

MARKETING SEX PRODUCTS AND SEX-POSITIVE FEMINISM:  
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SEX PRODUCT MARKETING FROM THE  
ANALOGUE TO DIGITAL AGE

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## **Abstract**

At the intersection of sex and technology, the marketing behind sex products has changed drastically from the analogue to digital age over the last century and has become increasingly prevalent in mainstream media and popular culture. This major research project explores the ethos of female empowerment embedded in sex product marketing and the changing discourse and rhetoric present in the marketing of sex products in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century compared to modern day. Drawing upon feminist theories of marketing, popular culture and sexuality, this research project aims to expand on existing literature by researching how the ways in which sex product brands market and present themselves have changed from the physical to digital space. In particular, this project explores how modern brands continue to initiate new conversations about sex, gender, and sexuality and foster the community that was driven by the rise of sex toy shops and parties in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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## Introduction

This major research project explores the ethos of female empowerment embedded in sex product marketing and the changing discourse and rhetoric present in the marketing of sex products in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century compared to modern day. At the intersection of sex and technology, the marketing behind sex products has changed drastically from the analogue to digital age over the last century and has become increasingly prevalent in mainstream media and popular culture. From *The New York Times* and *Cosmopolitan* to *Sex and the City* and the latest season of American Broadcasting Company's (ABC) *The Bachelor*, sex products have become a symbol of female empowerment and sexual liberation. Drawing upon feminist theories of marketing, popular culture and sexuality, this research project analyzes print and multimodal marketing campaigns and identifies emergent themes of sex product marketing to illustrate the changing discourse and rhetoric. This project aims to expand on existing literature by researching how the ways in which sex product brands market and present themselves have changed from the physical to digital space, as well as how modern brands continue to initiate new conversations about sex, gender, and sexuality and foster the community that was driven by the rise of sex toy shops and parties in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As an extension of my undergraduate writing and research centred around feminist communications, this research project continues to explore topics related to communications and feminism through a comparative discourse analysis of the use of feminist ideas and rhetoric in sex product marketing in North America during two major time periods. I compare and contrast marketing from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to modern day to analyze how marketing and promotion have played into the making of the multi-billion-dollar sex product industry and acted as a vehicle for the progression of sex-positive feminism. An inductive analysis of print and



multimodal marketing campaigns, advertisements and popular culture products illustrates the changing discourse and rhetoric, as well as how the rising popularity of sex products is tied to the sexual revolution and construction of new ideologies of female sexuality.

For the purpose of this project, the term *sex product(s)* is used as an umbrella term to describe products designed with the purpose to enhance sexual pleasure (i.e., vibrators, dildos, anal products, lubricants, BDSM [bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism] and fetish products). In particular, this research project focuses on sex products designed and marketed to pleasure women. This research excludes contraceptives (i.e., condoms, birth control) despite historical similarities between the restrictive obscenity laws of the marketing of contraceptives and the marketing of sex products (Lieberman, 2016b, p. 400). The term *sex products* is used rather than *sex toys* in an effort to use language that elevates the conversation around female sexuality and contributes to the progression of sex positivity. The word *toy* is defined as “an object for a child to play with,” contradicting sex toys as a product for adult use and trivializing the already stigmatized product. Better yet, using more specific descriptors of sex products works to normalize the products rather than using sex-avoidant language that shies away from the topic.

## Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to provide context and gain an understanding of existing research and identify gaps in sex product literature to lay the groundwork for additional research. Despite the assimilation of sex products into popular culture and the booming multi-billion-dollar industry (Sigel, 2019, p. 329), sex products remain under-researched and stigmatized in academia. Few scholarly articles about sex products were published before the year 2000 (see, for example, Loe, 1999) and recent articles remain limited in the scope and breadth of research. Furthermore, few pieces of literature explore the ethos of female empowerment and feminist messaging embedded in modern sex product marketing of the 21<sup>st</sup> century or the digital preservation of the sex-positive community that was driven by the rise of sex toy shops and parties during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Before exploring empowerment as both an inspiration behind sex product marketing and a result of sex products, it is important to define the term empowerment and acknowledge how it has been mobilized by corporate interests and divested of its original activist roots. In 1968, Brazilian academic Paulo Freire defined the term “conscientization,” empowerment’s precursor, as “the process by which an oppressed person perceives the structural conditions of his oppression and is subsequently able to take action against his oppressors” (Tolentino, 2016). In 1976, educator Barbara Bryant Solomon, redefined empowerment as “an ethos for social workers in marginalized communities, to discourage paternalism and encourage their clients to solve problems in their own ways.” While the term has been redefined and theorized in a variety of contexts, empowerment has been packaged and sold in the form of marketed products for women to buy (Tolentino, 2016). When using the highly marketable buzz word *empowerment*, it is important to understand the dilution of the word and the critiqued lack of sincerity when used to

drive capitalist motives, while also recognizing the power of capitalism in disseminating political ideologies and advancing the feminist movement (see Loe, 1999).

### **Marketing sex products**

Attwood (2005) examines discourses in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century which emphasized female pleasure and how these discourses take shape in sex product marketing to female consumers (p. 393). The article analyzes the websites of sex product retailers including Myla, Babes n Horny, Beecourse, Taboofoo and Ann Summers (Attwood, 2005, p. 393). Discourses that exist distinctly in fashion, consumerism, and sexuality are synchronized in sex product marketing, resulting in the construction of ‘new’ female sexualities (Attwood, 2005, p. 393). Attwood (2005) considers newspapers and women’s magazines to be the greatest representation of women’s growing sexual confidence and society’s increasingly progressive view of female sexuality and references publications such as Elle magazine and its coverage of sex products in relation to fashion (p. 393). Attwood (2005) uses the Rabbit vibrator as an indication of how discourse around female sexuality has changed (p. 393). What was once a symbol of female pleasure exclusively for the male gaze has been accepted by society as a representation of female pleasure that is “fashionable, safe, aesthetically pleasing and feminine” (Attwood, 2005, p. 393). Sex product marketing has become much like any other consumer product with branding and packaging that communicates a personality and persona within itself. Attwood’s identification of synchronized discourses that exist in fashion, consumerism, and sex products extends back to historical examples of sex product marketing. Sex product marketing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century also draws parallels with discourses in fashion and lifestyle as a distraction from their explicit sexual purpose.

In an article about marketing and the meaning of vibrators in early twentieth-century America, Lieberman (2016b) explores how sex products were historically desexualized in attempt to be more palatable for consumers. Lieberman (2016b) examines texts including vibrator advertisements, user manuals, artifacts, electric company pamphlets, and writings by physicians and moralists to illustrate how vibrator and electric companies transmit messages to consumers (p. 395). The article cites Rachel Maines in her 1998 book, *The Technology of Orgasm*, in recounting the history of the vibrator (Lieberman, 2016b, p. 395). Maines states that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the electromechanical vibrator was invented as a form of medical therapy to treat female patients for hysteria (Lieberman, 2016b, p. 395). She claims that doctors treated hysteria by using vibrators on their patients until they had orgasms as a treatment for mental illness (Lieberman, 2016b, p. 396). According to Maines, doctors were an early adopter of the new technology and embraced it as a time- and energy-saving replacement for “tired hands” (Lieberman, 2016b, p. 396). Lieberman (2016b) argues that no evidence exists for doctor-assisted masturbation using a vibrator (p. 397). Maines herself has defended her argument as merely a hypothesis (Lieberman, 2016b, p. 396) and Lieberman, alongside other researchers and historians, now consider Maines’ account of the vibrator’s history to be disproven by lack of evidence.

In the early 1900s, companies continued to desexualize sex products by positioning vibrators in “two major consumer product categories: labour-saving household appliances and electrotherapeutic devices” (Lieberman, 2016b, p. 393). Advertisements would implicitly encode sexual messages to avoid censorship by media outlets but in a way that was explicit enough so that consumers were able to decode them (Lieberman, 2016b, p. 397). The strategic marketing behind sex products at this time allowed sex product companies to avoid the social, legal, and

political consequences of tapping into the taboo market (Lieberman, 2016b, p. 397). The article argues that companies shaped the meaning of the electromechanical vibrator through strategic marketing that “overtly portrayed vibrators as nonsexual while covertly conveying their sexual uses through imagery” (Lieberman, 2016b, p. 393). Lieberman (2016b) provides an alternate history of the vibrator to Maines’ account, concentrating on the marketing of sex products and arguing that the history of the vibrator “does not follow a straight line from camouflage to openness” (p. 396). Lieberman (2016b) argues that “vibrators were not fully camouflaged in the late 1800s and early 1900s as nonsexual devices, nor did they emerge in the 1960s as fully sexual devices – they always contained both sexual and nonsexual meanings” (Lieberman, 2016b, p. 396). Vibrators’ nonsexual meanings acted as a partial disguise, allowing electric companies to manufacture and advertise them, and consumers to purchase them without feeling embarrassment or facing legal restrictions (Lieberman, 2016b, p. 396).

Piha, Hurmerinta, Sandberg and Järvinen (2018) investigate taboos in marketing and consumption, particularly in the sex product industry through an exploratory mixed-method approach (p. 1078). Their methods combine a quantitative consumer survey with qualitative interviews with sexual health experts (Piha et al., 2018, p. 1078). Their research uncovers how cognitive determinants, embarrassment and demographics influence consumers’ purchase intentions of sex products (Piha et al., 2018, p. 1081). As a result, they establish a framework for analyzing taboo consumption, “suggesting that self-protection and status maintenance are the core forces of taboo construction on the individual level” (Piha et al., 2018, p. 1078). In particular, the framework specified the societal- and individual-level forces that either destruct or construct taboos relating to sex product buying (Piha et al., 2018, p. 1095). They argue that just because a product is taboo, does not mean it isn’t widely consumed (Piha et al., 2018, p. 1078).

The article title itself, “from filthy to healthy and beyond” illustrates a shifting discourse in attitudes about sex products. Attitudes about sex shops and products were once considered to be ‘filthy’ and although this stereotype exists today, sex products are marketed and widely accepted as items of self-care and sexual wellbeing.

### **Sex products and feminism**

Rubin's (1984, p. 143) conceptualizations of sex-positive feminism provide historical context for the realm of sexuality. In past and present, sexuality has been critiqued as an unimportant and frivolous topic in comparison to pressing issues of poverty, war, racism, etc. but carries its own politics, inequities and modes of oppression (Rubin, 1984, p. 143). Throughout history, topics relating to sex and sexuality have entered and exited time periods when it has been deemed more controversial and politicized in society (Rubin, 1984, p. 143). For example, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in England and the United States was an era when sexuality was hotly contested (Rubin, 1984, p. 143). At this time, educational and political campaigns sought to encourage chastity, eliminate prostitution, and discourage masturbation (Rubin, 1984, p. 143), setting the tone for years to come of negativity about sex, gender, and sexuality. To protect children from premature arousal, parents would tie down their children at night so they would not be able to touch themselves and doctors performed female genital mutilation (FGM) on young girls to stop them from being able to experience sexual pleasure (Rubin, 1984, p. 143). Although in North America, these forms of abuse are foreign, the notion of sexuality as immoral has been drilled into social and legal structures that persist today (Rubin, 1984, p. 143). The widely held societal idea that masturbation is an unhealthy practice ties directly to the lasting controversy of sex products (Rubin, 1984, p. 143).

Fahs and Eric (2013) explore sex products, compulsory heterosexuality, and the politics of women's sexual pleasure in a study assessing women's subjective feelings about sex product use (p. 666). Qualitative interviews with twenty women illuminate six themes in women's narratives about sex products: emphasis on non-penetrative use of phallic sex products; embarrassment about disclosing use to partner(s); personifying vibrators and dildos as male; coercion and lack of power when using sex products; embracing sex products as campy, fun, and subversive; and resistance to sex products as impersonal or artificial (Fahs and Eric, 2013, p. 666). The six themes have implications for sexual identity and sex products, for both heterosexual women and men (Fahs and Eric, 2013, p. 666). One theme the authors draw attention to is women's negotiation of the "masculine" presence of sex products in their narratives about using sex products (Fahs & Swank, 2013, p. 666) — a theme that modern sex product brands subvert in both their marketing and manufacturing. Feminists and feminist theories contested the phallus' role in delivering pleasure to women and reinforcing men, the phallus's symbolic role, and penetrative pleasure as the primary means to female sexual pleasure (Fahs & Swank, 2013, p. 670). Fahs and Swank turn to modern sex product marketing in looking at how these themes have been perpetuated or dismantled and the notion of sex products as "a tool to help women to achieve stereotypical definitions of 'empowered' femininity" (Fahs & Swank, 2013, p. 668).

A second article by Lieberman (2016a) explores how sex products became tools that helped women reimagine their sexuality and how feminist perspectives of sex and changing conceptions of sexuality were incorporated into women's everyday lives (p. 96). During the 1970 and 1980s, "a powerful but nearly culturally invisible technology was transforming women's sexuality, helping many women experience sexual freedom and independence for the first time"

(Lieberman, 2016a, p. 96). Dell Williams, a former advertising executive and actress, opened the first sex shop in America and played a leading role in the transformation of sex products into feminist devices (Lieberman, 2016a, p. 97). William's store Eve's Garden in New York provided women with a physical space where they could buy products but also connect with a community of like-minded women and discuss the intimate details of their sex lives (Lieberman, 2016a, p. 97). At this time, sex products in the United States were transformed into feminist devices (Lieberman, 2016a, p. 97). Sex products became more than a product for sexual pleasure, they became a vehicle to drive important conversations about female sexuality. The article uniquely showcases the lived sexual experiences of women in the 1970s by studying primary data in the form of customer correspondence to Eve's Garden from women in the United States (Lieberman, 2016a, p. 96). Lieberman (2016a) received permission from Williams to access the restricted letters in the Dell Williams Papers in Cornell University's Human Sexuality Collection (p. 106). Approximately 60 letters from 1974 to 1989 were studied, all that mentioned dildos or vibrators (Lieberman, 2016a, p. 106). The letters illustrate firsthand how "ordinary women at the height of the second-wave feminist movement grappled with fraught issues surrounding changing conceptions of sexuality" (Lieberman, 2016a, p. 106). Three principal themes emerged from the customer correspondence: first, skepticism of feminists that sex products could be reconciled with feminist political beliefs; second, the ambivalence about using an inanimate object or machine for sexual pleasure; and lastly, the complicated role of sex products in both lesbian and straight relationships, particularly when women desired vaginal penetration with dildos (Lieberman, 2016a, p. 96).



## Sex toy shops

A few years after Dell Williams opened her store Eve's Garden, a woman-owned and woman-operated sex shop was born out of the 1977 women's movement (Loe, 1999, p. 705). A case study by Loe (1999) examines Toy Box, an adult enterprise opened in 1999 owned by women dedicated to the "democratic process, sex education and pro-sex attitudes" (p. 705). Loe (1999) takes into consideration the balance between politics, profits, and non-profit goals in the making of a \$6 million success story (p. 705). The case study used interviews, on-site observation, and organizational data analysis to learn the inner workings of Toy Box (Loe, 1999, p. 708). Loe (1999) completed 80 hours of observation at Toy Box in its administrative offices, retail outlets and mail order department, providing insight into how a sex store operates on a daily basis and how it differs from male-owned establishments (p. 708). Thirteen formal interviews and fifteen informal conversations were conducted with worker-owners for a first-hand account of working at Toy Box and general implications for working in the sex industry at this time (Loe, 1999, p. 708). The article calls attention to the ironic role capitalism plays in disseminating political ideologies such as feminism (Loe, 1999, p. 705). As the consumer base for sex products has grown in response to the pressures of capitalism, more of society has become exposed to the philosophy of pro-sex feminism (Loe, 1999, p. 705). The article also critiques the balance of political ideals with profit needs and the nature of sex product brands and sex shops to bill themselves as helping women first and generating profits second (Loe, 1999, p. 705).

Sigel (2019) reviews Lynn Comella's book telling the story of the third-wave feminists who "raised sexual consciousness, redefined the adult industry, and changed women's lives" (p. 329). The book, *Vibrator Nation*, looks at the emergence of sex shops during the 1970s and their

role in contributing to female sexual liberation in the 1980s and 1990s (Sigel, 2019, p. 328). The book recalls the history of the generation of feminists who attributed women's limited ability to experience sexual pleasure to the lack of education and resources (Sigel, 2019, p. 328). Inspired to make positive change, these women opened sex shops, owned and operated by women for women, and sold sex products with the goal to provide women with tools to help them experience sexual pleasure (Sigel, 2019, p. 328). Similar to Loe (1999), the book also acknowledges capitalism as part of the solution to social problems and the ability of sex products to change the status quo (Sigel, 2019, p. 329).

### **Sex toy parties**

Literature about sex toy parties closely relates to sex products in general and serves as evidence for sex products as an instigator of sex-positive conversation and community before the digital age. Sex toy parties are described as private events exclusive to women, typically held within the home with female friends and neighbours in attendance and facilitated by product representatives and experts (Herbenick & Reece, 2009 p. 179). Sex toy parties were social in nature with both a group and private component (Herbenick & Reece, 2009 p. 179). During the group component, products were showcased and described by the facilitator and passed around for guests to touch the product and in the case of vibrators, feel the intensity and pattern of vibration (Herbenick & Reece, 2009 p. 179). During the private component, women were able to enter a separate room, often called the ordering room, to privately ask the facilitator questions and place an order (Herbenick & Reece, 2009 p. 179).

In an article about in-home sex toy party facilitators as sex educators, Herbenick and Reece (2009) conduct an Internet-based survey of 1,197 women who facilitate in-home sex toy parties in the United States and analyze facilitators' role in promoting resources for sexual health (p.

178). The research method was a cross-sectional, internet-based survey of women who work as facilitators for a large sex toy party company in the United States (Herbenick, 2009, p. 180). The article gives mention to both informal groups of peers sharing information and expert-led groups, such as masturbation workshops led by Betty Dodson (Herbenick & Reece, 2009, p. 179), as re-popularized in the 2020 Netflix series, *The Goop Lab* with Gwyneth Paltrow (Paltrow et al., 2021). Herbenick and Reece (2009, p. 178) describe in-home sex toy parties as a way for contemporary women in the United States to come together to talk about sexuality, ask questions about sexuality, and access products to enhance sexual pleasure (Herbenick & Reece, 2009, p. 179). They emphasize the potential for women's sex toy parties to serve as a venue for sexual education and the promotion of sexual health and wellness (Herbenick & Reece, 2009, p. 179). Much like online retailers, women's magazines, and virtual communities of today, sex toy parties and brick-and-mortar sex shops acted as a physical location for disseminating resources and information related to sexual health. Specifically, sex toy parties served this purpose in the private rather than the public sphere before conversation about sex was deemed publicly acceptable.

McCaughey and French's (2001) article about sex toy parties explores the significance of sex products for women as marketed in female-only contexts, drawing similarities and differences between in-home marketing of sex products and Tupperware parties, marketing plastic that promises happiness to women (p. 77). The study uses participant-observation research from five female-only sex toy parties (McCaughey & French, 2001, p. 77). The article situates the sale of sex products in the context of in-home marketing to women and its relation to "the explosion of the sex industry, and the emergence of lifestyle and body politics" (McCaughey & French, 2001, p. 77). In the context of sex toy parties, the technology was often

presented to women as the answer to “absent, insensitive, or otherwise inadequate male sex partners” (McCaughey & French, 2001, p. 81) — a predominant narrative in the sexual consciousness of both women and men. McCaughey and French (2001, p. 89) believe that sex toy parties have “a radical potential of expanding women's critical consciousness of sexual culture.”

### **Assimilation into popular culture**

The Netflix show *Grace and Frankie* (Kauffman & Morris, 2015) features two main characters, played by Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin, entering the sex product business with the aim to destigmatize sex and sexuality for older women. Similarly, top-rated comedy and sex advice podcast *Call Her Daddy* (Cooper, 2018-present) aims to open the conversation about sex and sexuality through controversial yet intimate discussion between two best friends, with sponsorships from sex product companies and frequent talk about sex products. In the third episode of the Netflix series, *The Goop Lab* with Gwyneth Paltrow (Paltrow et al., 2021) titled “The Pleasure Is Ours,” sex educators Betty Dodson and Carlin Ross teach a woman how to orgasm with the famous Betty Dodson Method from her trademarked Bodysex classes of the 1960s. *Grace and Frankie*, *Call Her Daddy* and *The Goop Lab* are three of many trending examples of ways in which sex products have become a product of popular culture.

In the book *Feminism and pop culture*, Zeisler (2008, p. 6) tackles how popular culture has fueled the women’s movement and feminism, as well as how feminism has been depicted in popular culture. The book surveys the ways in which feminism has interacted with popular culture as both the catalyst and the subject (Zeisler, 2008, p. 6). Over the past decades, “feminism and popular culture have become more closely entwined than ever before” (Zeisler, 2008, p. 6). For many women, pop culture products such as television, magazines and books

were the first place they ever saw themselves represented — even if just as wives, mothers and other historical depictions of the stereotypical woman (Zeisler, 2008, p. 9). Each pop culture portrayal of women reinforced the importance of dismantling products of popular culture and remaking them to reflect the lived experiences of real women (Zeisler, 2008, p. 12). The book illustrates the twofold relationship between feminism and popular culture: feminism informs pop culture and pop culture is an imperative part of women's liberation (Zeisler, 2008, p. 12).

An article by Tchepikova (2014) discusses 'pleasure devices' and its significance for conventions of social relations in society and popular culture (p. 1). Tchepikova (2014) argues that sex products play a role in the construction and distribution of power and hierarchy, which depends on the user's personal perception of pleasure in relation to sex product usage (p. 1). Perceptions of sex product usage are shaped by the dominance of heteronormativity and reinforced or disrupted by depictions and representations of sex products in cultural products (Tchepikova, 2014, p. 1). Attitudes toward sex products reflected in popular culture texts and productions contribute to how sex products are framed on micro, meso, macro levels in society. The article cites that the existence of sex products as devices exclusively to deliver sexual pleasure first emerged in the 1960s while acknowledging that devices associated with this function were produced long before (Tchepikova, 2014, p. 1). The history of sex products is recounted from a sociological viewpoint, dating back to the contested medical discourse in sex product promotion emergent of the 1880s, with the purpose of clinically treating hysterical women, to the desexualization of sex products for marketing to the mainstream market (Tchepikova, 2014, p. 1).

The article notes numerous contributing factors to attitudes of sex products and divides them into two sections: sex products and the industry (including the marketing of the product and

the space of purchase, i.e., sex shops) and the attitudes and opinions associated with the use of sex products as devices for sexual pleasure (Tchepikova, 2014, p. 2). In analyzing the emergence of these attitudes, Tchepikova (2014) views sex products in the context of textual representations and cultural productions (p. 2). For example, mainstream film and television over the decades and representations in mass media, which strongly influence or fabricate the viewer's attitudes about sex products through examples of usage and platforms to form public opinions (Tchepikova, 2014, p. 2). Tchepikova (2014) discusses popular culture references in the late 1990s and early 2000s in which sex products are referenced primarily in a comedic tone, with fewer productions with the goal to educate and inform. The article is dated in the sense that most of the popular culture references analyzed use sex products as a product to increase shock value among viewers and while this remains prevalent today, sex products are more often represented in popular culture as a normal part of female sexuality.

An article by Coulmont and Hubbard (2010) is one of few articles to focus on the disruption of sex shops and products in society. Coulmont and Hubbard (2010) recall the negative response that arose from the opening of sex shops and the common belief that they would cause discord in the community in which they were located and attract incivility (p. 190). The article discusses the sex shop as a controversial part of the public sphere and considers the history of its legality (Coulmont & Hubbard, 2010, p. 190). They argue that the progression of today's modern sex industry is in part the outcome of social and legal processes which intended to decrease its visibility but had the reverse effect by contributing to its mainstreaming (Coulmont & Hubbard, 2010, p. 191). The article explores the disruption of sex shops in society with reference to the changing regulation of sex shops in Britain and France since the 1970s — noting ambiguities in the legal definitions of sex retail spaces (Coulmont & Hubbard, 2010, p.

189). In both cases in Britain and France, there has been a shift from the use of criminal law to more diffusive forms of control in which control is centralized to management of sex toy shops (Coulmont & Hubbard, 2010, p. 208). In Britain, this has been through licensing rather than relying on panoptic surveillance and in France, through the progressive outsourcing of the regulation from the police to local residents and a tentative legal exclusion of sex shops from city centres (Coulmont & Hubbard, 2010, p. 208). In both cases, the forms of regulation enacted by the state imply that it is uninterested in sexual morality for the public (Coulmont & Hubbard, 2010, p. 208). The state's regulation holds that sex shops and public order cannot exist simultaneously, informing the state decision to locate sex shops away from areas where their presence is deemed problematic (Coulmont & Hubbard, 2010, p. 208). Both Britain and France serve as global examples that the state favours corporate, 'well-managed' sex shops, and encourages more 'open,' women- or couple-friendly stores (Coulmont & Hubbard, 2010, p. 208).

### **Inclusivity and accessibility**

With few scholarly articles about the modern sex product marketing of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, even fewer scholarly articles exist about the inclusivity and accessibility of sex products to different gender identities and designated groups. An article by Virtù (2020) looks at sex product production in a not-for-profit context to investigate whether trans-organizing of sexuality allows for a critique of traditional and normative discourses on sex, sexuality and the body (p. 321). Through an exploratory case study using qualitative methodology, Virtù (2020) analyzes a trans and non-binary do-it-yourself (DIY) sex product workshop at a festival on trans and non-binary culture organized by a trans-led activist group in a mid-sized Northern European city body (p. 321 & 322).

The objective of the festival workshop on DIY sex products was to create a space for discussion on sexuality would give voice to people with trans, non-binary, and queer experiences (Virtù, 2020, p. 322). The workshop produced sex products through not-for-profit and DIY principles, with the goal to challenge the sex products and sexuality's dependency on the market and by extension, the commodification of sex, sexuality, and the body (Virtù, 2020, p. 322). In looking at sex products from a for-profit perspective, sex products are commodities whose accessibility primarily depends on the market (Virtù, 2020, p. 321). The case study itself is less relevant to sex product marketing but the article uniquely frames sex products as cis-political in the trans and non-binary community and positions reclaimed sex technologies as a political tool for community building and collective action (Virtù, 2020, p. 322).

In an article about co-designing sex products for adults with motor disabilities, Morales et al. (2017, p. 47) documents the masturbation practices of people with motor disabilities in order to design adapted sex products. Society continues to perceive people with motor disabilities as asexual although this is not the case (Morales et al., 2017, p. 47). For adults with motor disabilities, sex products are often the only means to sexual pleasure, yet the sex products on the market are not fit to meet their needs (Morales et al., 2017, p. 47). The study is based on two co-design meetings: semi-structured interviews with participants with motor disabilities and a focus group of professionals including caregivers, occupational therapists, and sexologists (Morales et al., 2017, p. 47). The multi-method qualitative study is intended to allow for the adaption of sex product designs that are accessible and usable for people with motor disabilities (Morales et al., 2017, p. 47). Much like how sex products were used as a tool for society to recognize female sexuality, the article positions sex products as not only a useful aid for people with disabilities, but a product to destigmatize the sexuality of people with disabilities.



## **International discourse**

In an article revealing findings from a national online survey based in Germany, Döring and Poeschl (2019) conduct a study on heterosexual cisgender women and men and their sex product acquisition and usage in both partnered sex and masturbation (p. 885). The article cites Attwood (2005) in discussing the modern marketing which strategically sells sex products as lifestyle products that are considered to be fashionable, stylish and trendy (Döring & Poeschl, 2019, p. 885). More than the content of this article, which focuses on sex product usage rather than marketing, it is important to note the progressive change in tone in comparison to articles from North America. The article itself states that Germany is a country that holds a less traditional and more progressive value system and higher degree of sexual liberation which is evident in the language used in the article (Döring, N., & Poeschl, S, 2019, p. 885). Rather than the previous articles that discuss the overarching concepts of how sex products are marketed without explicit mention of the product or type of product, Döring and Poeschl openly give mention to the sexual nature of the products in discussing gender differences in usage.

In an article about problematizing post-feminism in erotic retailing in England, Martin (2016) discusses how sex shops in England have traditionally been perceived as masculinized consumption spaces (p. 1420). Like Attwood (2005), Martin examines the emergence of fashion-conscious and female-orientated ‘erotic boutiques’ as a way to disassociate from negative stereotypical representations of sex shops (2016, p. 1420). This article considers how erotic boutiques offer “a post-feminist sexual address to women through claims of female empowerment, an embrace of traditional femininity and an endorsement of the aestheticization of the female body” (Martin, 2016, 1420). Related to Martin’s modern discussion of erotic retailers is the question of whether the shift to online retailing has re-instilled shame in going to

sex shops or parties — a concept reinforced by online retailers as a selling point by offering “discreet packaging” straight to consumers’ doorstep. Martin’s discussion of sex products in England extends to North America and other international perspectives of sex product retailing.

## **Research Questions**

The literature review prompts a number of research questions that require additional research and the application of the theory developed in each of these articles to both historical and modern sex product advertisements to reflect today's strategic and progressive marketing of sex products. The primary research question is:

- 1) How has sex product marketing changed from the early 1900s compared to the present day?
  - a) How have the ways in which sex product brands market and present themselves changed from the physical to digital space?

This research study analyzes historical sex product advertisements as well as today's modern brands like Womanizer, Dame Products and We-Vibe which sit at the intersection of innovative technology and sex and have yet to be studied in an academic context. Emergent themes identified by academics — from discourses in fashion examined by Attwood (2005) to medical discourses contested by Lieberman (2016b) — are applied to both historical and modern advertisements to explore the ethos of female empowerment or lack thereof embedded in sex product marketing, as well as the changing discourse and rhetoric marketed and presented by sex product brands in physical versus digital space. The second research question is:

- 2) How has marketing played a role in initiating intimate conversation about sex, gender, and sexuality?
  - a) How have modern sex product brands continued to initiate new conversations about sex and foster the community that was driven by the rise of sex toy shops and parties?

The digital marketing of sex products has fostered an online community larger than any other. Contrarily, digital marketing and online retailing have reinforced the privatization of sex products with marketing tropes that encourage discretion in the public sphere. Literature about sex toy shops including Dell William's store Eve's Garden (Lieberman, 2016a), the case study of Toy Box (Loe, 1999) and review of Lynn Comella's book about the emergence of sex shops (Sigel, 2019), as well as articles about sex toy parties by Herbenick and Reece (2009) and McCaughey and French (2001), are referenced as the foundation of sex-positive conversation and community driven by the rise of sex toy shops and sex toy parties in North America. In summary, this research project looks back to the desexualization of sex products throughout history to the marketing of modern sex products and compares and contrasts the marketing from each time frame as a tool for female empowerment and sexual liberation.

## **Methodology**

This research project was conducted by first sourcing sex product marketing campaigns and advertisements over the course of two major time periods. The first dataset of marketing campaigns and advertisements is from the 1900s to the 1950s and the second dataset from the present day. The first dataset ends in the 1950s for two reasons. The first being that in the 1950s, sex products started to be marketed openly as products of sexual pleasure and the marketing became more reflective of the present day, making for higher contrast between the discourses emerging from each timeframe. The second reason being that there is a gap in archives of sex product campaigns and advertisements during this middle timeframe, making it near impossible to gather primary sources to analyze. Few advertisements exist from the first timeframe, with even fewer advertisements that were preserved at a resolution that allows for minimum readability. Advertisements across different brands and retailers in North America were sourced using Google Images and cross-referenced using a reverse image search to obtain additional background information about the advertisement or campaign. For example, the publication that the advertisement was featured in and the year it was published. Three advertisements from each timeframe were analyzed, each from a different brand and publication. A sample size of three advertisements from each timeframe was selected due to the page and time limitations of a Major Research Paper, and in order to accommodate the inclusion of an analysis of the digital presence of each modern brand.

After data in the form of marketing campaigns and advertisements had been sourced, a multimodal discourse analysis (see, for example, Machin & Mayr, 2012; O'Halloran & Smith, 2012; Scollon & LeVine, 2004; van Leeuwen, 2012) was conducted to establish different presentations and framings of sex product marketing. The analysis included text and image in the

form of print advertisements from the first dataset and both print and digital advertisements from the second dataset. The themes that emerged from each dataset were established based on the text and image in each advertisement and the messaging that is portrayed to consumers, as well as the meaning that is generated from this messaging. The themes were compared and contrasted across each timeframe to illustrate the dramatic shift in discourse from the onset of sex products entering the mainstream market to the prominent role of products in North American culture today.

O'Halloran and Smith (2012, p. 1) define multimodal analysis as “the analysis of communication in all its forms [but] is particularly concerned with texts which contain the interaction and integration of two or more semiotic resources – or ‘modes’ of communication – in order to achieve the communicative functions of the text.” They distinguish between two major approaches to characterizing and conducting multimodal text analyses (O'Halloran & Smith, 2012, p. 3). In this research project, the second approach is used by exploring texts and working from the analysis of each text towards generalizations (O'Halloran & Smith, 2012, p. 3). In the second approach, close attention is paid to each text by writing detailed description and then applying a theoretical and descriptive framework to derive general discourses and themes of each text and developing theory as a result (O'Halloran & Smith, 2012, p. 3). O'Halloran and Smith (2012, p. 2) note that different semiotic resources carry their own affordances and constraints, both individually and in combination, as well as analytical challenges as illustrated by the differences in nature, accessibility and quality of the texts from each dataset.

The framework for multimodal discourse analysis is both practice-based and based on the application of theoretical notions of Scollon's mediated discourse analysis (Scollon & LeVine, 2004, p. 101). In conducting a multimodal discourse analysis, Machin and Mayr (2012, p. 1) note

the importance of carefully describing and analyzing text and image to evaluate broader discourses, ideas and values that are not overtly communicated. In using Machin and Mayr's (2012, p. 21) method to analyze speech, quoting text in sex product marketing and advertisements is used to identify discourses in the marketing relative to each timeframe. Machin and Mayr (2012, p. 21) state that to understand the complexity of meaning in texts, the meanings that remain implicit in a text must be made explicit and it must be explained why a text is accurately represented by a particular quote. Rather than using annotations to describe and organize points of analysis, a close reading is written for each advertisement to compare and contrast the analysis of each text. In choosing a multimodal discourse analysis as the research method, it allows multiple modes of communication and how they interact with one another to be taken into account. For example, the interplay between text and image in each advertisement as well as allowing for additional research and background information to be drawn in from the websites of modern brands.

In order to analyze research question (1) - how sex product marketing has changed from the early 1900s to the present day - and (1a) - how the ways in which sex product brands market and present themselves have changed from the physical to digital space - advertisements from each time frame were closely analyzed, compared and contrasted. Emergent themes across each timeframe were identified to reflect the changing discourse and rhetoric about sex products and broader topics of sex, gender and sexuality. To analyze research question (2) - how marketing has played a role in initiating intimate conversation about sex, gender, and sexuality - the analysis of advertisements from each timeframe was cross-referenced with existing literature about how historically, sex products have acted as a vehicle to drive sex-positive conversation. To delve deeper into research question (2a) - how modern sex product brands have continued to

initiate new conversations about sex and foster the community that was driven by the rise of sex toy shops and parties - the websites of each sex product brand featured in the advertisements were analyzed to survey the digital community fostered by each brand by looking for modes of interactivity and engagement with consumers (for example, community forums, blogs, educational resources). The three websites were selected in accordance with the modern brands reflected in the advertisements for consistency and to allow for an in-depth analysis of the digital presence of each brand.



## Analysis

Three main codes were used as the basis for the analysis of each advertisement. The first code, sentiment, analyzed the positive, negative or neutral sentiment of the advertisement communicated by the text and image. The second code, perspectivization, gave consideration to the point of view of the advertiser and the consumer and the attributes of each party. For example, the presumed gender of the consumer or the formality of the relationship between the advertiser and the consumer. The third code, interplay, examined the relationship between the text and image including but not limited to imagery, typography, colour and composition. Each code was selected with reference to literature about multimodal discourse analysis, with sentiment, perspectivization and interplay being the most relevant to sex product advertisements across both print and digital. Each code was used as a guide throughout the analysis of each advertisement for consistency and ease of comparability. In each advertisement, the meanings derived from the text and image either reinforced one another or independently communicated implicit meanings.

### **The Vibratile Facial Massage**

In April 1899, an advertisement for The Vibratile Facial Massage was featured in the popular 19th century periodical, *McClure's Magazine* (see Figure 1). The advertisement promises Western standards of beauty and youth with a long list of beauty and health properties. The name of the product is “Massage” rather than “Massager” which suggests a massage experience over a personal massager product. The headline of the advertisement reads “Secret of Beauty” to signify the definition of secret as “not known or seen or not meant to be known or seen by others” — hinting at the product’s potential for explicit use and serving as an example of a transmitted message communicated by vibrator and electric companies to consumers

(Lieberman, 2016b, p. 395). The advertisement includes words and phrases that arguably exaggerate the benefits of the product such as “the most marvellous instrument yet invented” and “The most perfect massage instrument in existence.” The advertisement also makes a number of fallacious beauty and health claims including the removal of wrinkles, crow’s feet and facial blemishes and is a treatment for “neuralgia, nervous headache, etc.” Additionally, the copy states that “It gives fullness and color to the cheeks, producing the rare beauty of perfect health.” Flushing of the cheeks from using the product draws parallels between flushed skin as a sexual response. The product “Strikes 5,000 delicate blows a minute, the force of the blow being under absolute control.” The phrase “under absolute control” instills a sense of power in being able to achieve the product’s promised results independently. The advertisement includes a black and white drawing of a woman and man in formal dress with the Vibratile Facial Massage between them. The lines surrounding the product suggest that it is floating and/or vibrating. The proximity between the man and woman begs the question of whether the woman or man is intended to use the product, or whether they are intended to use the product together. As identified by Fahs and Swank (2013), one theme emergent in women’s subjective feelings about sex product use is women’s negotiation of the “masculine” presence in their narratives about using sex products (p. 666). This theme is illustrated by the advertisement through the presence of the man in the drawing, perhaps symbolic of the male gaze or reflective of the lack of independence women had at this time as equals or in the context of advertising, as consumers. Lieberman (2016b) brings a different perspective to the male presence in sex product discourses, arguing that vibrator companies intended their products to be used by both men and women and the gender of the imagined user was dependent on the marketing strategy (p. 397). For example, companies portrayed users as female when vibrators were positioned as home appliances, and as

both male and female when positioned as medical devices (Lieberman, 2016b, p. 397). Despite the drawing of both a woman and man, the copy remains gender neutral. The beauty and health issues the product was invented to resolve are stereotypical of the Western beauty ideal of women rather than men, further reinforcing the target audience and imagined user as female.



Figure 1. An advertisement for *The Vibratile Facial Massage* (McClure's Magazine, 1899)

### White Cross Electric Vibrator

The White Cross Electric Vibrator was featured in *Home Needlework Magazine* in February 1908 (see Figure 2), strategically reaching women as the target audience and primary consumer of *Home Needlework Magazine*. Needlework and home-based work were considered to be “women’s work” and a hobby deemed acceptable of 20<sup>th</sup> century women. By featuring the advertisement alongside needlework or other women’s topics, the White Cross Electric Vibrator was positioned in a similar product category and associated with everyday products for women. According to Lieberman (2016b), targeting women in household ads was not surprising or uncommon as women were the imagined consumer of household products in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (p. 397). The advertisement was classified as a “Health and Beauty” feature and carries similar messaging and marketing tropes to *The Vibratile Facial Massage* advertisement featured

in *McClure's Magazine*. The advertisement for the White Cross Electric Vibrator gives mention to more specific body parts such as the shoulders, neck, arms and facial wrinkles, crow's feet and complexion. The descriptors of the women's ideal body are reflective of the timeframe with phrases like "No woman need have a poor figure nor poor health. Any part of the body may be developed, built up and rounded out perfectly and permanently..." and "you can make the body plump." It is implied that a poor figure is thin and undeveloped while the ideal figure is "plump" with developed breasts. The advertisement claims that the product is "Endorsed by medical science" to appeal to logos and legitimize medical claims including "You Can Relieve Pain, Stiffness and Weakness." The medical discourse emergent in historical sex product advertisements may point reference to an alternative and perhaps more accurate medical history of the vibrator, rather than the Maines' hypothesis positioning vibrators as a tool for doctor-assisted masturbation to treat and cure female hysteria (Lieberman, 2016b, p. 396). While medical claims may have been used as a partial disguise for the product's intended sexual purpose, there may have been a degree of legitimacy to the claims made that draw parallels with the benefits of massage therapy. The phrase "at your command" enforces a sense of independence and dependability, similar to the sense of power instilled in The Vibratile Facial Massage advertisement. Additionally, the phrase "A few minutes' daily use" normalizes the product as an everyday household object rather than a product intended for explicit sexual use. The descriptors "thrilling, refreshing vibration and electricity" and "red blood tingles through your veins and arteries and you feel vigorous, strong and well" are exaggerative and point reference to feelings derived from sexual pleasure. Two black and white images are featured in the advertisement. The top image is of a smiling woman holding the vibrator to her face. The woman appears to be wearing a robe or nightgown, signifying the night — the conventional time

of day for sex. The woman's dress is also symbolic of the privatization of the product and its intended use as a woman would not wear a robe or nightgown in public. The second image is a woman leaning back in a chair with her hands on her lap. Lastly, perhaps the most obvious indicator of the vibrators sexual purpose is the name White Cross Electric Vibrator. While "Cross" may carry religious symbolism and the colour white may stand as a symbol for purity, the decision to use the term "Electric Vibrator" rather than a more subdued product name like "massager" is indicative of the product's intended sexual purpose.

# Send For Our FREE BOOK



**ROUND OUT THE SHOULDERS, NECK AND ARMS.** Take away all wrinkles and crow's feet. Our free book tells you how to secure a beautiful complexion and retain the glow of Health and Beauty by a few minutes' daily use of the great

## White Cross Electric Vibrator

**No woman need have a poor figure** nor poor health. Any part of the body may be developed, built up and rounded out perfectly and permanently by the use of this wonderful **White Cross Electric Vibrator**. This great outfit, that has been endorsed by medical science, gives you both Vibration and Galvanic and Faradic Electricity all at the same time or separately as you wish. A complete Electric Massage and Electric Medical Battery outfit. Don't suffer any longer when you can have the three greatest known natural curative agents constantly at your command.

**You Can Relieve Pain, Stiffness and Weakness,** and you can make the body plump and build it up with thrilling, refreshing vibration and electricity. Just a few minutes' use of this wonderful vibrator and the red blood tingles through your veins and arteries and you feel vigorous, strong and well.



### Get Our Free Book "Health and Beauty"

Begin now to remove those blotches. Keep away those puffs under the eyes, and that double chin. Women and men defy the signs of age or ill health.

With our Electric Vibrator and special attachments you can convert any chair into a perfect vibrating chair without extra cost, getting the genuine Swedish Movement and wonderfully relieving of the same treatments for which you would have to pay at least \$1.00 each in a physician's office.

### THE WHITE CROSS VIBRATOR IS FULLY GUARANTEED

This great instrument gives you thousands of health producing vibrations a minute, and Medical Electricity at the same time if you want it. No other vibrator can do this. Our vibrators run either on their own powerful dry cells or may be attached to ordinary electric lights.

We refer you to dozens of leading actresses, many of them past the age of 50, who are as healthy and have eyes as brilliant as a school girl, whose cheeks are plump and pretty, and whose figures are rounded perfectly. The reason: **MASSAGE AND VIBRATION.**

### Great Reduced Price Offer

Get full details of our great introductory offer. The price of our vibrators cut almost in half, costing but a small sum. Sign the coupon and learn about this extraordinary offer. Also get our **FREE BOOK, "Health and Beauty."** You should have this valuable book anyway. Sign and mail the coupon **RIGHT NOW.**

**LINDSTROM, SMITH CO.**  
253 La Salle St., Dept. 1397,  
CHICAGO

With our Electric Vibrator and special attachments you can convert any chair into a perfect vibrating chair without extra cost, getting the genuine Swedish Movement and wonderfully relieving of the same treatments for which you would have to pay at least \$1.00 each in a physician's office.

Lindstrom, Smith Co., 253 La Salle St., Dept. 1397, Chicago  
 Please send me your free book, "Health and Beauty,"  
 and special reduced price offer on White Cross Vibrator.  
 Name .....  
 Address .....

Figure 2. An advertisement for the White Cross Electric Vibrator (Home Needlework Magazine,

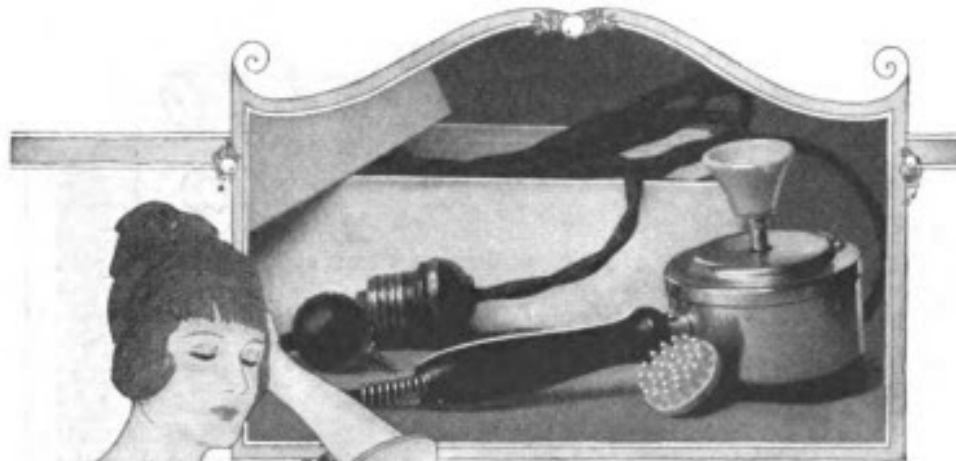
1908)

## The Star Electric Vibrator

In October 1919, The Star Electric Vibrator was featured in American family and women's magazine, *Cosmopolitan* (see Figure 3). The headline "Have You Tried Electric Massage at Home?" speaks directly to the women by using direct second-person narrative. The second-person point of view implies a more friendly, close relationship between the advertiser and the consumer. Similar to the previous advertisements analyzed, The Star Electric Vibrator is marketed as a "dependable health and beauty stimulant" to help "When you're fatigued, 'out of sorts,' have a nervous headache or a touch of rheumatism." The physical ailments the product aims to help contribute to medical discourses assigned to women. Being "out of sorts" or having "a touch" of rheumatism suggests the delicate nature of a woman and weakness that would not be associated with a man. The Star Electric Vibrator is also advertised to meet a number of Western beauty standards including "a natural healthy glow, a full and free circulation of blood, a constant source of restoring youthful firmness and contour." Complexion, circulation and youth are recurring in each of the advertisements analyzed, perhaps drawing parallels with flushed complexion and increased circulation from sexual arousal and the association between youth and sexual activity. The name The Star points reference to the definition of "star" as a famous person or celebrity. The copy states "many noted stage and screen beauties use and endorse The Star Electric Vibrator" and features the names and photographs of prominent actresses who use and endorse the product. This marketing strategy is reflective of modern celebrity endorsements or influencer marketing — attaching fame to the product and associating the product with idolized celebrities so everyday consumers are convinced to buy it. According to Lieberman (2016b), historical sex product advertisements usually featured a young woman who embodied the archetype of the "Modern Girl" (p. 398) — both perpetuating the Western beauty ideal and

normalizing the use of the product by associating it with a real person rather than a nameless model. Associating the product with a celebrity or real person deconstructs the taboos of individual consumption such as cognitive determinants, embarrassment and demographics influence on consumers' purchase intentions of sex products (Piha et al., 2018, p. 1078). Like the White Cross Electric Vibrator, the name "Electric Vibrator" rather than "massager" is an indicator of the product's intended sexual purpose. Today, there is a notable distinction between a vibrator and a massager. A vibrator is a sex product while a massager is a non-sexual product designed to massage the body, often used to relieve pain or stress. The advertisement features four images including both drawings and photographs. The first image is a black and white photograph of the product itself. The second image is a drawing of a woman looking at herself in a handheld mirror. The woman in the drawing wears a revealing top with a blanket or shawl draped over her arms. Like the woman's dress in the White Cross Electric Vibrator, her clothing is symbolic of the private use of the product. The third photo is a drawing of a woman holding an umbrella with little relevance to the product or the advertisement. The last image is a photograph of the actress endorsing the product. The proximity of the product itself and the women featured in the advertisement allows the reader to envision how or where the product is used — acting as confirmation of the product's non-sexual use in the eyes of the publication and leaving room for imagination in the eyes of the consumer.





### Have You Tried Electric Massage at Home?

**I**F you haven't you cannot realize what a dependable health and beauty stimulant it is. When you're fatigued, "out of sorts," have a nervous headache or a touch of rheumatism, you will find electric massage a wonderful help. With a Star Electric Massage Vibrator in your home, (and it costs only \$5 for the complete outfit) you have your own beauty parlor—you eliminate the expense of going downtown for these treatments.

**Costs only \$5.00 for complete outfit**

To have a natural healthy glow, a full and free circulation of blood, a constant source of restoring youthful firmness and contour, many noted stage and screen beauties use and endorse the Star Electric Massage Vibrator. You can now easily have a Star Electric Vibrator in your home. You can give yourself that careful home health and beauty

attention which every woman needs.

Will you try the Star Electric Massage Vibrator? Get one today. For sale at all leading drug and department stores. In case you cannot get the "Star" send money direct to the FITZGERALD MFG. Co., 106 Farley Place, Torrington, Conn.

## The STAR Electric VIBRATOR



Such well-known motion picture stars as Agnes Ayres, (picture herewith) Corinne Griffith, Betty Blythe and Gladys Leslie, all of the Vitagraph Company; Ruth Roland, Pathé; May Allison, Metro; and Lillian Walker use and endorse the Star Electric Vibrator.



Figure 3. An advertisement for The Star Electric Vibrator (Cosmopolitan, 1919)

## Dame Products

Dame Products is a female-founded company engineering innovative tools for sexual wellness in fulfillment of the mission to close the pleasure gap, defined as “the disparity in satisfaction that people with vulvas experience in the bedroom, versus their cis male counterparts” (Dame, n.d.). Dame’s 2018 digital marketing campaign was featured on their website, social media and in the form of traditional advertisements (see Figure 4). The colour palette of nude and forest green is gender-neutral, reflective of the progressive and inclusive marketing of sex products today. The advertisement features the product testimony “‘The smile on my wife’s face says it all.’ – David, 41, satisfied customer.” While the male perspective in an advertisement for a female sex product would previously be argued as a way to reduce women’s autonomy and silence the female voice about sexual pleasure, in this case it appeals to the intended purpose of the product for both coupled and solo use. The male narrative iterates the support of men in achieving sexual pleasure for women and normalizes the use of sex products in the bedroom for couples. The use of the name David rather than just “satisfied customer” creates the archetype of a heterosexual couple who uses Dame Products during sex and a wife who is achieving equal sexual pleasure. A couple as the imagined user for the product demonstrates a deeper level of understanding of female pleasure from the male perspective and progress from the historical archetype of the “Modern Girl” (Lieberman, 2016b, p. 398). Contrary to the gender-neutral graphic design and mission statement, the copy perpetuates heteronormativity as the standard or preferred sexual orientation. When looking at the marketing campaign as a whole, the other advertisements give representation to non-gendered and solo users that increase the inclusivity of the marketing campaign and sex product. While the term *sex toys* was redefined as *sex products* for the purpose of this project in an effort to use language that elevates the

conversation around female sexuality, the word *toys* also signifies fun and play, in this case, “for sex.”



*Figure 4. An advertisement for Dame Products (2018)*

## **Womanizer**

Womanizer is a modern sex product brand with patented Pleasure Air Technology that stimulates the clitoris without direct contact to avoid over-stimulation and desensitization (Womanizer, n.d.). In 2019, Womanizer launched an advertisement in partnership with sex product retailer, Pink Cherry, featured on a billboard in Toronto, Canada (see Figure 5). The brand name “Womanizer” clearly states the point of view and target audience of the product as women. To ensure that the advertisement is readable for passersby of the billboard, the copy

states the short tagline “Scream your own name” in large type. The tagline signifies both independence and pleasure. The words “your own” implies that women don’t need men to achieve sexual pleasure and “Scream” stands for the intensity of the pleasure derived from the product. The name of the retailer, Pink Cherry, points reference to the colour pink as a signifier for girls or women and the sexual symbolism of the cherry fruit. The light pink background and bright pink typography appeal to the stereotypical colours associated with femininity. It could be argued that these colours are used to appeal to a feminine audience or used as a reclamation of the colour to advocate for sexual pleasure that has been dominated by the patriarchy. The image of the Womanizer sex product is indicative of a technological device, with sleek lines and buttons as seen in marketing and product photography for technology products. As examined by Attwood (2005), the advertisement synchronizes discourses that exist distinctly in fashion, consumerism, and sexuality, with trendy graphic design and product photography that would be seen in a fashion magazine (p. 393).



*Figure 5. An advertisement for Womanizer at Pink Cherry retailer (2019)*

## **We-Vibe**

We-Vibe is an Ottawa-based sex product brand founded by a Canadian couple in 2003 (We-Vibe, n.d.). The company offers a wide range of products for coupled and solo use for all gender identities. We-Vibe positions itself as a technologically innovative sex product company with products that can be controlled remotely using the free We-Connect app to foster “digital intimacy.” The app allows couples to video call, pair the We-Connect toys with a smartphone, and control each other's vibrations and pleasure across physical distance (We-Vibe, n.d.). We-Vibe’s 2020 advertisement was featured on their website, social media and as promotional material used by partnered sex toy retailers selling We-Vibe products (see Figure 6). The copy in the advertisement states “Discover the exciting sensation of pulsating waves of air gently massaging the clitoris.” The language used is explicitly sexual by using medical terminology for the clitoris instead of slang. The language is gender neutral as it does not mention either female or male although the mention of the clitoris implies that the product is intended for female use while promoting inclusivity for persons with a clitoris who may not identify as female. The language used is positive in nature, instilling a sense of opportunity and pleasure with words like “discover” and “excitement.” The colours used in the advertisement are gender neutral to masculine, with shades of orange, purple and blue. The hand holding the product is covered in what appears to be purple paint. The purple liquid may be symbolic of female or male ejaculate or simply an artistic choice. Like Womanizer, the We-Vibe advertisement draws parallels with discourses in fashion and consumerism with aesthetically pleasing graphic design and curated product photography that mimics the marketing and advertising in the fashion industry (Attwood, 2005, p. 393).



*Figure 6. An advertisement for We-Vibe (2020)*

### **Digital Community**

To analyze how marketing has played a role in initiating intimate conversation about sex, gender, and sexuality, the analysis of advertisements from each timeframe was cross-referenced with existing literature about how historically, sex products have acted as a vehicle to drive sex-positive conversation. The advertisements analyzed are both reflective and non-reflective of the sex-positive movement driven by sex products, sex shops and sex parties. The historical advertisements analyzed desexualized the products in attempt to disguise their intended sexual purpose and be more palatable for both media publications and consumers. The modern

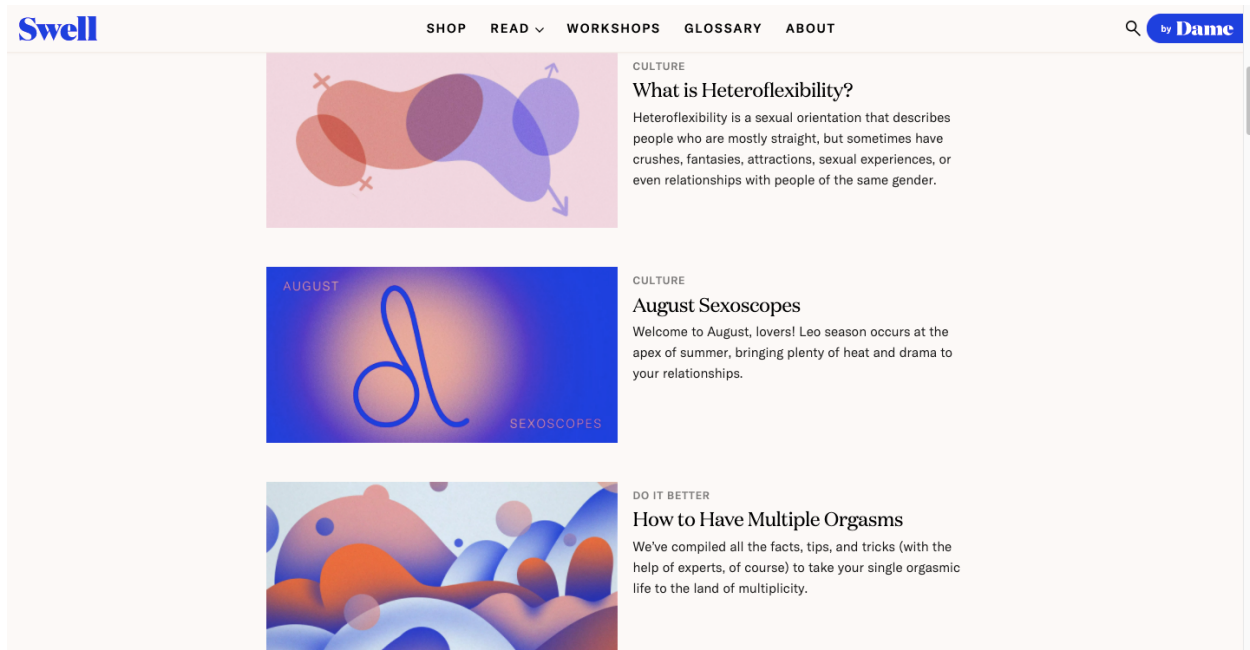
advertisements were explicit in nature, directly communicating the sexual purpose of the products. A facet of each modern brand that goes uncommunicated by the advertisements analyzed is the digital community fostered by each brand. The sex-positive digital communities of today are an example of how modern sex product brands have continued to initiate new conversations about sex and foster the community that was driven by the rise of sex toy shops and parties. Contrarily, digital marketing and online retailing have reinforced the privatization of sex products with marketing tropes that encourage discretion in the public sphere.

### **Dame Products**

Dame Products offers a digital platform called Swell, named after the combination of the words *sex* and *wellness*. The platform “explores the ins and outs of sexual wellness and human intimacy” (Dame, n.d.) with stories, advice, research, workshops and educational resources. Like the parallels Attwood (2005) draws between discourses that exist distinctly in fashion, consumerism, and sexuality that are synchronized in sex product marketing (p. 393), the digital communities fostered by modern sex product brands can be compared and contrasted with the readers of newspapers and women’s magazines. Many sex product brands are developing digital platforms that simulate the same user experience as media publications with columns dedicated to different topics including sex advice, relationships, health and culture. Articles are written by resident writers and freelancers with headlines ranging from “How to Have Multiple Orgasms” to “August Sexoscopes.” At the bottom of each article, there is a discussion board where readers are provided with the option to comment, although the majority of Swell articles have no comments which suggests low readership and poor engagement. Despite efforts to create a digital space that simulates the brick-and-mortar community fostered by sex shops and parties in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the lack of interactivity and engagement perpetuates a one-sided dialogue

without discussion or conversation. Dame Labs is another branch of Dame Products conducting people-centred research by providing consumers with the opportunity to create products from ideation to testing, engage in open discussion, and share opinions, voices and desires about sex, gender and sexuality that informs the creation of Dame sex products (Dame, n.d.). The workshops offered by Dame are both synchronous and asynchronous, delivered by leading experts in the sex and wellness industry. The majority of workshops offered by Dame Products are for-profit, making it a less accessible source of education for the public and a more exclusive community of members who have the time and money to attend. Loe (1999) critiques the balance of political ideals with profit needs and the nature of sex product brands and sex shops to bill themselves as helping women first and generating profits second (p. 705). This balance or unbalance is illustrated by the brand's community-driven services that go beyond solely selling sex products, yet operate on an entirely for-profit model. Despite Loe's critique, she also recognizes the role capitalism plays in disseminating political ideologies like pro-sex feminism (Loe, 1999, p. 705). In the FAQ section of the website, it answers the question "Will my order be shipped discreetly?" with the answer "Absolutely. The packaging we use for this product is completely discreet — it will show up in a plain brown box, with the return address listed as "Fulfillment Centers/DCL Logistics." It'll be our little secret. ;)" (Dame, n.d.). The phrase "It'll be our little secret" reinforces the privatization of sex products in the public sphere and instills a sense of shame in ordering a sex product non-discreetly.





*Figure 7. Swell website by Dame Products (2021)*

## Womanizer

The brand Womanizer has a blog called O\*Diaries on their website all about sex positivity. O\*Diaries is inclusive to readers of all gender identities and sexual orientations and seeks to democratize sex through information, opinion and inspiration (Womanizer, n.d.). The blog includes the subcategories O\*Pleasure, O\*Thoughts, O\*Self and O\*Boy, each containing different themed articles from sex education to sex product reviews. The letter O in each category stands for orgasm, signifying sexual pleasure. The subcategory O\*Boy expands the conversation beyond female sexuality with articles about sex products and sex tips for men — a topic debatably more stigmatized than sex products for women. While Womanizer claims to be inclusive to readers of all gender identities and sexual orientations, the division of content for women and for men reinforces the gender binary as either female or male and eliminating other gender identities from being directly addressed in the conversation. Contrarily, the division of content for women and men acknowledges and seeks to fulfill the unique sexual needs of

different genders. The subcategories O\*Pleasure, O\*Thoughts, O\*Self feature articles for non-heterosexual sexual orientations and different gender identities but the subcategory dedicated to men perpetuates a gender binary. While the articles published on the O\*Diaries website serve as both an educational resource and source of entertainment for readers, the user experience lacks the interactivity and engagement that was driven by sex toy shops and parties. Unlike Swell, O\*Diaries does not provide readers with the option to comment on articles. Instead, readers are provided with the option to review the article with a “Leave your rating” prompt that allows readers to submit a rating out of five stars. The majority of the articles do not contain a rating, suggesting low readership and/or lack of value and incentive for readers to rate an article. O\*Diaries’ decision to disable comments protects writers and readers from criticism, hate and discrimination in response to controversial topics like sex, gender and sexuality. In terms of user experience, O\*Diaries is linked in the fine print of the bottom of the website, making it difficult for users to find. More front and centre is a section of the website dedicated to customer reviews and influencers promoting their Womanizer product. The advertisement for The Star Electric Vibrator is an example of early influencer marketing and the personification of the imagined user which is an increasingly prevalent public relations tactic used in modern sex toy marketing today.

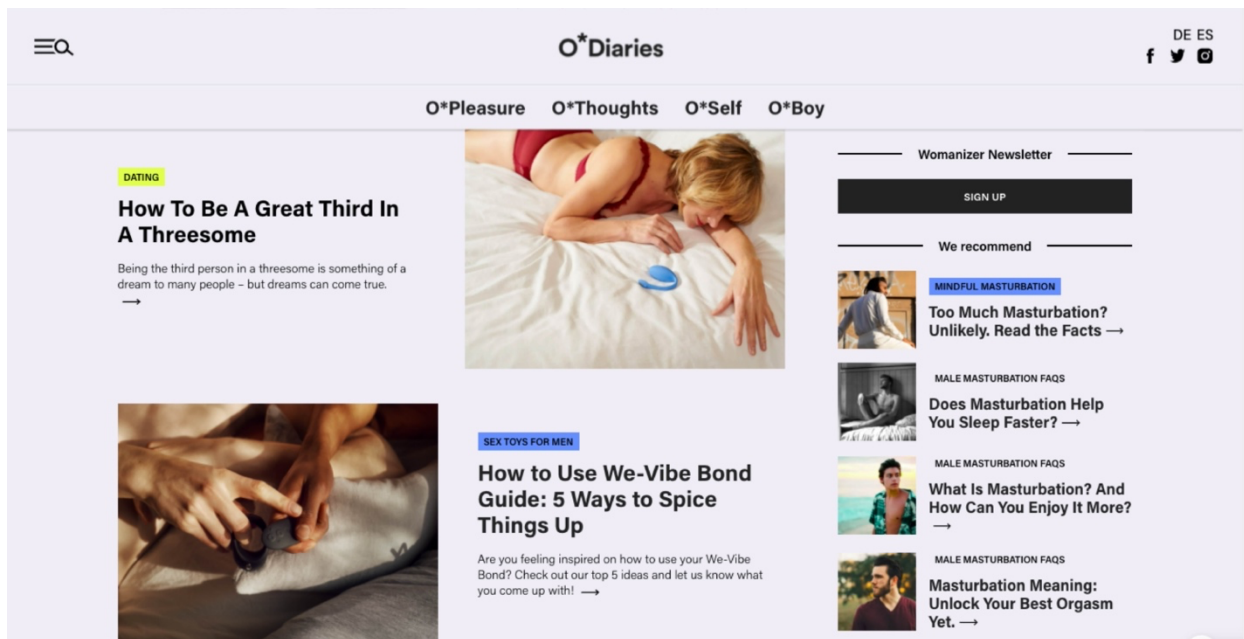
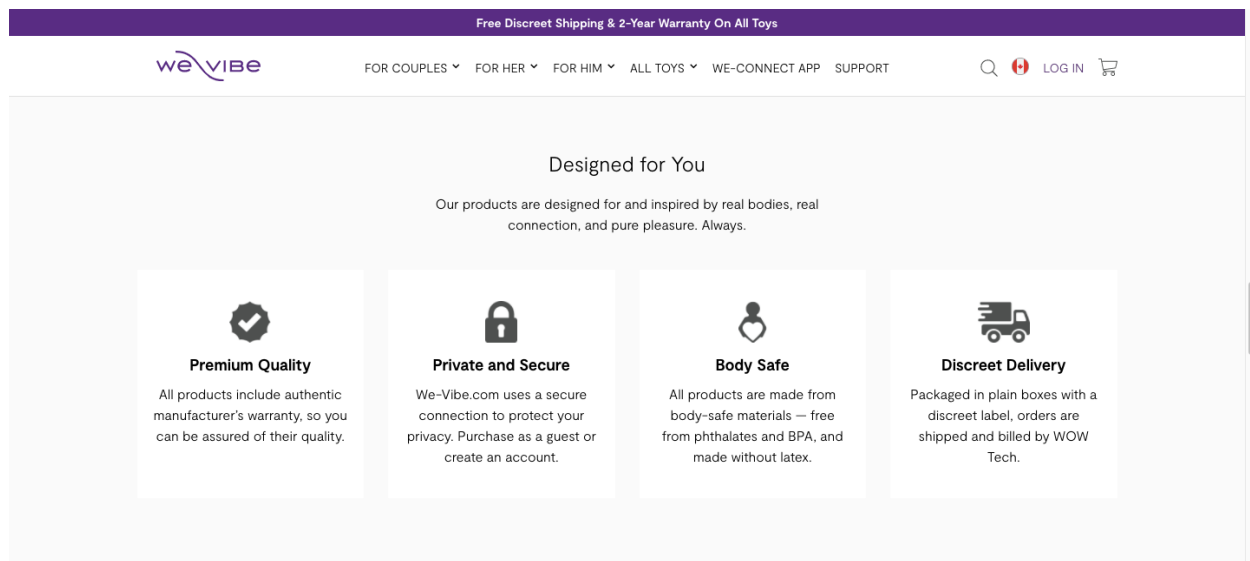


Figure 8. O\*Diaries website by Womanizer (2021)

## We-Vibe

We-Vibe fosters digital intimacy through its app, We-Connect. The app connects partners across physical distance and provides a platform for them to engage in digital intimacy. The app has recently been marketed as a tool to cope with the emotional toll the global COVID-19 pandemic has had on relationships, a time when "Ongoing travel restrictions have made long-distance relationships even harder than before" (We-Vibe, n.d.). We-Vibe and Womanizer are both owned and operated by design, manufacturing, and marketing company, WOW Tech Group. The We-Vibe website links to the same blog as Womanizer, O\*Diaries. Like Dame Products, both We-Vibe and Womanizer are marketed as "Packaged in plain boxes with a discreet label, orders are shipped and billed from 'WOW Tech Canada Ltd.'" (We-Vibe, n.d.). While the discreet shipping of sex products increases privacy, safety and accessibility for consumers, the notion of discretion serves as an example of how the shift to online retailing has re-instilled shame in going to sex toy shops or parties — a concept reinforced by online retailers

as a selling point by offering “discreet packaging” straight to consumers’ doorstep. Offering discreet packaging is encouraged to ensure that sex products are accessible to consumers at all comfort levels and to avoid pressuring consumers to publicize the intimate details about their sex lives but in an academic context, it is important to note how discourses about discretion contribute to broader narratives about sex products and sexual consciousness. This notion is an example of taboos in marketing consumption and cognitive determinants that influence consumers’ purchase intentions of sex products and in particular, the way consumers intend to purchase sex products (Piha et al., 2018, p. 1081).



*Figure 9. Discreet shipping and delivery offerings by We-Vibe (2021)*

## Research Findings and Discussion

In the beginning stages of conducting research and defining the research question, it was proven to be difficult to source historical sex product advertisements. More surprisingly, it was most difficult to find sex product marketing campaigns and advertisements from the 1950s to the 2000s. One potential reason behind this difficulty is that digital marketing campaigns are less likely to be preserved over time. From the analysis of the advertisements in the first dataset, prominent discourses include the desexualization of sex products, sex products as products to help women achieve ideals of physical beauty, sex products as a cure for physical and mental illness, and sex products as products for non-sexual functions. Most prominently, the three historical advertisements analyzed all contain marketing tropes focused on pushing ideals of beauty and health to women. Each advertisement was implicit in their sexual meanings, making their intended sexual uses virtually unknown to the consumer unless they had prior knowledge of the sexual purpose of the product. Advertisements from the first dataset has a higher ratio of text to image, with repetitive and redundant claims in the copy of each advertisement. Each product and advertisement contain both sexual and nonsexual meanings to be interpreted by the consumer (Lieberman, 2016b, p. 396). At this time in the vibrator's history, vibrators continued to contain a variety of meanings that contributed to their non-linear progression from camouflage to openness (Lieberman, 2016b, p. 396).

In the second dataset, sex products are marketed directly to women as products for sexual pleasure. Modern sex product marketing is framed with a strong ethos of female empowerment at the core of its brand values, with the goal of "closing the pleasure gap" for couples or promoting sexual independence for women. The marketing of modern sex products is reflective of marketing and discourses in fashion and consumerism, with buzzy copy, aesthetic

graphic design and curated product photography (Attwood, 2005, p. 393). With unambiguous language and direct calls to action, there is little left up to the imagination as to the product's sexual purpose. The comparative analysis of two different timeframes and datasets illustrate extremes in the changing discourse of sex product marketing, rather than the more gradual change illustrated by a diachronic analysis of the 1900s to the present day. The themes that emerge can be tied back to sociological and anthropological perspectives of female sexuality and women in society and provide insights into how sex products have become a symbol representative of female empowerment and sexual liberation.

Beyond the advertisements for each modern brand is a digital community fostered by the marketing and promotion of each brand. The sex-positive digital communities of today are an example of how modern sex product brands have continued to initiate new conversations about sex and foster the community that was driven by the rise of sex toy shops and parties but in some ways, fallen short of the brick-and-mortar communities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sex toy shops provided women with a physical space where they could not only buy products but also connect with a community of like-minded women and discuss the intimate details of their sex lives (Lieberman, 2016a, p. 97). Similarly, in-home sex toy parties were a way for women to come together to talk about sexuality, ask questions about sexuality, and access products to enhance their sexual pleasure (Herbenick & Reece, 2009, p. 179). In these contexts, sex products became more than a product for sexual pleasure, they became a vehicle to drive important conversations about female sexuality.

Despite each brand's efforts to foster a sense of community among consumers, the communities fostered online lack the intimacy and closeness of the communities of sex toy shops and parties with a physical presence and in-person interaction. The websites and blogs analyzed

show evidence of poor interactivity and engagement among readers, suggesting low readership and perpetuating a one-sided dialogue from the masses to consumers rather than the mutual discussion and conversation that was had in sex toy shops or at sex toy parties. Furthermore, marketing tropes in online retailing about discreet shipping and delivery offerings reinforce the privatization of sex products and re-instills a sense of shame in the existence of sex products in a physical space. It is important to note that although participatory conversations are not being had among consumers in the discussion boards of sex product websites and blogs in the digital community, the modern marketing of sex products is sparking these conversations among close friends and partners in the real world.

## **Conclusion**

This research project contributes to the study of sex product marketing and broader themes of sex positivity in the digital era. The research conducted analyzes modern sex product brands previously unresearched in an academic context and the shift in marketing and its impact from the analogue to digital era. This major research paper aims to inform sex product brands with strategic and thoughtful analysis of the explicit and implicit messaging embedded in their marketing and the historical significance of sex products, sex shops and sex parties in paving the way for sex-positive feminism. Due to the limited scope of this project, future research should expand the number and selection of modern advertisements analyzed in a variety of contexts, for example, traditional print marketing, digital marketing and social media marketing. A timely topic only briefly discussed in this research project is the parallels in marketing strategies between historical and modern advertisements including celebrity endorsement and influencer marketing of sex products. Future research should also centre the inclusivity and accessibility of the sex product market and make tangible recommendations for improvements to support and continue the progression of sex-positive feminism, empowerment and sexual liberation for all.



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