't see anything in it that is sordid, so for me by having it separate, you know upstairs is the clothes and that's ok and downstairs is the other stuff because it's not, it's all kind of one thing really – for me. And it also looks very different quite often, I mean the upstairs where we've just been in She Said is quite burlesque , it's quite , you know it's got all of that and downstairs it gets a bit, don't know . The way they've presented it, it has a clinical, it has a ...it's out of context.

Heidi

Kathryn Hoyle owner of Sh! is vigorous in making a similar point around the implications for an understanding of female sexuality embedded in this upstairs/downstairs approach to the display of sexual goods. Here she starts by distinguishing her business model from that of Ann Summers and continues by making the point that in Sh!:

We won't make this distinction between the nice unthreatening stuff [lowers voice conspiratorially!] is here and downstairs is...that's so often [normal voice] the case in a lot of the shops...[whispers] "the bondage is downstairs". I mean our bondage is downstairs but some of it's upstairs and uh some of the underwear is downstairs and some of the...I don't know what - the whips - are round at the top you know, basically we don't want to make that distinction...What that's actually saying, suggesting, is that there's this safe area and then there's the darker area but I also kind of have [inaud] worries about it, about how women's sexuality is now sort of being driven...There's no distinction between buying a fluffy pair of...a fluffy blindfold isn't in any way less exciting or less sort of, you know...

Or more 'ok'?

Or more ok absolutely, or more ok. So it's just basically that's how we've decided it and that's how we'll continue to ...keep it like that.

Hoyle

Hoyle clearly identifies her business as having a 'feminist' rationale which validates feminine sexuality in all its myriad forms. For her any differentiation between those goods deemed 'vanilla' or acceptable and therefore positioned at street level and those which are not and are therefore semi hidden downstairs or round the back, signals a retrogressive step. Thus this seeming appropriation of the designed layout of the traditional sex shop, one which conceals all or part of the interior in order to shield the merchandise from the casual gaze of the passer-by is clearly problematic for some of my participants. Heidi and Hoyle feel that a female sexuality, materialised in the women's sex shop as goods and designed interiors, is not fully culturally endorsed – that some things are 'ok' and some are not. Therefore I suggest that this bi-furcation in shop layout is one key way in which the 'making over' of a masculine paradigm expressed via design is potentially problematic for some women. Here I wish to position this discussion as a part of the wider debate around the re-appropriation of practices conventionally described as part of a dominant masculine ideology, such as pole dancing, neo-burlesque and so on:

the re-evaluation of forms which, within a feminist "common sense", form part of the representational conspiracy to keep women in their place has been problematic.

Tasker (1991:85)

While popular discussion has coalesced, as discussed in Chapter 3, around either cautious endorsement or heated critique, and while we see that participants have uniformly stressed the desirability of 'openness' in the women's sex shop, it is clear that this openness has limitations and complexities which are recognised by some consumers. That notions of openness and concealment, permissible and transgressive space still feature as a part of the significations for women's sex shop remains problematic and here the design of both shop windows and shop layout point to a sometimes uneasy appropriation of those signifying codes for sex shop - the blacked out windows and the sleazy back room.

'It wants to make it look like there's nothing wrong with it': *pushing up the sex shop*

Testimony reveals a number of key themes via which difference is established and appropriation conducted - themes that sit within an overarching paradigm of 'making over' or 'poshing up' of the traditional male orientated sex shop. This is ostensibly a flippant, invented phrase but one that I have adapted from participant testimony and am using self-consciously (since I cannot find an existing term that quite materialises this thinking) to encompass a raft of ways in which participants explain the means by which the women's sex shop distinguishes itself from the masculine model:

You know it's the same stuff but it's very beautifully designed and it's *posh*. And *posh* means that you can walk into anywhere.

Emily

Therefore, this section prioritises participant's accounts of things and spaces, acknowledging the ways in which the design, style and look of shops and objects are positioned by my participants as key to the process by which a commodified feminine sexuality is sought, established and maintained, moving the sex shop from its construction as sordid and sleazy to stylish and upmarket.

It is evident that Emily's statement makes a clear link between the notion of the shop as 'posh' and the means by which the shop may facilitate feminine access to the consumption of sexualised spaces and sexual products. For Emily the 'poshness' of shop and product provides an *alibi* for the consumption of sexualised objects by a potentially timid consumer. Plainly women's potential to purchase a commodified account of female sexual empowerment must be dependent on women's perception that they can access the commodity on both an intellectual, emotional and a material level.

Of course, all women's sex shops do not share the same ambience or exterior and interior style and the different shops promote somewhat divergent versions of 'female-centricness' mediated in various ways through design. However, participants testify that it is the 'poshing up' of products, product display and interior spaces which is the overwhelmingly significant strategy by which the sex shop is 'made over' in order to make its appeal to the feminine consumer.

Therefore, this third section focuses on the ways in which participants conceptualise goods and interior spaces, particularly in terms of how these may be envisaged as a part of a project of both normalisation and regulation - facilitating or inhibiting access to the version of feminine sexuality on offer in the women's sex

shop. Previously this thesis has begun to identify some shared key tactics used by the women centric sex shop in order to make its offer to the female consumer. For example: the appealing windows and window display, the idiosyncratic shop name, the stylish interior and a sense of openness to the street - even while, in actuality, this openness is challenged and compromised as we established in the previous section. Furthermore participants note that sexual consumption is normalised for the consumer in a raft of ways, for example, several participants highlight the positioning of 'softer' products near the entrance to shops, thus easing the female consumer's passage towards the often more sexualised goods inside. We also established in chapter 5 that, for some participants, the sex shopping experience is normalised by its construction as a social activity. In chapter 4 that for other women this is achieved through the way in which it may be represented as allied to familiar discourses of feminine consumption such as visiting a spa, eating chocolate and going to the supermarket.

In contrast to the situating of sexual consumption within a framework of domestication, as we have seen, some participants characterise shopping in the women's sex shop as a form of luxury consumption. Kate's explanation for the luxuriousness of Coco de Mer is that: 'It wants to make it look like there's nothing wrong with it'. Anna's critical account of shopping in Sh! also dwells on the notion of acceptability but makes a link between the female centric ethos of the shop and its 'softcore' merchandise. Here she is comparing it to Harmony and is unaware at this point that Sh! is unlicensed:

to be honest I was a little bit disappointed, I thought because it was predominantly female orientated it might be...I expected more, I don't know what exactly I expected more of but I expected it to be a bit more out there maybe, or ...it almost seemed like a gift shop ...in a way...you could buy sort of candles, like a boxed set with candles and massage oil and condoms and things like that, which I'm sure you can by in the other shops but it just had a different feel.

Anna

Anna is slightly 'disappointed' by the nature of Sh!'s products which she clearly feels embody a kind of 'soft', sensual construction of female sexuality and she clearly resents the lack of challenge to a normative narrative of female sexuality.

She feels this might be a response to the perceived expectations of its women consumers:

whether that's because they feel that women may not want that extra risqué element I don't know.

Anna

Shiri Zinn, a designer of upmarket sex toys, extends this framing of luxury as conferring acceptability. When asked about her design ethos she responded:

Yes, sure there's luxury it's obvious, but that's not where I'm coming from and why I'm doing it. The luxury is the point of seduction by which you can seduce these women into changing the way they think, moving boundaries, getting them to be a little bit more... into demanding what's theirs and their pleasure and looking into what they want and maybe saying "yes, ok my sexuality is worth a thousand bob" or this or that. But it's from that perspective, it's not the same perspective as a Prada bag and it's certainly not just about that... So yeah, the minute you make something beautiful it's going to seduce people and become more acceptable in that way. But if you leave it at that then "oh so what?" it becomes ...it's actually from a deeper place.

Shiri Zinn

Zinn's position is complex and contradictory, while her designs are highly expensive and explicitly and perhaps stereotypically gendered (fig 6.10) (see her use of crystal and coloured feathers!) she clearly identifies her work as serving both to facilitate and validate female sexual fulfilment as well as to: 'push [the] boundaries' of what is acceptable for 'fashion consumption':

But my stuff is more about the shock value and what that does to the psychology and what that does – how far you can push boundaries by what is acceptable and unacceptable for public in inverted commas "fashion consumption" because my pieces are like a big pink dick with diamonds or...the whip is like massive, or the crystals and that are more subtle but the one that got so much attention was specifically that carrot looking thing and...I didn't try to conceal what that was that was...the whole point...I'm not trying to conceal, hide, the sex side...

Shiri Zinn

Gill identifies a dichotomy which echoes the inherent contradictions raised by Zinn's work. Her analysis of what she calls 'midriff' advertising unpacks the

message of feminine sexual self-empowerment contained within contemporary advertisements:

Almost as central to midriff advertising as the notions of choice and “pleasing one’s self”, is a discourse of feminine empowerment.

Contemporary advertising targeted at the midriffs suggests, above all, that buying the product will empower you “I pull the strings”, asserts a beautiful woman in a black Wonderbra; “Empower your eyes” says an advert for Shiseido mascara; “Discover the power of femininity. Defy conventions and take the lead”, reads an advert for Elizabeth Arden beauty products. What is on offer in all these adverts is a specific kind of power – the sexual power to bring men to their knees.

(2009, p103)

For Gill embedded in the message of feminine empowerment represented in these adverts, is the assumption that there is: ‘no contradiction’ between ‘what “I” want and what men might want of “me”’ (ibid p101). Zinn views the ‘luxury’ nature of her designs as integral to what she sees as a process of, in her words, ‘change’ in terms of women’s access to sexual enjoyment and she undeniably reveals a commitment to women’s sexual self-fulfilment. Perversely, however, she shows no sign of dissatisfaction or frustration when she explains that a lot of her work is bought by men for their women:

Generally, it’s men wanting to make fabulous gifts...somebody who will buy eight pieces from the collection for each one of their in inverted commas “girls” that they have come to San Tropez with for the day:

Shiri Zinn

Clearly this is a scenario which sits neatly within Gills description of the post-feminist representation of female sexual empowerment as one in which women’s pleasure ultimately serves the interests of men, it is something:

straight out of the most predictable templates of male sexual fantasy, yet which must also be understood as authentically owned by the women who produce them.

(ibid, p102)

Zinn’s testimony suggests that while it is via the visual design of goods and their spaces for display that the women’s sex shop is most highly differentiated from its traditional forbearer, it is here perhaps, that the uneasy symbiosis between notions of luxury, high design and female ‘empowerment’ are most clearly materialised.

Veronica's account of Coco de Mer conflicts with Zinn's espousal of luxury as an instrument of female sexual suffrage. Veronica suggests that the luxuriousness of the shop and the aestheticizing of the product does not simply serve to make female sexual consumption more acceptable but neutralises the object in terms of its being something that has a sexual use value:

I think I felt a look but don't touch kind of thing, it did very much seem to be, even designer, which is a little bit crazy at the end of the day most of the things are just going one hole or another... I think it made the sexual experience very detached and I think there's a very detached feeling about it, that it's something that you wouldn't... That you would put on your table rather than actually use... I did feel it was much less sexual, that you wouldn't use these things.

Veronica

Attwood recognises the centrality of 'style and fashion' to the marketing of women's sexual products but takes it as axiomatic that a proliferation of products purporting to provide a technologically assisted orgasm means that masturbation is a key discourse in of sexual consumption:

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. The foregrounding of auto-eroticism is also key in this process, as evidenced by the speed with which the Rabbit vibrator has become one of the most visible contemporary signs of active female sexuality.

(Attwood 2005, p395)

In contrast, Veronica's emphatic assertion that the extreme aestheticizing of some sexualised products obscures, even nullifies their function, is echoed by Annabel in discussing the presentation of goods at Coco de Mer:

...they've got top end products for top end people, at top end prices...so it has a very different feel being in the shop, it's almost like it's not really about sex – almost...

Why is that do you think

Because some of the objects in Coco de Mer are designed to not look like they're anything to do with sex somehow. I mean there are some phallic shapes as far as I can remember there are some phallic shaped dildos,

vibrators whatever but there's also these odd kind of ones, is there one called the Bone? And it's a sort of shaped bit of plastic, in plastic colours and it comes in pale pink, pale green and pale blue and it doesn't look like anything, it could be I don't know what it could be, but it doesn't look like a sex toy or a vibrator. So it's a sex shop that's trying very hard to almost be not a sex shop.

Annabel

As we have seen Shiri Zinn designs highly priced, 'high spec' sex toys made from luxurious materials and sold in Coco de Mer as well as other luxury outlets. However, many designers, well known in other design contexts, have been commissioned to design sexualised products. Annabel recalls seeing the Bone in Coco de Mer, a toy designed by product designer Tom Dixon. (fig 6.11) Made from a nine-inch wedge of hygienic resin, the sculptural shape is reminiscent of a hipbone or perhaps a Brancusi (fig 6.11), it has five variable speeds and sells for approximately £120. While at the 2012 London Design Festival Dixon proposed that: most sex toys "are...far removed from the pleasure and sensuality of the act" (Drumm, P, 26 Sept, 2012) , ironically his statement inverts the observations of both Veronica and Annabel, whose testimonies concur that in the context of high design the sexualised object itself becomes desexualised. Discourses of high design collide with those of fun in German sex toy manufacturer Fun Factory (see fig 6.12). Their new catalogue introduces a:

...stylish art toy made by Boris Hoppek...for those who appreciate outstanding design and like to stand out with something special. The C' Mons dolls for the Opel Corsa ads by Hoppek have already won over the hearts of many. In ten bright colours and made of 100% silicone the JIM O. toy is pure FUN not to mention a decorative eye catcher. JIM O. is made and painted by hand, making each little work of art a unique piece. The stitched box in which the toy is packed and the colourful booklet tops up the JIM O. collector's item.

(Fun Factory online catalogue 2013)

Here the consumer is exhorted to see the sex toy, not in terms of its potential for onanistic pleasure, but as a 'collector's item', its function is entirely subjugated to its representation as a 'work of art', a 'unique piece'. Clearly, the upmarketing of the sex toy to designer 'collector's item' has served to re-position sexualised products in what was once a limited market and provided another, rather particular

alibi, for the consumption of sexualised objects by women. Aligning the sex toy with other items signifying aspirational consumption has arguably contributed to opening up this new market as well as having brought the sexualised product vastly increased visibility in terms of media representation. Anna Moore, writing in the Observer in 2003 asks:

So does the success of Gash, Myla and Coco de Mer mean the mist is clearing? Does the fact that a Versace-wearing woman can stride into a shop and buy a Bone, a Pebble or a Mojo show that the shame and sheer embarrassment around issues like female masturbation is gone forever? (Moore, A 2003)

While for Annabel and Veronica the designer sex toy may have been elevated beyond its sleazy origins, it has not, for them, facilitated access to personal sexual empowerment. Kate and Marley however, are more sympathetic to the signifying properties of stylish goods and interior spaces, exemplifying clearly in what ways these draw on existing design genres to make an appeal to women via the use of an already familiar narrative of feminine sexuality:

K: Isn't Coco de Mer, haven't they got like a...Is it them that's got a sofa'y' chaise longue thing? Is that them and a big table in the front, haven't they got a lot of like gilt, the gold...[inaud]

M: If I'm think of the right place, it's quite lavish and quite like lovely and luxurious and it's not...it doesn't make you [inaud]

K: it makes you think of burlesque and things like that, like not particularly like seedy and...

M: Not seedy and horrible and...

K: But it's not tacky or funny either.

M: It's stylish and it looks high end because it's decorated lavishly and for that reason it doesn't feel horrible.

Kate and Marley

Kate and Marley position what they identify as 'burlesque' style in opposition to the 'seedy', 'tacky' and 'horrible' - words used repeatedly in testimony to describe the traditional men's sex shop, as we saw in chapter 4. For them burlesque signals both 'loveliness and lavishness' and clearly acts as a sort of design shorthand for a style of sexuality already well-established as not only chic but drawing on a post-feminist identity which prioritises style and irony. Thus shops such as Coco de

Mer, Sh! and She Said exploit visual motifs and styles which in themselves code interiors and products via a particular style of mediated femininity which foregrounds sexual display. For example, the rococo exuberance associated with burlesque that characterises Coco de Mer's interior space or Sh!'s vivid pink paint on the façade and the interior –clearly an ornate wallpaper, ostrich feathers or a fin de siècle style chaise longue comes with its own set of associations or significations around female sexuality for those design savvy consumers, such as Kate and Marley, who can read them (see figs 6.13, 6.14, and 6.15). Rachel portrays She Said in a similar vein, when asked how she would describe the shop:

Well I think that where we differ from somewhere like Ann Summers is that it's very, very high end... And I think the image is quite kind of decadent, it's quite burlesque. It's got a definite vintage feel to it. The shop itself and the way it's been fitted and the furnishings are all quite sort of sumptuous and the changing room is very beautiful, the lighting's very important and we do kind of pick colours of items that will fit well in the shop. so there's a general kind of, I suppose the ambiance of the shop is very pleasurable and feels like a treat, So I suppose it differs from a high street shop like Ann Summers which is quite kind of gaudy and in your face, it is meant to feel kind of Parisian and yeah quite decadent.

Rachel

The popularity of neo Burlesque since the early 1990s has spawned an associated aesthetic style which loosely references the late nineteenth century and relies more perhaps on a nostalgic notion of the boudoir or bordello than a bawdy stage variety show. It has however, retained a sense of self-parody or irony which has enabled it to be seen as re-appropriation rather than subjectification. Attwood quoting Rosalind Gill (2007) suggests that burlesque forms:

...part of the development of a postfeminist sensibility "organized around notions of choice, empowerment, self-surveillance, and sexual difference, and articulated in an ironic and knowing register"

(Attwood 2011 p204)

Essentially in Great Britain, neo burlesque has been adopted by a middle class, Brighton living, cognoscenti who espouse its claims to female empowerment on the part of both performers and its largely female audience and thus as a style of interior décor, 'burlesque' as materialised in furnishings, colour ways and

wallpapers, is uniquely appropriate to the women's sex shop. Attwood draws on Debra Ferreday in suggesting that:

...the construction of the vintage feminine 'look' associated with neo-burlesque (Ferreday 2008) also challenges practices of femininity which are "grounded in shame", focused on "erasure" and "disguise", and which conceal both the labour and the anxiety that they involve. In contrast, vintage femininity is shame-less, foregrounds an alternative D.I.Y approach and resists "the notion that feminism and femininity are mutually exclusive, and that the enthusiastic pleasure taken in feminine identity is inherently problematic".

(Attwood 2011 p206)

Attwood and Ferreday might actually be discussing the women's sex shop here so closely does this account of neo burlesque chime with the expressed rationale of the women's sex shop. Furthermore, thanks: '...to the fashion for sleaze style and the love of irony on the part of "cool" tastemakers' (McRobbie 2004, p1) the ubiquity of 'porn chic'³³ has provided an additional context and a consumer sympathy for styles which are generally understood as signalling a 'knowing' or 'empowering' style of female sexuality. Indeed, McNair emphasizes that porn chic has been: 'granted visibility in mainstream culture' (2002, p87) and clearly the women's sex shop does serve to move female sexuality towards a greater visibility even while this notion of visibility must be problematized. As McRobbie suggests, an embrace of porn cultures formally condemned by a politicised feminism now signals a liberated attitude which celebrates the freedom to writhe around a pole or wear a t shirt featuring an explicitly sexualised message:

there is even something of the feminist arguments of the 1980s coming to fruition, women's right to sexual pleasure, the destigmatisation of sex workers and solidarity with them and, of course, the challenge to the iniquities of the sexual double standard.

(McRobbie 2004).

Porn chic plays with the codes and conventions of the pornographic: 'producing texts which constantly refer to, pastiche, parody and deconstruct the latter' (McNair 2002 p61) and in that Coco de Mer's rococo flock wall paper may be

³³ Attwood's article of 2011 does not distinguish between porn chic and neo burlesque. While I would problematize the notion that neo burlesque can be understood as forming a branch or aspect of porn chic it may certainly be said to be part of the 'striptease culture' as described by Brian McNair in his influential text of that name published in 2002.

constructed as 'pastiche' and all the shops (and the goods for sale in them) under discussion here are certainly aestheticized - the women's sex shop might be said to fit neatly into McNair and McRobbie's construction of the genre. However, participant testimony around the look of the shops and products reveals a focus on the ways in which sexual consumption is 'tamed' or made (in Emily's term) 'palatable' to the female consumer. Interestingly Emily makes an emphatic link between 'ethics' and the upmarket nature of Coco de Mer's design aesthetic, she clearly identifies the 'classiness' of the designed products for sale in the women's sex shop as a way of establishing the acceptability or validity of female sexual consumption:

So it's easier to go to Coco de Mer and make it a bit posh because if it's got a diamond on it, it can't be utterly disgusting and depraved. Which is fine by me, actually – disgusting and depraved. But I think for a lot of people they find it very difficult.

Emily

McNair's assertion that: 'such texts *must* be sanitized, if they are to find a space in mainstream culture' (2002, p72) sits well with Emily's account of the effect of moving female sexuality upmarket. But while the 'text' must be 'sanitised' to be acceptable as a part of mainstream consumer culture, the women's sex shop must still occupy the liminal space lying between 'acceptability' and challenge (to a hegemonic male sexual archetype) in order that it may be permitted to make its particular offer of sexual self-actualisation or empowerment, to women. It is this challenge implicit (and widely understood by at least a middle class cognoscente) in neo burlesque style that serves to increase the commodity value of the women's sex shop:

And statements of rebellion and opposition are, in this economy, just as saleable as, if not more so than, those of submission to, or acceptance of, the state of things as they are. In their engagement with increasingly sophisticated and knowledgeable consumers aware of and possibly living out the ideologies of feminism and gay rights, and in so far as their aim is to realize profit in a crowded media marketplace increasingly responsive to considerations of style and taste, commodities must resonate with and express the ideas which constantly emerge from the complex, chaotic interaction of people with each other and their media.

(McNair, B, 2002 p10)

Thus if a sexual commodity must speak at once of both challenge and of acceptability, in what other ways is design utilised in order to comfort and reassure the occasionally tentative consumer of the women's sex shop? My participants suggest that one way in which it does this is through a discourse of 'fun'.

Fun in the sex shop

Several participants prioritise the fun and humour encapsulated in the products for sale in the women's sex shop. Louise, for example, who is overwhelmingly positive about Sh!'s women centric ethos, stresses this notion repeatedly:

It's very fun, very open and very fun atmosphere...(and later)...it looked very friendly and cheerful and bright and fun really.

Louise

Louise correlates the 'fun' to be had or seen, in Sh! with feeling 'comfortable' and in simplistic terms these terms might be transposed onto the challenge/acceptability paradigm - both terms are repeated throughout her testimony:

Sh! was deliberately light and playful and yeah and I suppose one of the things about Sh! was that it didn't have any pictures of – pictures that would make me feel uncomfortable, like pictures of women in bondage gear or people in sexual poses or any kind of top shelf magazines that I imagine that you would get in a normal sex shop. There wasn't anything that would make me feel uncomfortable – pictures on the walls or magazines on display that would make me feel uncomfortable.

Louise

Sexy Kitten echoes this correlation between fun and feeling comfortable. When asked if she went downstairs in She Said:

I did yeah. And what's interesting is urm, I think they, as I remember they do handcuffs and they do masks and they do whips but much more non-threatening and more fun...

Sexy Kitten

Louise and Sexy Kitten make it clear that it is, at least in part, the fun and playfulness that have contributed to their feeling 'comfortable' not only with sexual consumption but ultimately with their own sexuality. Louise describes the products in terms of how they provide a clear differentiation from the masculine stereotype

achieved through this narrative of fun, for example when asked about the packaging of products, she recounts that:

There was one kind of, oh what would you call it? Anal stimulator thing that had quite fun packaging; “hours of anal adventures” but it was quite tongue in cheek, cartoony packaging, so it wasn’t hard core at all. It was fun.

You mentioned several times about the colours of the products.

Yes, the bright colours, most of them were bright colours, pinks and blues and purples and things like that. Nice colours.

Louise

For Louise the potential discomfort of encountering and consuming a hard core product (she tells us later that she does buy the anal toy, although in black for her boyfriend) is obviated by the jokey and colourful presentation. The discourse of fun is clearly played out in the design of vibrators, dildos anal stimulators and so on, many of which privilege humour and whimsy alongside high performance technology and saturated colours. Alongside infinite variations on the inevitable rabbit theme; Jessica Rabbit, Thruster Rabbit, Thriller Rabbit and so on, other anthropomorphised dildos and vibrators feature bright primary colours and happy, smiling faces. A range from German company Fun Factory is distinguished by names such as, ‘Flexi Felix’ ‘Dolly Dolphin’, ‘Dinky Digger’ and ‘Paddy Penguin’:

As founding father of Fun Factory Paddy Penguin still holds down the fort and is a companion in demand for those late hours of the night. With his diverse structure, tantalizing curve and a tapered nose which stimulates spot-on, this little guy in tailcoats spreads pleasure wherever he goes.

(Fun Factory online catalogue 2013)

In the specific context of the women’s sex shop, the product has been tamed, in McNair’s term ‘sanitised’. While it may not have been incorporated into Juffer’s ‘everyday routines’ the anal toy *has* been ‘domesticated’ - its potency dulled via a performance in which the object has transformed its identity in order to communicate the soothing message that sexual consumption in the women’s sex shop is: ‘ok absolutely, or more ok’ (Hoyle) (fig 6.16). To engage our reference to burlesque and employ it as metaphor, in the spectacle implicit in the design of the women’s sex shop, the anal toy and the handcuffs have dressed up and put on a show! This notion of the object significantly changing its embodied significations from one context to another is akin to that described by Hebdige in his classic study of sub- cultures:

Objects borrowed from the most sordid of contexts found a place in the punks' ensembles: lavatory chains were draped in graceful arcs across chests encased in plastic bin liners. Safety pins were taken out of their domestic 'utility' context and worn as gruesome ornaments through the cheek, ear or lip... The perverse and abnormal were valued intrinsically. (Hebdige, 1979 p107)

In the case of the anal stimulator too, a sense of the 'perverse' is valued. It is this element that constitutes the power of the object and furthermore it is vital that a 'memory' of the 'perverse and 'abnormal' is maintained if the object is to contribute to 'empowering' the female consumer through a project of appropriation. Thus for the object to be successfully tamed a sense of its former subversive power must be retained. However, while interviewing Hoyle in her office, I was distracted by a sex toy with a somewhat crude representation on its packaging, an example of a toy which, for Hoyle, has not *sufficiently altered* its embodied significations:

Basically they go through a decision process about whether, will it pass the first level of Sh! kind of control. And it's to do with is it well designed, is it designed for its target audience? I mean like this [holds up item] has been rejected.

I was wondering about that!

Because it's a double dildo, vast majority of double dildos are sold to lesbian women, it's totally dick shaped and most lesbian women do not want a dick shaped toy.... So that's been rejected because... that's not actually been thought about – what their target audience is.

Hoyle

The toy has not been designed to sit comfortably within the context of the women's sex shop. Its origins in pornographic representations of lesbian sexuality as a performed on men's behalf, are only too clear for Hoyle and her team – the toy has not been sanitised. The following exchange between Georgina and Melanie who are discussing the display table of vibrators situated on the ground floor of Sh! (fig 4.3) draws on the normalising and 'sanitising' power of 'fun'. Here it is the 'fun' which enables Georgina and Melanie to engage actively with what might otherwise have been challenging objects:

G:... it wasn't too kind of formal "oh this is 1700 watts" It was like "do you need to close the door" or "do you need to turn the music up" sort of thing.

Which was quite amusing! And all the ones which looked interesting were all you: “had to turn the music up”...

M: They have all these little features, double features and the more features the louder obviously, because all the workings are very loud. Those were really interesting, yeah it's really fascinating. I think the fact, I think it was really good that they had that table in the middle because you feel like you're almost gathering round, again it was just like women looking at tops, it was exactly the same thing. You know picking them up and reading and looking and then picking another one and there's no sense of discomfort or awkwardness which is what I would have expected if I went to a normal sex shop and maybe there were men loitering around. You don't feel that you would have the same kind of freedom to pick up and casually look at everything and browse at your own pace and touch and you know...to see exactly how they work.

Melanie and Georgina

Sh!'s table of vibrators is not only 'amusing' but reminds Melanie of women going shopping for 'tops', here sex shopping utilises three discourses, fun, everyday consumption and women's shopping as a social activity. Her metaphor conjures an image of women discussing the shortcomings and merits of various chaotic displays of clothing displayed on tables only to be re-folded by exasperated shop assistants. Melanie is clear that it is this sense of familiarity and light-heartedness, these normalising discourses, which ease sexual consumption in terms of making it accessible to women. Rachel makes a similar point talking here about Tickled in Brighton's North Laine, where she used to work:

...so it was fun, approachable, nothing sleazy, all quite innocent and silly , which I think people, lots of people, really liked.

Rachel

The telling word in Rachel's account is approachable; Tickled is approachable in the same way as the table of noisily oscillating vibrators in the centre of Sh! is approachable for Melanie and Georgina. For Rachel, fun, like luxury, has operated to wipe away the sleaze.

Just as the harnessing of high design as an alibi for female sexual consumption was problematic for some participants - the sanitising power of 'fun' may have

complex significations. We saw in chapter 5 that Ann Summers was identified by several of the women I interviewed as selling popular novelty products:

...it's a bit kind like immature, giggly, I mean, I know, I think that pink plastic and funny toys...

Kate

Ann Summers is characterised by participants as: 'high streety' (Kate), a place for 'for having a laugh with people really...it was just tacky and disgusting' (Emily), 'it's a bit commercial' (Anna), it is 'a different category of place' (Annabel). The style of 'fun' in on evidence in the various novelty products available at Ann Summers (the Inflatable Willy Ball, Glow in the Dark Willy Straws, Clone a Pussy Moulding Kit and so on) are one element of a tranche of markers that we have seen utilised by my participants in distinguishing it from Sh! Coco de Mer, She Said and others. These distinctions are played out in the goods for sale in Sh! which while it does stock colourful Fun Factory sex toys, at the time of my interview did not display the anthropomorphised products such as *Dinky Digger*:

I noticed in the shop, oh what are they called, that German make, Fun Factory. You didn't seem to stock the ones that are dolphin shaped or mole shaped or...?

No, no, we have had a dolphin shaped one, I have to say it just doesn't sell very well and I think there's a very limited...The thing in the shop as well is you have to be aware that just offering somebody too much choice is like offering them nothing at all....They need to have a unique point to them.'

Hoyle

Thus having fun in the sex shop potentially involves a sophisticated reading of tone and nuance in order to distinguish between the fun which is not simply 'sanitising' but confers a level of legitimacy on women's sexual consumption – and the tacky fun which my participants associate with Ann Summers:

I think Ann Summers is for men

Yes? That's interesting. What makes you say that?

[laughing] Because everything's so disgusting and tacky and erm you know like they have plastic underwear. I know Sh! does as well but it's slightly different. I think it's marketed towards women's..., Ann Summers is marketed towards women who are driven by what they think men want. Like you know nurses outfits and I'm sure that's alright for people but it's the – it's tacky.

Emily

For Emily, the version of fun on offer in Sh! is 'slightly different' to that on offer in Ann Summers. It is 'driven by what they [women] think men want'. Her hypothesis fits neatly into Storr's account of homosocial constructions of femininity encountered at the Ann Summers party discussed in the previous chapter. Louise's experience is similar, but for her critique of Ann Summers also coalesces around class distinctions:

...it was like kind of going into the Primark equivalent of sex toys, you know...It was just a very bargain basement, cheap type of experience, where Sh! made me feel really positive and excited.

Louise

Thus, for the female consumer to access a form of sexual empowerment which may be seen as truly agentic in nature, it is necessary to have the *right type* of fun in the *right kind* of sex shop. The transformative power of goods rests on design which accesses notions of 'fun' without 'tackiness'. To achieve this balance, goods may also harness the various classed discourses of luxury and aesthetics discussed earlier in this chapter. The design of goods may retain some element of subversive power - a 'memory' of the 'perverse' - but products must be sufficiently removed from pornographic stylings to be understood as offering access to a discourse around agentic sexual expression. Thus the consumer is recruited to a project of identity construction which, while it resists the norms of male sexual representation, is reliant on complex consumer negotiations around a sometimes contradictory, array of knowledges and understandings.

Conclusion

This chapter, then, has focussed on a range of discourses, visually embodied and brought to the fore by participants when describing their own sex shopping. It is clear that these models draw the consumer into a complex process of negotiation around the coding of designed things and spaces. This is exemplified clearly in the competing meanings ascribed (through various processes of production, consumption and regulation) to notions of public and private and materialised for example in the obscured shop windows of Sh!. Furthermore, this chapter has highlighted how design may be co-opted in the service of providing an *alibi* for sex

shopping, re-appropriating problematic commodities in order that they might signal a new relation between sexual consumption and female sexual empowerment.

While Attwood suggests that: 'sexual representations, products and services are becoming accessible to a wider group of consumers' (Attwood 2006, p82), my participants clearly represent the visual and designed elements of the women's sex shops and its goods as having, for them, complex and often contradictory embedded meanings which co-exist in a state of tension. For while the design of goods and spaces in the women's sex shop may offer, to use Emily's term, a 'palatable' version of feminine sexuality, they also serve to regulate access to participation in a discourse of sexual self-empowerment. Moreover, class and taste affiliations are present in the testimony of the women I interviewed, for example in terms of a widespread disparagement of Ann Summers, described by participants as 'chavy' or 'tacky' and this tendency sits well with McNair's defence of porn chic. He suggests that criticism of the genre is made by those who are seen to have the aesthetic capital with which to disparage it:

Criticism of porno chic as "barren titillation" or "sexploitation" arises from the application of a set of elite aesthetic criteria for evaluating the public sphere. (2002, p87)

While all shops (and Sh! and Coco de Mer! would characterise themselves as vastly dissimilar in appeal) seek overwhelmingly to code themselves in opposition to the traditional male focussed shop, design here is understood by consumers as a project of distinction or differentiation as much as facilitation. While design elements borrowed from one context, the traditional sex shop, have been re-appropriated to denote feminine sexual empowerment, in some instances they retain the memory of other masculinist significations.



Fig 6.1 (2009) Coco de Mer

Exterior view of Coco de Mer in Monmouth Street, London WC2



Fig 6.2 She Said window (2013)



Fig 6.3 Coco de Mer window (2009)



Fig 6.4 Traditional sex shop (2009)

A run of traditional sex shops in London's Soho with blacked out windows and explicit signage.



Fig 6.5 Sh! exterior (2009)



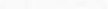
Sh! exterior showing shop windows.



Fig 6.6 Sh! window (2009)

Sh! shop windows are definitely obscured.

Legend

Solid Wall	
Eyeline interrupted	
Eyeline uninterrupted	

- a Lingerie
- b Dressing up clothes
- c Novelty and humorous toys
- d Erotic massage and candles
- e Games
- f Lubricants (inc. novelty)
- g Bathing and body care
- h Vaginal exercise
- i Menstruation products
- j Vibrators
- k Strap ons/dildos
- l Spanking/tickling devices
- m Bondage, whips, restraints
- n Nipple toys: clamps/pasties
- o Anal toys
- p Love dolls
- q DVDs
- r Books and magazines

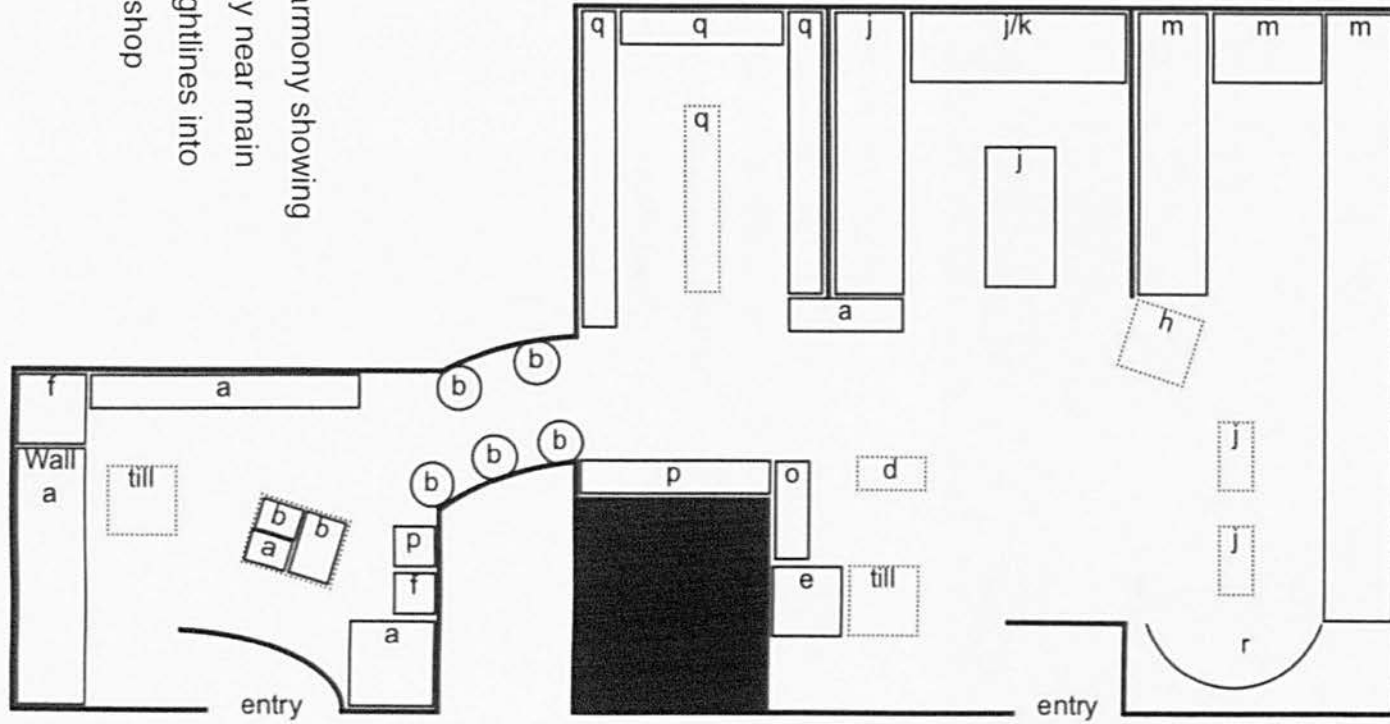


Fig 6.7

Floor plan of Harmony showing goods on display near main entrance and sightlines into 'harder' area of shop



Fig 6.8 Sh! shelving display (2009)

Sh! Hoxton. The 'lighter' and often 'fun' products tend to be placed near the door. Here we have a display which utilises two 'sanitising' discourses; fun, embedded in the *I Rub My Duckie* vibrator and the notion of feminine self-indulgence embedded in the '*Rice Bran Bath Bag*'.

Fig 6.9
Floor plan of She Said showing differences in type of product displayed on street level and basement level.





Fig 6.10 The Black Minx by Shiri Zinn

A Shiri Zinn designed sex toy, the Minx. Each one includes 12 pink Swarovski crystals on a stainless steel cap with a detachable feather tail. It comes in a handcrafted snake skin box with a satin lining and comes with its own silver engraved display stand.



Fig 6.11 Tom Dixon's Bone



Fig 6.12 JIM O Fun Factory toy

Fun Factory online catalogue. JIM O [image online] [Accessed 22nd January 2013]
Available at: <http://www.funfactory.com/products>



Fig 6.13 Coco de Mer interior features many burlesque style elements, feathers, corsets, elaborate wall paper and so on. (2012)

Coco de Mer. Rob Greig. Time Out. Jun 20 2012 [Accessed 11.11.2012] Available at: <http://www.timeout.com/london/shopping/coco-de-mer>



Fig 6.14 Interior of Sh! where the corset and feather display make clear references to burlesque style.



Fig 6.15 Interior of Sh! with burlesque style chaise lounge.

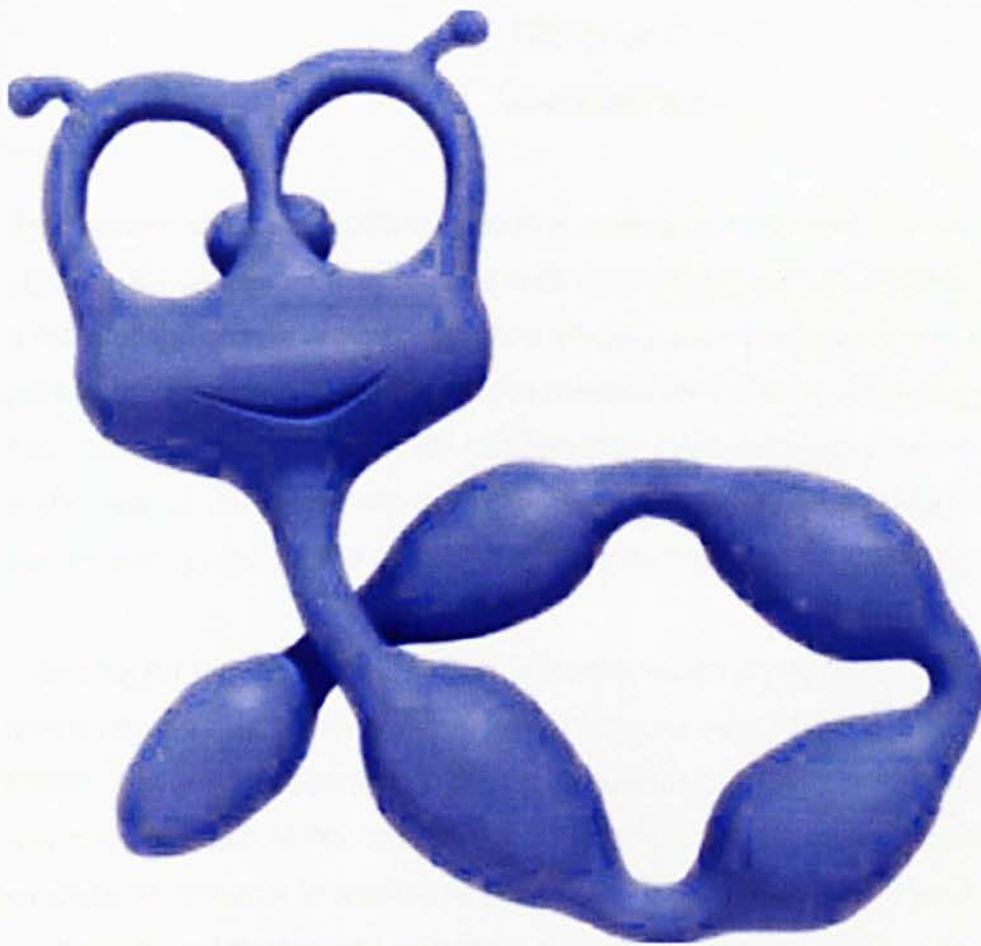


Fig 6.16 Flexi Felix Fun Factory toy

The sexualised product tamed: 'This fun-loving guy dubbed FLEXI FELIX is the perfect companion for those ready to explore the world of anal pleasures'.

Fun Factory online catalogue. FLEXI FELIX [image online] [Accessed 22nd January 2013] Available at: <http://www.funfactory.com/products>

Chapter 7

Conclusion

The women's sex shop offers women a route to autonomous sexual empowerment via sexual consumption, in spaces coded in design so as to eradicate all traces of a masculinist sexual culture, a culture visually and ideologically expressed in participant accounts of the masculine orientated sex shop. However, this research has made it possible to unearth key tensions, contradictions and overlaps located in the various discursive models of female sexuality materialised in both the act of sex shopping and via the designed spaces and goods of the women's sex shop.

This chapter begins by returning to the early impetus and starting points for my research. As is fitting for a thesis which relies so heavily on notions of narrative, initially it takes the approach of telling the research story as it unfolded. In this way it looks again at the original aims for this project in order to draw out the success of research in relation to these intentions as well as considering the methodological framework proposed by my research in terms of what it offers the study of design. A perhaps overly simplistic image that is useful to me here, is to imagine a visual or diagrammatic representation of the women's sex shop. Its embedded ideology (as well as its material actuality) is magically mapped on tracing paper and overlaid on a similar image of the masculine shop. The second section of this concluding chapter will focus then on highlighting where the outlines merge or collide and where they are clearly distinct or depart from each other.

The story of my research

My earliest starting point for thesis was an interest in gender, sexuality and consumption, allied to a commitment to using interview to access women's experience of and interaction with, sexualised spaces and products. Initially perhaps this seemed to suggest a problematic combination of research elements and worries were expressed as to whether I would be able to access research participants. However I was blithely optimistic about the possibility of finding women who would discuss their sex shopping habits with me. A study of the 'strap on' formed a pre-cursor to present research. It exposed some early insights into potential contradictions and complexities in the material culture of a sexual object and I was encouraged to extend this focus. Moreover I had used interview

successfully, albeit in a very limited fashion, to provide a broader framework for the meaning of the 'strap on' and I had an interest in exploring this as a method of unearthing not simply the context of an object, but the meanings invested by women in *things*.

While Margolin (2009) calls for multi-faceted design studies which: '[address] issues of product conception and planning, production, form, distribution, and use.' (2009, p38), studies of design history in disciplinary terms have traditionally not yielded much in terms of work which has explored objects in use from the perspective of those who use them. While the overwhelming focus of much design history still tends towards analysis of design in production and representation, Whitehouse (citing Trentmann 2004) in her analysis of the state of design history, does point to new a body of design studies which have:

developed user narratives that examine the complex practices and self-understandings that people build of themselves as consumers as they negotiate the abundance of mass culture (Trentmann 2004). The concern arose that consumption as opposed to production, was essential to rupturing modernism's idea of good design and extending the understanding of the social dynamics of how ordinary people engage with the idea of design within the realities of their daily lives, be it within the home or beyond.

(2009, p58)

As Whitehouse suggests some, relatively recent, design and material culture studies prioritise the analysis of design in everyday life – design as it is lived and experientially understood. However there are few texts concerning the visual culture of sexuality other than in terms of representation (Chaplin's 2007 text on the evolution of Japanese Love Hotels is one notable exception) and fewer still which use interview to access first-hand accounts of design of any kind. On the other hand, dress studies, has proved a fertile ground in terms of its promotion of oral history as a means by which to access accounts of gendered subjectivities expressed in clothing choices, see for example Biddle Perry's 2005 *Bury Me in Purple Lurex*. Therefore, the first sentence of the above quote encapsulates the ambition of this study to develop these '*user narratives*' in relation to the topic of gendered sexual consumption.

My intention was to move away from the imposition of disembodied meaning on objects and spaces, but rather to access and elucidate the meaning of *things* directly from the shopping descriptions of female consumers. The narrative approach, drawing on influences from the disciplines of both material culture and sociology (Miller 1998, Storr 2003, Holland 2010 et al) has facilitated an exploration of the meanings women make in the *practice* of shopping, alongside their understandings of the material environments encountered in the process. Furthermore, an awareness of current debate, primarily concerning new representations of female sexuality in both the popular and academic press, meant that I hoped to contribute to academic discussion by providing an analysis of these discussions, as they are visually reproduced in objects and spaces. This thesis then draws on the interests of both Design Studies and Material Culture serving to introduce an underexplored area of study, heterosexual female sexuality, to both disciplines. It proposes a new model for investigating intersections between design, gender, sexuality and consumption, one which takes as its primary focus consumption as lived experience and objects and spaces as they are discursively materialised.

Methodology has informed not just the style of research but the research outcomes. I encountered interview as a research method initially through the medium of oral history and was drawn to its resolve to counter the grand narratives of 'big history' and validate the experience of ordinary people and in particular those groups and practices excluded from history, for example women:

Through oral history interviews, working class men and women, indigenous peoples or members of cultural minorities, amongst others, have inscribed their experiences on the historical record, and offered their own interpretations of history. More specifically, interviews have documented particular aspects of experience which tend to be missing from other sources, such as personal relations, domestic work or family life, and they have resonated with the subjective or personal meanings of lived experience.

(Robert, P 1998, pix)

However, although oral history has a strong ideology which was very appealing to me it didn't provide the in depth analysis of and analytical focus on methodology which I was looking for. I found this in feminist standpoint research which

challenges the notion of objective research as masculinist and foregrounds an understanding of the subject as an active participant in research. Of particular interest and in retrospect concern in terms of my own research, were those studies which highlight the relationship between interviewer and female participant. This was significant, in terms of a tendency to 'see behind the back' of the research subject to discover structures of domination and subordination invisible to the supposedly less analytically 'expert' eye of those who form the object of study. At the end of the research process I maintain a level of anxiety that the second section of this concluding chapter does just that. Radway in her 1991 introduction to a new edition of *Reading the Romance* also recognises the potential for this dilemma:

I attempted to openly proclaim my feminism and acknowledge that it had affected the way I evaluated or related to my subject's self-understanding. However, I now think that my initial preoccupation with the empiricism claims of social science prevented me from recognizing fully that even what I took to be simple descriptions of my interviewees' self-understandings were mediated if not produced by my own conceptual constructs and ways of seeing the world.

(1991, p5)

Initially also, I had some concerns that the shopping narratives of my participants might not adequately cover the particular territory which interested me and I was anxious that in order to achieve my research aims I would need to guide interviews in directions which they would perhaps not naturally take. However, repeatedly, in returning to the testimony of my shoppers, I found their narratives to be so rich and insightful that my initial worries around imposing my own disciplinary concerns and understandings on the words of my participants and directing analysis in directions where they did not go, were largely unnecessary and unfounded. Ultimately, this thesis has been a long process of learning to trust in the insights of my participants to structure and guide the interests and focus of research.

Thus the overarching themes of my research are twofold. As outlined in my critical review chapter, this is a study which draws on the interests of both design studies and material culture to expose the ways in which female sexuality is articulated in the design of spaces and objects. In uncovering the narratives of women sex shoppers, it has called on an underpinning ethos as well as a methodology derived

primarily from social science disciplines to unlock the meaning of the sexualised commodity in consumption.

Sex Shop Stories

This study uses empirical methods to explore how sexuality is *done* by and on behalf of women consumers of the female orientated sex shop. Most particularly, it has a sustained focus on the shops' claims to offer autonomous sexual empowerment to women, a claim materialised in marketing and representation but also explicitly located in the design of shops and their goods. Thus this account of research has marked out new territory in accounting for women's access to sexual consumption in showing that aesthetics and design are implicated in theorising women's ability to participate in a commoditised notion of sexual empowerment.

Study of participant narratives has established a range of discursive models for understanding the means by which the women's sex shop is constructed in design and represented in discourse. While Previous work on the female orientated sex shop (Malina and Schmidt 1997, Dennis Hall 2000, Tony Kent 2006, Feona Attwood 2006) has highlighted the strategies by which the women's sex shop is moved representationally from sleazy to stylish or from a masculine to a feminised space, my research has uncovered the ways in which design is utilised in relocating the paradigm of sex shop, to borrow a term used repeatedly in testimony; to transform sex shopping from an *uncomfortable* experience to a *comfortable* one for female shoppers. Principally this research concludes that the route between these states is circuitous. Participant testimony reveals an understanding of both the act and the products and spaces of sexual consumption which is complex and sometimes contradictory. Sexual consumption is framed as being an individualised and therapeutic activity but also at times as social one, competing conceptions of resistance and appropriation, public and private space, the domestic, luxurious and humorous are all harnessed in the project of commoditising female sexuality. The 'stories' told by women about sex shopping, dictated the organisation and trajectory of my research. In exposing and tracking these discourses I have uncovered implications for our understanding of the ways in which female sexuality is visually mediated, and correspondingly, the ways in which contemporary constructions of female sexuality have impacted on or constrained the design of sexualised goods and spaces. While empirical research

findings show that for some of the women I interviewed, sexual consumption in the women's sex shop had been a libertory, therapeutic or self-actualising experience, research has also revealed the ways in which the shops offer of sexual empowerment was inhibited for others by design strategies relying on a still dominant masculinist paradigm. The following sections will highlight key narratives in order to draw out the tensions and correlations between them.

I began my analysis chapters roughly at the point where the interviews tended to begin, with an exploration of how women experienced or envisaged the 'traditional' male sex shop. Long after the interview process was over, I looked back at my checklist of interview prompts and the question 'have you ever visited a male sex shop' was not amongst any of the multiple versions of interview questions that I had devised at one point or another. However, without exception all the women I spoke to framed the women's sex shop within the paradigm of the male sex shop. Usually this emerged at the start of interview, when asked 'which shops have you been to?' although for some women this arose later on as they came to describe their shopping experiences. Having determined at a 'political' and theoretical level that the focus of my analysis would be led by what my participants chose to highlight, it became very clear to me that this was a starting point not simply for the trajectory of the interview but for conception and understanding of the women's sex shop.

My first analysis chapter concludes that echoes of familiar debate between the pro and anti porn lobbies are firmly embedded in descriptions or imaginings of the traditional male shop. In somewhat simplistic terms this thesis has shown how and where the women's sex shop is positioned between two pole positions concerning sexual consumption – it is occupied by extinguishing a narrative of female subjugation at one pole and embedding one of agentic and creative self-fashioning at the other. Attwood accounts for the prominence of anti porn lobby rhetoric in both academic and popular debate around the representation of sexuality:

The term "objectification" has been central to feminist critiques of sexual representation that examine how woman functions as a sign for patriarchy as its other, its spectacle and its subordinate *thing*.

(Attwood 2004, p7)

Of course then it was not surprising that, in their condemnation of the male sex shop, women called on narratives of subjugation and domination familiar from anti porn address. Many of the women made links between the masculine subjugation of women and their experience as well as the look of, the male sex shop, for example Sexy Kitten's memory of a trip to a masculine orientated sex shop which encapsulates the tone of other accounts which signal resistance by drawing on feminist anti-pornography rhetoric. Thus ideological resistance to a dominant male sexual culture formed a leitmotif that was present in several of my participant's vivid accounts of the real or imagined male sex shop. While the 'porn wars' were subtly and not so subtly invoked in the language women used to describe goods available in traditional shops, on the whole women did not discuss pornography directly in relation to the women's sex shop. Indeed pornography was something located solely in relation to the men's shop and formed part of the 'othering' that was active in descriptions of masculine shops. Traditional masculine sex shops were described as 'grubby', 'dingy' as places where 'anything could happen', as a 'threatening' environment and overwhelmingly of course, for men. In fundamental terms, participant testimony established that the women's sex shop was understood comparatively; it was not *that* – it was not sleazy, it was not uncomfortable or threatening, it was not for men. While women's shops were framed by the women I talked to in terms of resistance (to an ideology of female subjugation) my research establishes that the design of women's shops is overwhelmingly conceived and delineated in *response* to the masculine shop. Familiar design elements are re-coded, re-gendered and re-appropriated to conform to a popular idea of 'women-centricness' – a concept that itself draws on a raft of established signs for and discourses of femininity. Thus a key finding of this thesis is its acknowledgment that discourses around female sexual agency materialised in the visibility of the women's sex shop can and do draw on existing discourses located within frameworks of masculine domination. Furthermore it has problematised the notion of consumer participation in a project of re-signification and agentic resistance by showing how those sexual subjectivities open to consumers may be delineated and limited by available discourses around female sexuality

This thesis recognises that the women's sex shop forms part of a culture to which women have traditionally been thought to have little or limited access. Clearly the

primary occupation of the woman focussed shop is to move away from the associations of the male sex shop and establish itself as a site where women can access sexual agency. I have shown that a raft of strategies are utilised to this end by the shops themselves. For example the use of the term erotic in shop names and on websites (Coco de Mer calls itself an erotic boutique) clearly works to re-gender and differentiate shops from their nameless masculine counterparts. What I have called 'erotica branding' clearly broadens accessibility; more culturally acceptable than porn, it is also a means, for women consumers, of circumventing the problematic masculinist associations of pornography. Significantly then this research has emphasised that women's capacity to adopt an active feminine sexual identity via consumption relies on the successful normalisation of sex shopping and sexualised commodities. Chapter 4 utilises Juffer's 1998 work on the domestication of pornography to explore the ways in which the women orientated sex shop aims to provide women with validation, permission and a forum in which to consume a version of sexuality mediated through designed goods and spaces. Participant accounts showed the ways in which sexual consumption is framed within narratives of the everyday and foregrounded references to familiar gender focussed consumption. Participants equated the design of women's shops to the supermarket, clothes shop or chemist. On the other hand, sex shopping was linked to the notion of the 'treat', compared to chocolate for example or to luxury body care products, thus harnessing equally established discourses of gendered consumption.

The practice of going sex shopping produced other normalising discourses Chapter 5 concluded that sex shopping may be constructed as leisure and social activity, several participants constructing it as a shared endeavour. Thus testimony from some participants concurred with Storr's 2003 research on Ann Summers parties which locates them as a site for social activity and opportunity for female bonding. However, analysis of these accounts departs from Storr in that sex shopping was not characterised by any of the consumers in terms of supporting the interests of men. Louise and Emily in particular viewed sex shopping as part of an individual process of self-fashioning, as a means of working on the self in therapeutic terms. We also saw that several participants saw themselves as pioneers of sexual consumption, taking their less confident friends sex shopping in an evangelist project of spreading the message of sexual

empowerment to other women. This 'pioneer discourse' was highly explicit in my discussion with sex shop owners and those who work in sex shops as well as the testimony of the sex toy designer Shiri Zinn. All of these women described their work in terms of a 'mission' to facilitate women in experiencing a sexual fulfilment denied them in a patriarchal sexual culture.

Not all shops were viewed as successful in their project of re-signification however. Some (the most upmarket shops) were identified as offering a version of female sexuality in which empowerment is located as available only to those who can read (and afford) the subtle codings inscribed on goods and spaces. Coco de Mer in particular was critiqued by several for its designer sex toys and exclusive ambiance. For some this shop was: 'detached', it had: 'a look but don't touch kind of thing' which for both was: 'much less sexual'. For several participants both the shop and its products were not only 'prohibitive' in terms of ambiance and cost but also de-sexualised in design. The women I talked to critiqued the various women's sex shops they had visited on a number of fronts. Significantly, this critique tended to coalesce around the ways in which the women's shops draw on the designed elements that they saw as belonging to the sexual ideology of male shops. Significantly Ann Summers emerged in this context. The majority of my participants positioned themselves as not being Ann Summers girls and indeed Ann Summers as not being a sex shop for women. Most participants analysis of Ann Summers and its customers was biting and fits well within the first element of Storr's model of homosociality: 'women promoting the interests of women who promote the interests of men' (2003, p50). It is pertinent to my own research that this was a critique utilised by participants to distinguish Ann Summers from other shops they had themselves identified as woman focussed - sex shopping as my participants described it only furthers women's *self*-interests. Furthermore, my own research showed that it was primarily where participant discussion focussed on Ann Summers, that class emerged as a category for understanding the women's sex shop. Storr's account of homosocial constructions of femininity at Ann Summers parties:

Unravels some of the complexities of class identifications in Ann Summers settings and some of the ways these are played out in talk about and preferences for, lingerie and other consumer goods.

(2003, p177)

Thus the point at which class and taste judgements coalesced explicitly as an issue in my own research was when participants were describing Ann Summers or comparing it to their experience of shopping in what they judged to be a woman orientated shop. Unconsciously aligning themselves with Storr's 'sophisticated' and 'savvy' academic colleagues they too made taste judgements which cast aspersions:

on the whole of Ann Summers as unsophisticated unstylish 'uncred'-ible, cheap common – as, in a word, naff.

(ibid, p184)

Overall, discussion of Ann Summers echoed the 'othering' associated with descriptions of the traditional male sex shop. One of my participants, Emily was, as we have seen, particularly scathing about Ann Summers. She described her recent plans to set up what she conceives as a very different kind of sex shop, one that places female sexuality in a 'holistic' context of other feminine interests and practices:

And I just had an idea that what I would really like is to have everything under one roof. So I would really like to get therapeutic help and porn and really nice food and nice books to read and my nails done and my legs waxed with my mother or my friends and have a drink and have coffee and cake in another bit. So for me it was more about not such an emphasis on being a sex shop but an emphasis on being a woman, whole woman shop.

Emily

Emily felt that her proposal for a new style of women's sex shop 'started from a different place'. Her description of an 'ideal' sex shop envisages something unlike the shops that form the basis of this study in a number of respects. I have not encountered a sex shop with an attached nail bar for example, although Coffee, Cake and Kink, which closed its Covent Garden café in 2008 did provide a fusion of BDSM erotica and cake. However, it is clear that Emily's dream of a sex shop draws on familiar signs for femininity; most of which are already present in the sex shops encountered through this research; the work of bodily self-care, sexual expression as a form of work on the mind, sex shop as social outing and occasion for feminine bonding and of course cake! (At Sh! customers are offered a cup of tea while they browse). Sadly Emily's sex shop plans eventually floundered.

Research found that many women's shops echo the layout of traditional male shops by differentiating sexualised products into those which are 'acceptable' and those that are not. That is, the harder goods tend to be located in a semi hidden part of the shops as they are in She Said for example (upstairs, downstairs or round the back) while the softer goods are located near the front of the store and visible on entering the shop: 'for me it's almost like this is the bit that's ok and that other bit, you know'. Heidi. For some women the ideal shop would offer a real challenge to the women's sex shops encountered, a shop where hierarchies of sexual acceptability are not materialised in terms of layout.

Testimony identified a discourse of public and private sexuality expressed in the sex shop in spatial terms. This notion of public and private consumption appears initially to be straightforward in the design of the women's sex shop; however my research has established that simplistic correlations in which soft-core equates to public and hardcore signals private space are obfuscated and confused in design. I recently encountered another stark example of this on a trip to She Said which, like some other shops, has a concealed downstairs section where the majority of goods such as vibrators, anal toys and so on are located - in She Said this section is for over 18s only and invisible from street level. However, I noticed that near the entrance on street level, there was a dark wood, glass fronted cabinet displaying vibrators, anal stimulators and dildos in shiny chrome and obscure sculptural shapes. The cabinet of sex toys was a display of goods manufactured by Swedish company Lelo, an upmarket sex toy company whose website professes that they are:

the world's leading designer brand for intimate lifestyle products...Lelo is famous for transforming the look, feel and function of how personal massagers are perceived, bringing a new level of luxury to products of this kind.

Lelo website

The explicit sexual function of these goods should have located them in the concealed section of the shop but here the embodied challenge of the sexual object is nullified. The objects' function, clearly they are intended for women's self-pleasure, is obscured by their high design specifications, their cost and the mode of their representation in display. Semantically the display case too, is used to domesticate the object, to put it in a context of the home and thus private use.

These factors have worked to de-sexualise and de-stabilise the object, certainly to divorce it from a narrative of female masturbation. Overall, my thesis concludes that design is one of a raft of strategies used by the upmarket sex shop to provide an *alibi* for sexual consumption and to move it from the arena of private consumption in a windowless basement, to public display at the front of a luxurious boutique. Thus public consumption and private use are conflated and inverted in design.

In discussing their conceptions of the male orientated sex shops other material features of the shops were brought sharply into focus. For example as we have seen, windows featured significantly in women's descriptions of the masculine sex shops and these blacked out, shuttered facades evidently signified a range of meanings for my participants. Without very much prompting the women returned to the theme of windows in their descriptions of the women's shops, making explicit comparisons between the windows of one site and the windows of the other. Chapter 6 revealed the eloquence of the sex shop window for my participants, the complexities and inconsistencies invested in their design, the ways in which again meanings attached to notions of public and private intertwine and change places. For my participants windows were polysemous things, emblematic of both the discourse of 'comfort' that pervades representation of the women's sex shop and of female sexual 'empowerment'. As we have established these competing discourses were invested equally in notions of both public and private, the obscured windows of Sh! safeguard the privacy of female shoppers. On the other hand women's shops must be light filled, interiors clearly visible from the street - the transparency of the window serves to obliterate the memory of the traditional sex shop and allow the female consumer to feel *comfortable* while sex shopping. Thus the location of sexual consumption as public practice carried out in a public arena is successfully employed to facilitate women feeling 'comfortable' in sexual consumption as well as to indicate a bravura position in relation to commoditised sexual expression. For this reason this thesis places the terms 'comfort' and 'empowerment' in alignment. It establishes that while one would seem antagonistic to the other, these are models for a discursive understanding of a commoditised female sexuality which co-exist in a perpetual state of tension in the designed spaces and goods of the women's sex shop.

Concluding remarks

The achievement of this research has been to contribute to current debates surrounding the intersections between the commoditisation of feminine sexuality and female empowerment by establishing a new model for analysis. It has foregrounded new methods of addressing design matters through using interview with women consumers to unlock the ways in which objects may be said to function ideologically in design. For both the disciplines of Design Studies and Material Culture, itself an area of study which has its origins and interests in various and interconnected disciplines, this work has contributed to the opening up of a new area for enquiry. It has offered a fresh perspective for examination of current constructions of heterosexual female sexuality by prioritising the study of designed spaces and recognising the ways in which *things* are active in materialising and producing discourse around female heterosexuality. Research has focussed on exposing and highlighting the strategies and contradictions inherent in consumer accounts of the women's sex shop. In some respects this intention has inhibited the drawing of clearly delineated outcomes, for this thesis acknowledges the ways in which seemingly contradictory understandings of feminine sexuality work alongside and against each other. The work of this research has been to highlight, uncover and to problematise rather than to conclude, to expose the muddying and the rifts in accounts of gendered and sexualised consumption.

To summarise key concerns and findings; this thesis problematizes distinctions between public and private, permissible and transgressive space distinguishing the complex utilisation of these ideas in the women's sex shop from the simpler dialectic manifested in the traditional sex shop. It reveals the way in which complex notions of openness and hiddenness, public and private are embedded in accounts of shop windows, shop layout and the display of 'vanilla' and 'harder' products. It highlights the ways in which these concepts emerged from testimony, concluding that these polarised notions are *both* harnessed on behalf of ideas around women-centricness and female empowerment. Moreover, research revealed the ways that the various discourses of sexual consumption expressed in visual terms in the women's sex shop are utilised as an alibi for sexual consumption, but found that conversely these discursive models are also used to regulate access to a discourse of sexual empowerment via consumption of the

sexualised commodity. Overarchingly, research has concluded that the sex shop operates as a significant means by which women's sexuality is normalised and regulated, via a raft of strategies, in order to become a part of the public domain of everyday consumption. However, its claims to be an agent of resistance to patriarchal understandings of female sexuality are actively compromised by the limited range and restricted potential, of the sexual subjectivities visually materialised in the design of shops and the goods for sale in them.

I would hope that this piece of work opens up other avenues for further research. Clearly much more empirical work needs to be done in terms of accessing women's experience of sexual consumption in other contexts. Additionally further work might build on the consumption narratives uncovered in the things and spaces of the women's sex shop and investigate how and whether these might be evident in other gendered and sexualised contexts. The next step for this research may be to extend this coalition of empirical and visual analysis to examine the online consumption of sexualised goods. How are the narratives of sex shopping translated for and represented in, the world of virtual shopping and what impact does the private nature of shopping from the sofa have on women's capacity to explore their sexual potential? Potentially, the internet has opened up new vistas for women in terms of engagement with both sexual consumption and sexual practice, but how far its offer is shaped by traditional and masculinist conceptions of feminine sexuality is yet to be fully addressed. Some forays into investigation of women's online sexual lives are already being made, for example analysis of successful female sex blogs (see for example Ciclitira 2004, Attwood 2009 and 2011). Specifically future research in this area will build on both the subject area and the methodological and disciplinary framework of existing work by looking at the spatial design of sex retailing for women, to examine how notions of public and private, permissible and transgressive space are represented via the design of online sex retailing and ask what meanings are made by women in their negotiation of the design of online shops. Work on specific discourses uncovered via current research may also be extended into new contexts, asking for example, how far a therapeutic discourse, is present in online sex shop retailing. Additionally, the cross disciplinary approach utilised by this study may usefully be harnessed to meet Clarissa Smith's challenge to consumption studies:

Further research needs to focus on the place of sex toys in women's lives and their actual practices of use and experimentation...just the moment that they really begin to matter: in the processes and experiences of consumption, after the product has been bought and made one's own. And indeed this is a particular problem with theories of consumption, which seem to stop at the point of purchase.'

(2007, P181)

Empirical work engaging with women's relationship with sexualised objects and the meanings consumers make of individual items in use undoubtedly fits into the category my methodological chapter describes as 'sensitive research' and may therefore involve further challenges and attention to the relationship between researcher and subject. However, my experience has shown already that some women were happy to discuss their purchase and use of particular objects. The research process, at various times, embraced discussion of corset shopping, the difficulty of finding, attaching and using nipple pasties, the marvels of a *Lelo* vibrator and so on, although sometimes these conversations took place once the recorder was switched off!

In addition, this body of research, focussing as it does on the voices of sex shop shoppers, has potential value to a sex industry which is increasingly making an address to both the couples market and the individual female consumer, both on the high street and digitally. Retailers of sexualised goods and designers of interiors and products must attend to the ways in which female sexual identities may be articulated in lifestyle terms and sensitively commoditised in products and spaces. My research shows clearly that women are keen to articulate their views in terms of their preferences for particular styles of interior layout, display of objects and the design of objects themselves. My work shows that these preferences were meaningful in terms of how, for them, commodities and spaces of exchange, spoke of female sexuality and where what was spoken ran counter or in tandem with their own beliefs and preferences.

In keeping with the narrative approach with which I began this concluding chapter and indeed with my project as a whole, I would like briefly, to clarify my own position in terms of how I view my subject – women's sex shops. My own views

and understanding of these shops and of their significance for the women who shop in them, has moved along a parallel trajectory to the life of this research. I started by taking a sceptical position in relation to the notion of commoditised female sexual empowerment. However, I became increasingly sympathetic, not to the shops themselves exactly, but to the undeniably strong ethos behind some of these endeavours. I talked, on tape and off, to a small number of women occupied with the design, production and retail of sex toys, all of them, while it may have been differently expressed, voiced a real interest in and commitment to the agentic sexual 'empowerment' of women. My acknowledgment of their 'mission' was compounded by my reading around feminist research. The words of Ann Oakley and others resonated profoundly for me. Their work impacted significantly on my ability to engage analytically and transparently with the data but also with my capacity to 'accept' what women told me at a personal level. This was not always easy, several women expressed views, attitudes and significantly tastes, very different to my own and on playing back tapes of interviews I can sometimes detect my struggle to remain empathic yet impartial! However, I recognised that all of the women I spoke to had a particular motivation in taking the time to talk to me - a complete stranger - often at some length. Women let me into their homes, perched on park benches, sat in random cafes, in one case took me corset shopping - and were tolerant of my inept fiddling with a digital tape recorder I did not wholly understand! It is undeniable, given the methods I utilised to access participants, that a group of women would self-select who were happy if not keen, to discuss the meaning of sexual consumption in their own lives. It was unquestionably as if the women, denied an outlet for exploring or expressing their sexuality in a public arena, had seized upon sex shopping in spaces which they fervently hoped would both validate their particular conception of female sexuality and contribute to proclaiming female sexual consumption acceptable in a public domain.

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