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Sex Toys in the City: Pleasure, Profit, and Sex-Positive Cultures in Portland

by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

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Abstract

Since the development of sex stores, the product appeal has been directed toward cisgender men and excluded minority groups including women and queer people, creating an experience exclusive to the male gaze. With this, products sold at early sex stores often did not appeal to these minority populations and it was often uncomfortable for women to shop in traditional stores. However, in the 1970s, feminists began to create sex stores directed toward women and they in turn became hubs for information. Through my research process, which included ethnographic work both in Portland and online, I have considered the past challenges faced by minority groups due to the creation of sex stores that did not uphold feminist values. I used the method of observational research to analyze different styles of sex stores: traditional stores versus feminist and education stores. With these observations, I will showcase the current discussion of sex and pleasure within Portland by analyzing two styles of stores that thrive within this area, revealing their marketing strategies, and examining the limitations due to social interpretations despite the reputation of sexual liberation within Portland. The goal of my data collection, analysis, and my project is to indicate how the development of feminist and education based stores has benefited a broader audience and has done more than just sell sex oriented products; they have emphasized sexual health and pleasure for groups who have historically been deprived of finding pleasure through sex and sex toys.

Introduction

Women tend to be on the losing end of every sexual battle; over 50% of advertisements portray women as sexual objects and in men's magazines, women are objectified 76% of the time (Swift & Gould, 2021). Despite these statistics, women are still criticized for having sexual desires and have been historically limited when it comes to embracing sexual pleasure and empowering themselves in this sphere. In the realm of pleasure, I have discovered that there is a unique difference between sex toy stores that are made for the purpose of the male gaze and uphold traditional values and those created for women that orient themselves towards feminist values and education. Through preliminary investigation of this topic, I ask: How are various ideas and cultures surrounding personal pleasure altered by the rise of the regional sex toy industry in Portland that has the reputation of having transformed from its profit-oriented origins to an industry that has moved to emphasize feminist values such as education and sexual liberation? To answer this question, I visited the physical locations and websites of four sex stores in Portland: She Bop, Lovers, Fantasy for Adults, and Mr. Peeps. These stores fall under one of two umbrellas, two of them being centered around education and feminist values, while the other two are traditional and oriented toward the male gaze.

In order to highlight these differences and how each store fits into these categories, I observed various factors including but not limited to aesthetics, paid attention to what products are sold, the engagement between employees and customers, and the price range of products. In the past year, I performed field research by physically observing each location for a period of time and additionally observing their websites to have a broader perspective and more information to potentially support my claims. I use the background research and the current literature in the field and analyze three specific aspects of the local sex toy industry: social

interpretations and how individuals engage with stores, the growth and value of feminist sex stores, and the profit market that impacts stores in a capitalist society.

Through observational research methods, my project shows the differences between feminist and traditional sex stores, the methods they use to push for sales and appeal to their audiences, and the value of having feminist stores for a demographic of individuals who have historically been limited in terms of exploring sexuality and experiencing criticism around sex. The purpose is to prove that although there are clear aesthetic and epistemological differences that exist among the four stores that serve to appeal to various audiences, the end goal is to make a profit. Since Portland is a city that exists within a society that emphasizes profits, this research will show that while sex stores may hold inherently different values, the end goal is to profit and thrive in a capitalist society. Feminist sex stores promote messages that stand out as holding radical feminist values, such as those indicated by theorist Kate Millett, who made multitudinous claims in her book *Sexual Politics* about patriarchy existing as a force that limits the sexual empowerment of women due to the ideology that “man shall dominate woman” (Millett et al., 2016, p. 25). The attempt to challenge these messages stands out as a move toward sexual liberation and education about individuals’ bodies. These messages oppose patriarchal values and attempts to create a space for women. Although the concept of a profit-oriented market exists within Portland, feminist sex stores emphasize pleasure as an investment and pushes for a neoliberal ideology as opposed to solely centering on profits, thus nurturing beliefs of sexual empowerment and not solely selling products.

Literature Review & Background Research

The question that I am focusing on for this observational research project has three primary aspects that are general overlying aspects of the research in the field. The three

significant conversations that emerge from the existing scholarship of the sex toy industry that build on my research are the social interpretation of sex toy stores, the growth and value of feminist sex stores, and the profit based market surrounding sex toy stores. Through reviewing the current literature, I intend to showcase what researchers have examined while addressing what may be lacking through analysis of past investigations. I also intend to utilize the literature review to additionally showcase the background research that has been performed that is specific to my research question.

Social Interpretation of Sex Toys and Sex Stores:

Social interpretations of sex toys and sex stores have impacted their growth and development since they were created. In *Vibrator Nation*, a book published in 2017, Lynn Comella discusses the development of feminist centered sex stores as a result of the industry being solely focused on the male gaze and seldom creating an environment where women felt comfortable to shop in. It intersects with different parts of the research that I am conducting, including feminist sex stores and the capitalist market, but there is a deep dive into the social interpretations of sex toy stores as a general topic for critical review. It additionally outlines the history of the controversy that was women's pleasure, including commentary on how vibrators were at the center of 1975 courtroom battles, "...regarding an individual's right to sexual privacy versus the state's interest in regulating public morality- a concern that many critics argued unfairly targeted women" (Comella, 2017, p. 7). This book illustrates how broadcasting sex toys as a product that people should purchase and use deviates from the norm that pushes for modesty and hiding away from emphasizing pleasure, especially in the case of women. Another article that adds to the conversation, "Prevalence and Characteristics of Vibrator Use by Women in the United States," introduces nationally represented study to show how vibrators can improve

health and quality of life, concluding that “Vibrator use among women is common, associated with health-promoting behaviors and positive sexual function, and rarely associated with side effects” (Herbenick et al., 2009, p. 1857). While this may be the conclusion based on a national survey, the survey itself was taken in 2009, which is more contemporary than the events mentioned in Comella’s book. Although the history is valuable to understanding the social perception of women’s pleasure, viewing more contemporary works can assist in understanding the influences to the current literature in the field and additionally conceptualizing the historical influences.

The aforementioned pieces of literature have shown how sex stores centered around female pleasure and comfort were developed as a response to there not being locations for women to shop and feel like their pleasure was something that should be taken seriously. An additional aspect mentioned is the historic limitations and the debate of morality regarding women’s pleasure. Another article that outlines the idea of pleasure from the female perspective is entitled “Adventures with the ‘Plastic Man.’” The general idea of this article centers around the subjective feelings towards sex toys from the perspective of women and how sex stores can perpetuate stereotypes through the types of toys they sell. The author expresses that “women generally use [sex toys] to enhance sexual responsiveness and sexual pleasure” (Fahs & Swank 2013, p. 667). In this idea of enhancing one’s own personal pleasure utilizing sex toys, the author discusses how there are criticisms for women who use these sex toys, though the criticisms are different for each sexual identity. There is also mention of how sex toy stores often fall into stereotypes that are formed by social perceptions, such as when the author states “As another way to critique the hierarchical implications of sex toys, they often replicate racist and sexist themes, particularly the racist stereotype of the gigantic (notably dismembered) black penis as a

‘signifier of racial terror and desire’” (Fahs & Swank 2013, p. 671). This article indicates not only harmful stereotypes and assumptions of what individuals want for their individualistic sexual experiences, but it also showcases underlying tones of racism and assumptions about non-white bodies.

An article similar to Fahs & Swank’s that shows individualistic interpretations of sex toys is called “Toy Stories: The role of vibrators in domestic intimacies.” The author conducted interviews to understand the role that vibrators played in the sex lives of women. There is a lot of conversation about where individuals keep their sex toys, and many of them were kept in places that children and guests were unable to see or access them (Mayr, 2022). This implies that, even if individuals are using vibrators to enhance sexual pleasure, they still seem to fear the questions a child may ask if they see it and they do not want anyone who visits their home to have confirmation that they have one. This example of the existence of sex toys in the home as being something equally progressive (the process of embracing one’s pleasure) and shameful (the action of intentionally hiding the toy’s existence and being fearful of reactions to it) showcases the history of sex toys and the impact that social perspectives have on how they exist in the home.

The final piece of literature that directly discusses sex toys and their relationship with the development of female sexuality is a section from the book, *The Routledge Companion to Gender, Sexuality, and Culture*. The section observed is entitled “Coming of Age” and discusses the history of the sexual revolution for women, and states, “As part of this sexual revolution sex toys were identified in a positive light in that they gave women a further tool to discover the workings of their bodies, allowing them more freely to explore their own sexual satisfaction without any need to take into account the wishes, desire, and needs of another person” (Nixon &

Marco, 2022). This highlights the importance of women taking individualistic pleasure into account while additionally adding to the literature surrounding social interpretations. Overall, the general literature viewpoint of social interpretations regarding sex toys and sexual pleasure shows how the opinion and accessibility to one's own pleasure, especially for women, has faced criticism but has slowly developed to be more accepted, although even in contemporary society there are still critiques. Overall, the general public still either refuses to publicly discuss sex toys or they are disgusted by such products, but the growth of feminist sex stores has attempted to challenge these views by offering more than just products.

Feminist Sex Stores:

According to Comella, the first feminist sex stores in the United States were developed in the 1970s and they did much more than just sell toys. As a result of these stores, Comella shares that “[feminist sex stores] have made quality products and accurate sex information cornerstones of their retail missions” (Comella 2017, p. 7). The book outlines that the development of these stores created not only female oriented sex stores, but additionally hubs for information about sexual pleasure directed toward women. In her book, Comella implies that feminist sex stores hold so much value because they created an avenue for women to shop comfortably and learn about their bodies in spaces led and owned by other women. This book explains that feminist oriented stores exist as a result of their absence because the only access to sex stores were those that were not only owned by men, but those that were also directed toward a male audience. They did not exclude women but conventional adult stores emanated an atmosphere that did not bring comfort or support to women; the employees were often men and could not properly educate women on their bodies and at the time in which feminist stores were developed, women were not encouraged to embrace their sexuality.

Another article, “Sex Education in Adult Retail Stores: Positioning Consumers' Questions as Teachable Moments,” examines the interactions and knowledge of employees who work in adult retail stores based on their interactions with customers. There is a deeper examination regarding the educational knowledge of employees about different factors including products and sexual health which seems to be a more contemporary function of these stores. The nature of this study was to understand the engagement from both consumers and employees, and as stated by the authors, “...we hypothesized that consumers of adult retail stores would frequently ask questions that, by their nature, introduced ‘teachable moments’ during which employees would be able to provide sexual health education, information, or advice” (Herbenick & Reece 2006, p. 61). The research question that I pose attempts to understand a variety of layers, one of them being how sex toy stores that center around education have transformed the industry as a whole and I believe this source shows examples of the comfort of employees and consumers when there is a baseline level of knowledge that goes beyond solely attempting to make a sale. This also outlines the development of stores that center around conversation regarding sexual health and the products that are sold and how even though this article and study were conducted and published in 2006, there was a push for more engagement from both staff and consumers to discuss topics that were not publicly discussed.

The final source I have examined that focuses on aspects of feminist sex stores is an article entitled “Liberation and Pleasure: Feminist Sex Shops and the Politics of Consumption.” The primary purpose of this article is “[to draw] on work in the field of technology studies to make sense of how the rhetoric of liberation and empowerment comes to be attached to sex toys within the context of feminist sex shops” (Huff 2018, p. 428). The importance of this article goes beyond the importance of education and retail missions, focusing more so on the way that

feminist sex shops empower their consumers because of the way that feminist sex shops sell their products. The researcher who wrote this article used observational field research and also used interviews to address the owners of a small feminist sex shop. These two different methods they used assisted in the investigation of the use of sex toys as tools for liberation and empowerment through the perspective of individuals who work to create these two aspects by the way they sell their products. This connects to both Herbenick's study of how consumers and employees engage with sexuality conversation and Comella's discussion of sex stores becoming hubs for information in the 1970s, which shows the development of the function of these feminist and education based stores from the 1970s until our current time. Since these developments, there have been different methods for sales, but since they are stores, there is an emphasis on making a sale despite the way they are marketed toward consumers.

Profit-Centered Market:

Capitalism and the profit-centered market are crucial to research when focusing on sex stores, especially considering that my research is taking place in the United States, which is a capitalism-driven nation. Even while the products may be tools for empowerment and are used for pleasure, there is an inherent need to make sales for the survival of these stores and the products are often expensive. In an article entitled "Commodities and Sexual Subjectivities: A Look at Capitalism and Its Desires," Debra Curtis reflects on their experience attending a "tupperware sex party"- a party held in an individual's home where someone who works for a sex toy distributing company will attend the party and showcase and sell products from their company. According to the author, after the presentation from the party leader who ran the company, Athena's Home Novelties, she invited guests to buy products that she had brought with her and also handed out product catalogs where they could keep a "wish list" (Curtis, 2004). The

author also stated that the party leader shared how much her company had made over the course of one year and that all of the advertisement was by word of mouth, and prior to starting her own company, the party leader sold sex toys as a way to supplement her daily income (Curtis, 2004). The leader of the party both pushed for engagement with sex toys while additionally highlighting her products, which shows the capitalist inclusions while also additionally trying to empower individuals through making the experience about their sexual pleasure as women who may not have been able to embrace their own sexuality in the past. This event allowed for women to gather in a place and gain insight regarding sex toys and how to enhance pleasure, but the end goal is for the party leader to sell products and expand her business, though she does so through enticing women through attempting to empower their own pleasure by making them the center of the experience.

While discussing the push for empowering pleasure for women in line with the idea of profit, it is crucial to showcase Comella's book, *Vibrator Nation*, once again due to the discussion about how feminist sex stores attempt to examine products as those that are investments for pleasure. Profits were not the initial goal of feminist sex stores that began to develop in the 1970s; according to Comella, there was a "thorny relationship between consumer capitalism and the business's larger mission of changing the way the culture thinks about sex" (Comella, 2017, p. 190). The desired mission was to center their stores on education and feminism, but due to the prevalence of capitalism and profit emphasis, these stores had to shift to track sales and push to sell products made of silicone as opposed to rubber ones due to the price differentiation. The main challenge these businesses faced was "to figure out how to balance its commitment to social change with being a profitable business" (Comella, 2017, p. 191). This relationship can be seen now, as even feminist stores that do not root their primary values in sales

and profits still must consider these aspects due to the nature of their existence within a capitalist society.

In the book *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, author Rosemary Hennessy does not directly address sex toys or sex stores, but she does offer an overview of the limitations of individuals of various sexual identities that fall outside of the cisgender, heterosexual norm and how capitalism impacts those identities. In the introduction, the author expressed how “capitalist labor markets have been conditioned by the assimilation of premodern patriarchal gender norms, nineteenth-century white supremacists racial hierarchies and the discourses of sexual norms and perversions” (Hennessy, 2018). These cultural values tend to push out individuals that are not white and who have identities and desires that fall outside of a (male) heterosexual, cisgender norm. This can be additionally used to support other sources utilized to explain why feminist sex stores were created to offer spaces for other identities to access sex toys and other such products without feeling like they were in spaces not made for them. This book is more of an analysis and does not showcase any field research, but it shows the limitations of other identities and their approaches in a capitalist society that tends to push them to the side and does not put their needs on the same level as those who are white, cisgender, heterosexual and, more often than not, male.

Methodology

The purpose of my research is to address the different layers that impact sex stores, including the social interpretation of them and their products, the development of feminism centered sex stores that emphasize education, and the role that capitalism and the profit centered market has on the methods stores use to sell their products. Connecting to the purpose of retail, which is ultimately to make a profit, there are other varying ideologies surrounding these types

of stores. This is shown in how they sell their products and what types of messages they attempt to send to customers who visit their stores and interact with their companies, both physically and virtually. The method of research that I utilized was observational research because I understood the observational process as a way to give my research the most general overview of each store, as observation methods can give a broader overview as opposed to limiting to individual perspectives through an interview process. In an article that I utilized to dig deeper into the process of observational research entitled “Understanding Observational Learning: An Interbehavioral Approach,” the author stated “Observational learning is an important area in the field of psychology and behavior science more generally” (Fryling et al., 2011, p. 191). Since the psychological field is a social science similar to the field I am doing research in, I believe that this article appropriately outlined how the method of observation would be the most beneficial to the development of my research.

To conduct my research, I chose four different sex stores, two of which I identified as centering around education and feminism, whereas the other two were more traditional and catered to the male gaze. The four samples are all located in the Portland Metropolitan Area, all of them having both a website and a physical store, so I could attempt to do an equal amount of observation and have the most accurate results. The four samples in question are She Bop, Lovers, Mr. Peeps, and Fantasy for Adults. In order to conduct my observations, I first identified what I was attempting to investigate, and it differed between the physical observations and those formulated through the online research. Due to my research question having a lot of layers, similar to the Literature Review and Background Information segment, I split the research into different sections based on what each form of location (online or physical) served what layer of my research question. In order to address the aspect of social interpretations and culture of the

stores, I used my physical research to observe each location in terms of aesthetic; how the products are presented; whether or not the store was busy; and the general perception of the stores among other aspects that are outlined in the Field Research Observation Notes. These observations were generalized in the sense of how the store physically attempted to appeal to consumers and how the employees engaged with consumers. Additionally, I attempted to gain a general perspective of how the employees presented themselves and whether or not they represented various identities in order to appeal to a wider range of consumers. For the section of online observation, I focused on the profit aspects of the sites and tried to identify the ways in which each site attempted to appeal and sell to their online audience. The different factors that I took into account were the aesthetics of the websites; social media and how they used social media to engage with consumers; different discounts and deals; and the general price range of the different products they sold.

Although the above factors are outlined as the purpose for utilizing observational research methods, there are limitations to the research I performed. The time I was able to spend breaking down websites and social media was much more than the time I had to spend in each physical location, so there are different quantities of research outlined in my notes. Additionally, since the observations are based on my perspective there is likely bias that will be woven into the notes and analysis despite my attempts to remain objective and not insert my own feelings into my research. Since I identify as a feminist and a queer woman who plans on pursuing a career in sex education, I am more oriented to value feminist and educational stores which could lead to bias, though I have tried to remove my own values and worked to research without inserting my own opinions. That being said, I believe that observational research was the best method that could've been used to collect data because of the ability to choose several samples. Overall, it

provides a more conclusive overview based on the clear differences between stores that are directed toward feminist and educational views in comparison to those that have been created to appeal to the male gaze and tend to be more “traditional.”

Field Research Observation

My goal when physically observing each store was to get a general feel of the store by observing a few different base aspects. These included the aesthetics of the location, in which I observed the color scheme, how and if the location was decorated, the openness of the space and how that space was utilized. After observing the aesthetic, I took into account the primary products they sold and what took up the bulk of their sales floor. Following this, I centered on my individual perception of the store and how I felt entering the store and looking at products. The final thing I observed was the general engagement of customers with the employees to build on my perception of the location. In each store, I set a budget for myself and purchased something so I would be perceived as a customer and treated as such as opposed to being identified as someone observing the location and potentially changing the engagement that employees would attempt to have with me. Although I based my observations on the aforementioned aspects, the research notes show in their nature that each location is different in what they sell as there were different aspects outlined as things that caught my eye that vary from store to store.

She Bop: 909 N Beech St suite A, Portland, OR 97227

When arriving at the shop, there was a bright pastel colored A-frame sign outside that advertised the store as a woman-owned sex store. Upon entering the store, directly to the right was a table of resources, including business cards for family therapists, sex therapists, and promoting sex-positive sources such as “Sex Positive Portland.” On the table was a blurb about

the store and how the employees are all educated regarding products and enhancing pleasure, but are not sex therapists, so to keep discussion to the products and their uses. There was an emphasis on inclusivity based on the pride flags they showcased on the walls and the resources on the table that centered around connecting with queer communities.

All of the walls are white and brightly colored, along with different works of art on the wall. The windows were not glazed; they were open and didn't hide products sold. The staff were welcoming and asked me and other customers if we were looking for anything in particular, and were very open to discussion about products and their uses, from sex toys to lubes to sex-oriented games. On the left upon walking in was a wall of books that had different sections that included Orgasms & Masturbation, Kinks & BDSM, LGBTQ+, Health & Wellness, Relationships, Parenting, etc. There was an assortment of lubricants that were color coordinated and advertised lube that was specifically for condoms, lube for toys, and some that are for all uses. Some of the products sold were not solely for sex; She Bop also sells period products, primarily diva cups. Products also included dental dams and thin underwear for oral sex that were advertised as to be used for safety and avoiding STIs.

In the center of the store were four different tables that had sex toys sitting on top. Customers could pick up toys and turn them on in order to gain an understanding of what they feel like. None of the products were in locked cases; all were able to be touched and held, with boxes under the tables with new toys that could be purchased. This implied that, if the consumers desired, they had a tangible method to develop a better understanding of how the product works and which one will bring them individually the most pleasure. Most of the shoppers were individuals and tended to be more feminine presenting, and most of the employees were

feminine presenting or androgynous, which seemed to put other consumers at ease and put me at ease as an observer, since I am feminine presenting and was conducting my research alone.

Lovers: 3300 SW Cedar Hills Blvd Ste A, Beaverton, OR 97005

Of the stores that I observed, Lovers was the most populated sex store that I observed, in regards to the people frequenting the store. Much like She Bop, the windows are open and do not hide anything in the store, and there is a sign on the door that advertises Lovers as a safe space that does not discriminate. There is a pride flag in the front window next to the safe space sign. There are an assortment of products featured; all of the products are in boxes, and there are different shelves that divide up product types, clearance products, products by brand, etc. Upon examination, there seemed to be different tables based on who they were directed to, such as products made for women being closer to the lingerie section. Meanwhile, products for anal play were further away and seemed to be located closer to where there were an array of products for penetration. The primary products are a mix between lingerie, gag gifts, kink gifts, and sex toys. No books were sold or advertised.

Lingerie section is in the back of the building, as well as the changing rooms. The changing rooms instruct individuals to keep undergarments on when trying on different lingerie. The different sections, while the store advertises itself as welcoming to all identities, has a lot of his/hers sections in it. The environment was very welcoming and the employees were all feminine presenting or genderqueer presenting, but the products were very much directed toward one sex or the other and a lot of the games used “boyfriend/girlfriend” language as opposed to using gender neutral terminology. However, since the products are imported, it’s likely that the store has very little say over the terminology. Some of the products were not solely sexual and were more for relationship building, such as the games that are “get to know your partner”

focused games. There were different lube packets sold on clearance, as well as different types of condoms that are used for different purposes. Most of the people in the stores presented as couples and were not individually shopping, and most of the couples were presenting as heterosexual partnerings.

Mr. Peeps: 13355 SW Henry St. Beaverton, OR 97005

Of all of the shops that I investigated, this shop was the most difficult to find; it was hidden in a small area and was not easy to come across while walking like the others, which were more publicized and public facing. As opposed to Lovers and She Bop, this store had the windows completely glazed over and covered, except for the main door, though I think that it is based on legality due to the amount of porn shown in the store. Upon entering, I recognized that this shop was the least populated; there were customers in the building during my entire duration of observation but it did not have the same amount of clientele, especially considering the size of the space was similar to Lovers and there were a large quantity of products being sold. One of the sensory aspects that I noticed about the location is that the building smelled like it was freshly sanitized and gave an artificial aura to it.

Every product except for the porn videos were in locked glass cases, and a lot of the products seemed to be gag gifts or kink gifts. In the store, there were aisles upon aisles of porn videos in DVD cases, and they were organized based on theme, but most of the covers were objectifying toward feminine presenting individuals. The products in the store were oriented towards individuals with penises, as opposed to individuals with vaginas, including blow up sex dolls and penetrative toys. In addition to the orientation being for people with penises, the primary clientele were masculine presenting individuals ranging from what appeared to be late twenties to fifties, as were the employees. Additionally, one of the services offered were porn viewing rooms that customers could use, and based on the nature of the store, the videos sold,

and the clientele, this felt like something made by men for men. The entire store felt directed toward clientele that did not include me and my own identity. The entire experience was a bit unsettling and did not showcase many educational aspects like the feminist sex stores did.

I am unsure whether or not the viewing rooms were for watching videos they've already bought or if they just rent the room and there are videos present, as I did not investigate the viewing rooms. Of the stores, this one made me the most uncomfortable so I feel as though the investigation was not fully conclusive because I did not explore the viewing rooms. Some of the products shown at the store were considered standard, such as vibrators and dildos, but there were others that were more directed toward pain play, one such example being a vibrator with a mechanism used to shock whoever is using it. This differed from any of the other stores I visited. There were no books sold or any educational films that I could see when observing the different videos; they were all porn oriented and, as previously mentioned, a large majority of them seemed to objectify the female body. Due to my identity as a lesbian woman, I felt out of place in this location compared to the feminist stores that I previously visited.

FANTASY Downtown: 1703 W Burnside St. Portland, OR 97209

When entering the store, the windows are open glass and show lingerie mannequins that are mostly feminine presenting with one male presenting. Behind the models was a screen so individuals couldn't see into the store unless they went through the front door. The main floor after walking in was full of lingerie and socks that are fishnet style and meant to be "sexy wear." The floors were all wooden and overall had an open floor plan that was easy to navigate. There are changing rooms on the main floor within the lingerie section. The changing rooms instruct individuals to keep undergarments on when trying on different lingerie. One of the sensory aspects that I noticed was that the entire store smelled of an overly sweet perfume.

The checkout desk had lots of gag gifts, including socks with funny quotes on them, candy undergarments, and board games/sex play dice; they seemed to be advertised as last minute grabs at the checkout. The main floor heading towards the back of the building had sex toys, all of them in locked cases once they hit a higher price range. There were lots of lube options that were not in glass cases and there were signs indicating the base, such as water, silicone, and oil, as well as some flavored lubes. In the back area, there were products that were not in locked cases, but they were limited to products that were cheaper. The back area featured a few aisles of sex toys, kink and BDSM oriented products, and other items that were more on the sexual side as opposed to apparel.

As far as sales go, across the store there were a lot of clearance promotions and sales deals. To my surprise, since this is a store I designated as a traditional store, there was a small book section, and the books included *Come As You Are* which falls under the umbrella as more educational. The clientele included primarily couples shopping together, but the attention seemed to be on gag gifts and lingerie as opposed to the sex toys. The clientele was diverse, as there were both male and female presenting couples, as well as some couples that looked to be queer. Most of the employees were male presenting, and from what I overheard, most discussion about products tended to be oriented towards the pricing and deals when discussing with employees. This was the only store where I was asked to present an ID upon checkout.

Online Research Observation

The second part of my observation process was going to each of the stores' websites and deep diving into their aesthetic, prices, and messages among other aspects. The purpose of this investigation was to dive deeper into the profit market aspect of my research and additionally determine if it was made to be clear as to whether or not the feminist sex stores upheld their

inherent values within their websites. The same idea was formed when observing the traditional websites. In line with the profit market aspect as well as accessibility to the products in what I believe to be an attempt to follow ideologies of the neoliberal market as opposed to focusing solely on a market that craves profits. There is a clear differentiation in this process between the traditional and feminist stores, which is showcased in the observations, as traditional stores seem to focus more on making a sale of cheaper products and the mindset of feminist stores is more expensive products and emphasis on pleasure and products as an investment.

She Bop:

When typing the website on my browser, the first thing that popped up was She Bop, a song by Cyndi Lauper which was known for being controversial because it discussed masturbation. The second thing that popped up was She Bop the sex store and the subject of my online research. When it pops up, it shows the different locations and shows that there are two different locations, both located in Portland. When starting my investigation online, the first thing I focused on was the aesthetic of the page. When opening the homepage, the primary colors were white (the background of the page), as well as navy blue for the various boxes that hold white text and orange text that is used for headers. The imagery on the page showcases the banner image as being a body of water reflecting sunlight. Other images on the page include new sex toys/new arrivals, merch, class opportunities, and events. It also has information on the bottom of the page that encourages their blog to stay up to date with information. There were also a lot of different messages on the page, but the ones that grabbed the most attention include: “Women owned boutique,” “Sexual empowerment is for every body,” and “There is no one-size-fits-all approach to sex education or pleasure.”

I also examined the headers of the website to see the primary categories that they broadcasted for consumers visiting the site. The categories included the following: Shop (25 drop down categories including different sex toy types, books, BDSM information, lube, sale, etc.), About, FAQ, Classes, Blog, YouTube, In-store pickup, and Brands. Due to some of my observations and research being centered around capitalism and consumerism, I looked into the different prices of the toys. The categories I observed were strictly the different products identified as sex toys and not their other options that included merch, books, and lubricants. Of the sex toys, at the time in which I observed, there were 298 options and the price ranged from \$10-\$400. I focused on the range because there was an abundance of toys in each category and this encapsulates that there is a range of accessibility for products.

Due to my research question also taking into account the aspect of education, I chose to look into the different advertisements the website utilized and additionally investigated what social media platforms they are present on. She Bop is present on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. On their Instagram/Facebook, they post at least every week, more typically every few days. Their most recent YouTube video was posted in November and all of their videos seem to center around pleasure and empowerment. They also have a blog and newsletter that are both free to observe through the website or sign up for. These both offer deals and information about their products and events. The website in general also has its own methods of advertisement. The main page showcases current deals and sales, including BOGOs, discounts, and deals of merchandise that comes with placing orders above a certain amount. The homepage also encourages viewers to check out their classes and advertises that the classes are hosted either on Zoom or in-person by sexologists, educators, and sexual health experts.

The final aspect that I observed during my online observation was the purchasing options, as there are many individuals who still do not feel comfortable going into a store and purchasing a sex toy. All of the products sold at She Bop can be purchased online and they offer shipping to both American and Canadian addresses. They also have an option for in-store pickup for individuals who are unable to pay for shipping fees. In order to further my understanding of the events that She Bop performs, I attended one of the workshops, which is shown in the discussion section.

Lovers:

When typing in “lovers” online, the store is the first thing that pops up, as well as the navigation map that shows the closest one to me based on my laptop location. Under the map, where it says the name of the store, it is advertised as a “lingerie store” as opposed to an adult product store. When clicking on the website, the appearance is much like She Bop in the sense that the background is white and is made to look like a standard retail site, just with sex toys instead of other products. The primary colors on the page were pink, black, and white. The pink is the color for the header line across the top and the color outlining some of the text boxes. Most of the text is black on top of the white background.

The general homepage has a giant header, with three different images that it circulates through. The first one is bright pink and advertises a promotion that says “spend \$100, save \$15” with a promotion code to use upon checkout. The second image promotes their air pulsators and the best selling ones with an option to “shop now” below. The background coloration is an orange-pink color and the toys themselves in the picture are pink and green. The final image is a picture of different products including a pillow, a bottle of lube, and an anal plug with the

message “the only thing missing is you” with the option to “shop now” below the text. The coloration in the image is a green background with a dusty pink pillow and blanket.

The homepage imagery changes a lot based on the time of year, if there’s a holiday, and what their primary sellers are. During my initial research performed in February, the website featured Valentine’s Day promotions. The images on the page featured an image of a male presenting and female presenting couple holding two sex toys, but that has since changed later examinations based on the season and holiday. The homepage also featured different boxes (not the same as the categories at the top of the page) that promoted popular categories, membership rewards, events and promos, and customer reviews. There were an assortment of messages on the homepage used to pull consumers in, including the following: “Lovers provides accurate information, guidance and high-quality curated products for all interests, needs and budgets in the world of sexual pleasure,” “We are like a trusted, close friend always willing to guide you with openness, knowledge and positivity,” and “Lovers is your place for pleasure and we can't wait to help you get some!”

I observed the different categories that Lovers featured for consumers visiting the website. I included the amount of drop down categories because there are various options for each category because they are broad categories: Sex toys, Vibrators, Lingerie, Gifts & more, Sexual health, Sale, Blog, Stores, and Rewards. Like my observations for other stores, I chose to observe the price range for their umbrella categories of sex toys, which includes dildos, vibrators, anal play, penis toys, and masturbators. The range of the toys, which includes 801 options, ranges from \$10-\$270. Outside of sex toys, Lovers has over one thousand products on their website, and the price for those overall ranges from \$6-\$1650.

As far as advertisement goes, Lovers utilizes different social media platforms as well as advertising on their webpage. For social media, they utilize Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. Their Facebook page is updated frequently, at minimum once a week and at most 3-4 times a week. Their page features their products, inspirational quotes, and news articles about sexual health. Their Twitter page is not as frequently updated, usually once a month or once every other month, whereas their Instagram is updated usually once a week, sometimes once every other week. Their YouTube is utilized the least and was last updated about two years ago.

The Lovers homepage uses different methods to advertise their products. They showcase bestsellers, new arrivals, and favorite picks. Their favorite categories cover different products from various categories to encourage a range of shoppers, both male and female. They also advertise different collections of their products for different events, such as a Valentine's Day kit and a bridal collection kit. Lovers is one of the biggest lingerie sellers of the stores I observed. They have different options for lingerie shopping, including role play, accessories, dancer wear, and jockstraps and underwear. Their lingerie goes up to 2XL in size. All products for Lovers can be bought online and shipped anywhere in the United States. The website advertises a secure and discreet shipping process.

Mr. Peeps:

When typing in Mr. Peeps, the first that comes up is the sex store that I observed. It comes up on the map with the two locations and is advertised as an "adult super store" and is additionally advertised as a 24 hour shopping experience at all locations. The coloration of the website stands out comparatively to other sites. The colors on the webpage are more neon-esque and have an ombre effect as the background, the colors included being red, orange, dark blue, and hot pink. The text is white and black and is all bold and in a cursive font, and it's also big

and can be read from further away, even on a computer or phone screen. This website is very clearly not made to look like a standard retail site. It is made to stand out and grab attention of the viewer and made to be different from other retail sites.

The imagery on the page gives an aura of “mystery” and “seduction” when looking at it. The image on the homepage shows a feminine presenting person and a masculine presenting person with their lips nearly touching in a very sensual, seductive way. There are messages on the page and they are more kinky and manufacturer oriented: “Add some spice to your romance with adult novelties from Mr. Peeps. We carry a diverse inventory of adult products for customers with various tastes,” and “Here, you'll find the newest grown-up merchandise from the top manufacturers in the market.” Under the message that overlays the image on the homepage is a button that says “view products.” This is not with the header line that holds the categories for search on the page, but it is important to acknowledge that it navigates consumers to the products.

I observed the different categories on the header image. The header line is a dark blue and violet color and the text is white. The categories on the homepage are as follows: Home, Locations, Adult products, Mr. Peeps FAQ, Product Gallery, and Contact. When going to the section to look at the products, there were no prices shown on the page. There are no shopping options either, as when I pressed on the products option it takes consumers to the product gallery where they can view products but not purchase them. All of the images looked to be stock-type images and were not consistent in the size of the photo and it often showed the boxes of the products and not actual products. The product gallery was split into the following categories: New products, Strap-ons, Lubes & more, Vibrators, Dildos, Fetish, Lingerie, Male masturbators, Male enhancers, rings, & sleeves, Penis pumps, Anal toys, and Novelties.

There wasn't a lot of social media advertised on their homepage, the only two methods that could be utilized to connect are a Facebook page and their website's contact form. When I attempted to observe the Facebook page, I was unable to access it as the content is not available to the public. The final aspect that I observed was the FAQ page in order to try to gather information because there wasn't a lot of information to engage with. The FAQ page showcased the following questions and answers, including questions regarding the legal age, hours, DVD rentals, viewing room uses, and whether or not there are entertainers at the location.

Fantasy for Adults:

When typing in the name of the store and reaching the search page, the first thing that came up was the map and three different locations near me. It is labeled as an "adult entertainment store" under the name of the store in the location options. When clicking on the website, the homepage comes up. The coloration is dark, with the background being black. The text on the homepage is all white except for the name of the store, which is white and outlined in neon blue. When clicking any of the navigation buttons on the page, when hovering over them, the color changes from white to pink.

This website was observed several times during the observation process, and at one point there was background imagery that showed an assortment of BDSM centered products. However, upon more recent observation, there has been no background imagery. There weren't any messages or advertisements that stood out on the homepage besides one message beneath the label that says "Portland's Inclusive, Sex+ Adult Shop." The homepage showcases the categories, which include the following: Location, Local Brands, Performers, Sex Toys, Every Body, Shop Online, and Connect. In order to shop, consumers must click on the "shop online" button which takes them to a separate page just for shopping for products. This page mimics a

normal retail site, as it has a white background and an assortment of different colors that don't line up with the separate homepage. These colors include a white background with primarily black text, with some text being red indicating a clearance deal.

There were different categories that lined the top of the page: Dildos, Vibrators, Her, Him, Couples, Fetish & Bondage, Sensual Products, Lubricants, Anal Toys, and Lingerie. Through my investigation, I realized that Fantasy is way more diverse in their online shopping experience and has thousands of options. In order to observe the range of prices but also encompass how big their website is, I observed the sex toy ranges, which included dildos, vibrators, sensual products, lubricants, and anal toys. The total product number for these specific categories came to 4,977 products and ranged from \$2-\$1,868.

The social media advertised includes Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Yelp. They also have their own contact sheet under their "Connect" category, which is additionally where consumers can view the different social media sites. Their Instagram page is updated daily, and seems to be solely used to showcase different products. Their Instagram is only for the Portland Hollywood location. Their Twitter is centered around their Montana locations and is labeled "Fantasy Montana." It has not been updated since August of 2022, so there is not much engagement through their Twitter. Most of their page is made up of memes. Their Facebook page is also only for their Portland Hollywood location and essentially posts the exact same content as their Instagram with the same daily frequency. The Yelp page is solely used to show their public rating and it only centers around the Portland locations, which range between 3-4 stars and shows how to get to them.

The advertisements for online shopping are solely on the separate product page that differentiates from the homepage. The advertisements are primarily focused on clearance deals

and the first segment of products advertised is those that are part of closing sales and are discounted. The lingerie is only advertised as his and hers. The lingerie for “her” shows full body images for the most part and shows the models’ faces. The lingerie for “him” only showed the bottom half of the models and has products that are lingerie-eque but additionally products that are more gag gifts than anything else. All products can be bought online through the online shopping website that is separate from the homepage. The website advertises secure checkout and discreet packaging. It also advertises billing privacy.

Workshop Attendance @ She Bop:

To further my online observations, I attended one of the She Bop classes in order to gain a better understanding of how they are constructed, their accessibility, and their inclusivity. When signing up for the event, I had the choice to spend either \$15 or \$25, to make the event more accessible for those with a lower income but so the store can still make money and pay the host of the class. I chose the \$25 option, but I did click on the \$15 to see if there was any needed proof of qualifying for a lower price, but there was none. The class I attended was entitled “How to Eat Pussy Like a Champ with Luna Matatas.” It was hosted on Zoom on February 28, 2024.

The host, Luna Matatas, is a Sex and Pleasure Educator with 15 years of experience in the field of sexual health and wellness. According to her website, her classes are trauma and equity informed and are performed with the purpose of assisting attendees with creating a better relationship with their bodies and practicing empathy with their partners and their insecurities. The class was held on Zoom and it was held in a lecture format. Attendees could not turn on their cameras or microphones, as those functions were disabled by the host. They were, however, encouraged to use the chat to interact with the host, ask questions, and answer questions that the host asked. The Zoom was hosted by the coach, Luna Matatas, but there was additionally the

events coordinator of She Bop who offered information about the store before the start of the event. Attendees were told they were able to put in either their real name or a pseudonym in order to promote their own anonymity.

When asked where we were viewing from, the coach stated that we didn't have to answer or we could just put a state if we were not comfortable. The entire environment was created with the purpose of promoting comfort and anonymity if that was something the viewer desired. The class lasted for about an hour and afterward we had the opportunity to type questions. The events coordinator from She Bop spoke at the very end, telling us we could fill out a survey that would be sent out the following day about the class and we would get 10% off our next purchase. In the final email sent, there was a link to rewatch the event, though the link would expire in 7 days. Additionally, there were links to Luna Matatas' webpage and links to the products she mentioned during the event that were sold at She Bop. This experience was educational, but it also indicated the mindset directed toward profits due to the open attempt to create product placement and appeal to consumers who want to put what they've learned into action and will be able to immediately engage with these products.

Discussion

Through the process of observation and the utilization of two separate observational research methods, I was working to examine three specific aspects of the local sex toy industry: social interpretations and how individuals engage with stores, the growth and value of feminist sex stores, and the profit market that impacts stores in a capitalist society. While all three of these aspects could potentially be analyzed solely utilizing one observation method, by utilizing both, I had the opportunity to use two different perspectives to dive deeper into each aspect. Physical observations were primarily used to analyze the social interpretations whereas the online

observations were used to examine the profit market and financial views on the sex toy industry. Both methods worked to indicate the value of feminist sex stores due to their difference in aesthetic, social engagement, and price range from traditional stores. All four stores have differences and similarities, but the biggest difference that I found through my research is how the stores orient themselves to appeal to different populations. While any individual can shop at any location regardless of their identity, I have been able to fully comprehend how feminist stores have a relationship with their clientele that vastly differentiates from the relationship between the consumers at traditional stores. The various conclusions that I have drawn throughout this process of observation and analysis also have broken down the connections between feminist sex stores and the profit market considering that, historically, the intention of feminist sex stores was to create a safe space and not solely center on profits despite existing in a capitalist society that requires economic growth for survivability.

In both She Bop and Lovers, the two selections for feminist centered sex stores, there were clear indications of these values through their websites and the set up of their stores. In the physical stores, the products were all easily accessible and were not withheld in glass cases. In She Bop, one of the defining aspects of their sales floor was that the center space of the store was taken up by tables that held sex toy products on shelves beneath them, and on top of each table was a sample product so consumers could pick them up, turn them on, and observe the actual size outside of the box. The products in both stores, as far as quality sex toys go, were expensive products but the premise of feminist stores, including these two subjects, pushes consumers to see their pleasure as an investment and encourages them to purchase toys that are higher in price range but will last longer. In addition, the more expensive toys also have chargers as opposed to batteries which can make the toys waterproof and tend to last a lot longer than battery powered

toys. Lovers had a wider variety of cheaper toys, but that store was also much bigger and has more locations across several states whereas She Bop only has two locations in Portland. These stores also, compared to the other two stores, had the least amount of clearance sales within their stores and did not push for making a quick profit. This indicates the relationship that feminist sex shops have historically had with conforming to capitalism, pushing them to sell expensive products but not to rely solely on clearance deals and instead pressing for consumers to consider their pleasure as something to invest in and purchasing the expensive products.

Mr. Peeps and Fantasy for adults oppose the sale-based ideologies formulated by Lovers and She Bop. They tend to be more conservative and fall under the pretense of a traditional store; their environments are more oriented toward the male gaze in what they sell and tend to be darker and more closed off from the public, which can create an environment of isolation for consumers. Some of their products are cheaper and they tend to have a much wider array of cheap sex toys. Unlike Lovers and She Bop, the more expensive sex toys that would be considered an investment are in locked cases and cannot be accessed without employee assistance. There are a lot more clearance deals and “BOGO” deals. This indicated through the observation that these two stores intend to make as many sales as possible by offering cheaper options. For those who cannot afford an expensive product, relying on traditional stores is reasonable, but cheap sex toys tend to break easier and not be as long lasting.

The websites for all four stores also show the intent of the audience through their websites. To further my investigation of the websites and their aesthetics, I found an article entitled “Romantic Red: Red Enhances Men’s Attraction to Women” by Andrew Elliot and Daniela Niesta. This article discusses how men’s attraction to women can be enhanced when they wear the color red, but women’s attraction to men does not change based on the colors they

wear (Elliot & Niesta, 2008). Additionally, another article, “Do Certain Colors Make Women Appear More Attractive,” the author, Martin Graff, states that warmer colors such as red, pink, and even orange can make women appear more attractive to men. It also states that some colder colors, such as dark blue and black can also increase attractiveness due to a decreased estimation in body size (Graff, 2022). I applied this to the websites and how they present themselves because I think it shows how traditional stores work to appeal to men while feminist stores try to normalize the sex toy industry through their websites and social media.

The online experience of both She Bop and Lovers seemed to align with their physical locations in the sense that they were oriented towards feminist and educational values based on the way the websites were structured visually and appeared as though they could standard retail pages, just with sex toys and adult novelties as opposed to other products. Another aspect of these stores that showcases their feminist natures is the way they engage with their social media accounts. In an article published in 2021 that analyzed the use of social media for that specific year, the researchers discovered “Some 84% of adults ages 18 to 29 say they ever use any social media sites, which is similar to the share of those ages 30 to 49 who say this (81%)” (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). The 18-49 age range is a prevalent range that observes the social media of the various sex stores that I have observed, and what is shared on their social media pages can showcase the feminist nature of these stores. Both She Bop and Lovers’ social media pages are publicly accessible and there are a variety of posts including new products, inspirational posts about empowerment and pleasure, as well as posts that are inclusive of queer communities, such as a post by She Bop about Lesbian Visibility Day.

Fantasy for Adults and Mr. Peeps, much like their physical locations, are different in terms of social media engagement and websites and directly oppose Lovers and She Bop.

Observing the websites for Mr. Peeps and Fantasy for Adults is what pushed me to investigate attractiveness based on color, especially for the male gaze because both of the articles that I read stated that attractiveness based on colors worn is based on a man's perception and women tend to not be impacted as frequently or view someone as more attractive based on the colors they wear. Mr. Peeps' website has a gradient coloration as the background, the colors moving between hues of red, orange, hot pink, and dark blue. Fantasy for Adults had a similar aesthetic in the sense that it seemed oriented to the male gaze and was not created with the intent to appear as a standard retail website. The entire background was black and it appeared to mimic an incognito page as opposed to any other kind of website. The only color on the page besides the classic white text was the title of the store, which was outlined with blue and had a neon effect. All of the colors outlined on these two websites are identified as ones that men tend to find attractive on women. The messages perpetuated in the social media also show these two stores to be made for the male gaze; Fantasy for Adults' social media is primarily directed toward their products, and has a lot of images of lingerie models as well as their pleasure products. Meanwhile, due to the pornographic nature of Mr. Peeps, their Facebook page isn't even accessible to the general public.

The different social media platforms that each shop utilizes can be connected to the year they were established. Facebook is seen as one of the first social media platforms, and this is the site that is used by all four sites, though Fantasy for Adults and She Bop update their Facebook in sync with their Instagram. Fantasy for Adults, Lovers, and Mr. Peeps were all founded between 1981 and 1990, so it makes sense that they all utilize Facebook due to its foundation in 2004 and the ability for consumer connection through a media platform. Since She Bop was

founded in 2009, it makes more sense that they utilize both Instagram and Facebook and update their posts to each site in sync with each other.

Through this project, I conclude that there are different uses of each store since they are very clearly oriented to two different populations and their prices also orient them toward different classes as well. However, the growth of feminist sex stores stands out as valuable because they offer more than just products; they offer information to a population that has not always had access to information about how to obtain sexual pleasure while also understanding how crucial sexual health is. Additionally, moving away from traditional stores may be an appropriate mobilization because, regardless of sex, all individuals should be educated when it comes to sex and that is missing from traditional stores because the prioritization is profits. It's understandable that the emphasis would be on profits because of the system these stores exist within, but it has been shown in the feminist oriented stores that there can be a balance formed between education and sex stores. Due to the fact that sexual liberation is still a work in process, audiences now have a unique opportunity to build on this research by thinking of ways to create opportunities for sexual pleasure while also considering limitations such as class, exclusion of other identities, consider where they purchase their products from, and, most importantly, what values they hold in terms of their own sexual experiences and how to showcase that in the products they invest in and in how they talk about sex.

Appendix

Due to the nature of my research being in the field of social science and the understanding that I am writing based on observations formulated from my own perspective, I believe that it is in the best interest of my audience to address potential biases due to my own identity and showcase what is missing from the research due to the current literature not delving

into certain aspects for my research to build on because preliminary research has not been done and I did not perform the additional investigation. These factors include the identities outside of male and female identities, as some of the stores I visited featured “his & hers” products and excluded other identities, or they discussed feminism in the terms of women creating locations for other women. While this does not necessarily exclude other identities from visiting these stores and obtaining sex oriented products or information about sexual health, it does not always stand out as an environment directed towards identities outside of those who identify as man or woman.

To prove my own credibility, I believe it is important to address my own potential bias and emphasize how I have tried to be objective in my investigation and analysis by using observational research to generalize the research and disconnect from a personal relationship with the work. That being said, working within the social sciences is often the kind of work that often has a connection with the researcher, so it is not as clear cut as research performed in other fields. As someone who identifies as a feminist and is extremely sex positive and emphasizes sexual liberation for all identities, especially women who have historically been more criticized when trying to embrace their own pleasure, I understand that my audience may not trust my investigation because I am more likely to support the sex stores that emphasize feminist values and education.

Due to this, I worked to remove my own opinions from the work and gave equal attention to each physical location and website and merely highlighted their intended audiences based on the findings of my research combined with other work that has already been performed in this field. This includes declarations from the current literature in the field that I used in order to build on and create credibility for my own work.

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