

Now More Than Ever:  
Sex Toys and Social Justice in the Digital Age

by

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Now more than ever: sex toys and social justice in the digital age

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## ABSTRACT

Since the 1970s, sex toy retailers such as The Pleasure Chest and Babeland have used social justice frameworks, sex positivity, and feminist politics to shape their marketing and education. In the age of social media these same frameworks and mores have been shorthanded for algorithmic relevance. I argue that sex toy marketing on social media mimics personal sexual storytelling, as well as digital social justice discourse.

These shops were all opened and operated on the premise that sexual pleasure, especially for women, was inherently liberatory, and that the education and shame-free conversation that such shops facilitated (not to mention the products they sold) were part and parcel of a freer, more empowered, and honest sexual expression for women everywhere. And their message had an impact! The sex toy industry is thriving and expanding, and the same original retailers continue to compete in the online space with ecommerce giants such as Adam and Eve and Amazon.

Writers and historians Hallie Lieberman and Lynn Comella have, separately, traced the development of the industry over decades, and delved with particular interest into the landscape of industry marketing and politics since the 1970s. Through engagement with their written work, and the work of others assessing the contemporary landscape of digital marketing and the citizen consumer reality, as well as some examples from currently active online accounts, I explore the presence of feminist sex toy brands and shops on Instagram. Specifically, I will discuss how the performative politics of that and other such platforms serve to extend the legacy of their feminist

underpinnings, and explore the limitations of branded feminism and sex positivity on these platforms.

## LAY SUMMARY

Since the 1970s, sex toy retailers such as The Pleasure Chest and Babeland have used social justice frameworks, sex positivity, and feminist politics to shape their marketing and education. In the age of social media these same frameworks and mores have been shorthanded for algorithmic relevance. I argue that sex toy marketing on social media mimics personal sexual storytelling, as well as digital social justice discourse. This work contributes to contemporary explorations of the overlap of personal and branded sexual storytelling and social media in American consumer culture.

## PREFACE

This work has been researched and written by me under the supervision of Dr. Janice Stewart, and the final version was defended to Dr. Stewart and Dr. Jennifer Jenson.

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## INTRODUCTION

Let's start with some numbers, shall we? The sex toy industry accounted for a revenue of over 31 billion US dollars in 2020, with annual trends at a precipitous slope upward. According to a 2021 report from Statista, the industry anticipates upwards of 52

billion US dollars in profit by 2026.<sup>1</sup> As of 2017, a survey of over 970 respondents showed 65% of female Americans owned some type of sex toy.<sup>2</sup> With little regulation under the Federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA), it's easy to produce products cheaply and quickly, making the adult novelties industry immensely profitable and increasingly enticing to enter as a business endeavor. That said, sex toy manufacturers and retailers face strict limitations when it comes to marketing, a factor that has necessitated creative advertising tactics over the decades. Like all industries, this one has turned to digital marketing and social media to reach potential customers directly, without the belabored interventions of traditional media.

The most recognizable names in social media—Facebook, Twitter and Instagram—came on the scene in the early 2000s, with exploding popularity that resulted in one-in-three people on the planet becoming a user of at least one.<sup>3</sup> The ubiquity of social media and the growing use of social media platforms for shopping and brand building has resulted in a new dynamic relationship between brand and consumer. Brands now have the opportunity to blend nearly seamlessly into individuals' personal networks.

On these platforms, sex toy brands and retailers which have been historically limited in how they can advertise due to age limits and general social taboo, have had a space and opportunity to curate their image and directly access their consumer base. The temporality of the content on these platforms, especially Instagram, also gives brands and retailers the opportunity to participate in and adopt social trends,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/587109/size-of-the-global-sex-toy-market/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.statista.com/forecasts/743584/sex-toy-ownership-of-female-consumers-in-the-us>

<sup>3</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/rise-of-social-media>

conversations and language, including those related to social justice movements and pop feminist politics. The social media presence of sex toy companies offers a unique eye into the cultural and capitalist reproduction of feminism, social justice, and sex positivity.

These companies—with a history of feminist politics, aspire to make a meaningful claim about their roles in individual sexual liberation. At the same time “woke” sex toy brands, in order to counter the ongoing limitations on their advertising and marketing, have appropriated the language and tone of activists and social justice movements (online and otherwise) to sell their products. Sex toy brands, unable to participate in paid methods or deep data, instead have leveraged market(ing) trends that aim towards arguably our most personal practices of consumerism. They participate in and contribute to the shorthanding and simplification of social justice conversations on social media, as a means to connect to their consumers on a personal and sociopolitical level.

There are tense discussions that are happening on a broad basis: of the role that social media plays in our lives, and the anxious intermingling of our personal content and targeted marketing by brands large and small. Many of these conversations take place more casually among users and consumers on social media, but certain strains have made their way into media coverage as well. Consider, for example, discussions around the necessity of “social media detoxes” or otherwise treating media consumption as an addiction; there are also debates around “performative activism” by brands,<sup>4</sup> and many surveys about user distaste for ads; and one particularly newsworthy example is

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<sup>4</sup> Desjardins, Lisa, et al. “Rainbow Capitalism Raises Questions about Corporate Commitments and Pride Month's Purpose.” PBS.com.

the rolling coverage of Facebook's (and their properties') various infractions, including but not limited to the selling of personal data, the noted-yet-ignored impact of their platforms on children, teens and adults,<sup>5</sup> and many a concern about their using apps on your personal devices to collect real-time information via microphone, etc. (yet unproven, but a very popular debate among users).<sup>6</sup> These conversations are filled with consequential questions as the political and social ramifications of social media continue to be revealed. Within the industry, there is a history of critical reflection on social media marketing that companies should be a part of, from both a consumer and marketer perspective. In the simplest terms, the ways in which our personal mores and stances are incorporated and regurgitated matter.

Feminism, sex positivity, and social justice are the bedrock of some of the biggest names in the sex toy industry, and continue to play a role in their inner and outer workings today.<sup>7</sup> From early players like Dell Williams' Eve's Garden, whose catalogues explicitly framed vibrators as tools of sexual liberation, to still thriving companies like Joani Blank's sex therapy informed Babeland, to Claire Cavanah and Rachel Venning's Toy in Babeland (described as "fun, feisty, and feminist")<sup>8</sup> the roots of this ethos are strong. These shops were all opened and operated on the premise that sexual pleasure, especially for women, was inherently liberatory, and that the education

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<sup>5</sup> Wells, Georgia, et al. "Is Facebook Bad for You? It Is for about 360 Million Users, Company Surveys Suggest." WSJ.com.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert, David. "Facebook Said It Wasn't Listening to Your Conversations. It Was." Vice.com.

<sup>7</sup>The Pleasure Chest (est. 1971), Good Vibrations (est. 1977), and Babeland (est. 1993) in particular get attention for their grounding in education, inclusivity and feminism. Comella covers this in depth in chapters 7 and 8 of *Vibrator Nation*.

<sup>8</sup> Comella, *Vibrator Nation*, 66

and shame-free conversation that such shops facilitated (not to mention the products they sold) were part and parcel of a freer, more empowered, and honest sexual expression for women everywhere. And their message had an impact! The movement and approach took hold so much over the middle of the century that, as Lynn Comella writes, “the growing cultural acceptance and mainstreaming of sex toys, due in large part to the success of Good Vibrations and other sex-positive retailers, meant that these businesses were now competing with big companies like Amazon.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite a massive expansion in manufacturing and influx of VC and investor funding in some corners, the sex toy industry is still fairly small. This means that, despite the low profile of the industry, it’s still a somewhat manageable task to make a map of it. Writers and historians Hallie Lieberman and Lynn Comella have, separately, traced the development of the industry over decades, and delved with particular interest into the landscape of industry marketing and politics since the 1970s. Comella frames her book, *Vibrator Nation*, as “a book about feminist invention, intervention, and contradiction, a world where sex-positive retailers double as social activists, commodities are framed as tools of liberation, and consumers are willing to pay for the promise of better living through orgasms.”<sup>10</sup> Her writing focuses on the underlying tensions of the work, with an emphasis on major retailers such as Babeland and Pleasure Chest, and the people behind them. I aim to expand on the arguments and revelations of Comella’s work to explore the presence of feminist sex toy brands and shops on Instagram. Specifically, I will discuss how the performative politics of that and

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<sup>9</sup> Comella, *Vibrator Nation*, 212

<sup>10</sup> Comella, *Vibrator Nation*, 8

other such platforms serve to extend the legacy of their feminist underpinnings, and explore the limitations of branded feminism and sex positivity on these platforms.

There is an array of other texts and ideas which will also fundamentally inform my inquiry, including Butler's *Bodies that Matter*, the dissections of cause marketing and the intertwining of capital and activism in the collection of essays *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times* (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser), and discussions on new media applications for sex positivity, education and storytelling (Plummer), and activism (Brock, Moors, Thornton, and others). I believe that there is a fascinating way to pull these elements together specifically within the context of the sex toy industry.

Finally, Hallie Lieberman's *Buzz: A Stimulating History of the Sex Toy* reviews the long winding road of the industry, surveying a wide group of retailers, manufacturers, educators, and more. A particularly interesting aspect of Lieberman's work is the attention to the tactics of language and semantics used by all parties to normalize sex toys and pleasure, and to navigate complicated terrain of social taboo and legal risk. Together, Lieberman's *Buzz* and Comella's *Vibrator Nation* paint a lucid picture of the history of the industry and the feminist sex toy shops within it, as well as the dynamic between their politics and business models.

A primary concern of both Comella and Lieberman's writing is how many of the oldest, most foundational feminist retailers (such as The Pleasure Chest, Eve's Garden, Babeland etc.) centered sex education, sex positivity, and feminism over profit for their initial years. It's not hyperbole to say that this model utterly transformed and redirected the industry. However, most of these stores had to face the reality that, in order to stay

open, they had to find a way to make a profit. Comella in particular discusses how, starting in the late 90s, many of these stores integrated more traditional business practices and models into their strategy while trying to maintain their original intents, and many were successful in doing so.<sup>11</sup> That said, the existing rub between feminism and capitalism, felt and discussed by all levels from founders to floor staff, became increasingly chafed. The anxiety is not trivial, and the desire to not only continue to center ethics of feminism, inclusivity, and sex positivity but to demonstrate that attention to both staff and customers (and therefore maintain trust) remains of great importance.

For the past few years, social media platforms have given these brands and stores a space for free brand-building and marketing, despite ongoing red tape when it comes to advertising. Instagram, in particular, has gained a particular prevalence within industry direct-to-consumer (also known as business to consumer, or B2C) marketing. Tonal and graphical insights are taken directly from this platform, and brands increasingly mimic non-branded accounts to gain followers and nudge sellthrough. When available, brands often obscure their selling tactics through posting user generated content (or UGC), which may or may not be paid for or even authorized. This matters because, when done well, this content blurs the lines between personal and marketed content.<sup>12</sup>

If Twitter is a saucepan perfectly tuned for cooking down political acts and movements, Instagram is a similar thing for consumer-oriented content. New shopping features, while not available for brands in the sex toy world, have simplified the link

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<sup>11</sup> Comella, *Vibrator Nation*, 188-210

<sup>12</sup> Notably, Instagram has recently begun to more stringently draw distinctions between organic and marketed content.

between brand building and ROI. General trends in marketing and ecommerce such as increased attention to brand and consumer ethics have, of course, been translated to these platforms as well. I argue that the contradictions between feminisms and consumerism Comella and Lieberman define are prevalent in the front-facing social media presences of these stores. This claim will inform much of my analysis of these accounts.

Similarly fundamental to the way the sex toy industry has shifted is the increasing prevalence, importance, and opportunity of ecommerce. Small, feminist toy shops can exist exclusively online, in a world of their own design and with a direct line to their customers all over the country via social media. Doing so limits the overhead and makes them viable where they may have otherwise struggled to get a hold. Shops such as Spectrum Boutique, Wild Flower Sex and others exist and flourish, in varying degrees, due to this interplay. The accessibility of the ecommerce world also plays a key role in how new retailers such as Shop Enby, a Black/Trans owned company, enter and build an audience in an industry still burdened by white and cis-hetero-centric gatekeeping. It's worth noting as well that stores that straddle the online and brick-and-mortar world have been thrown into the ecommerce-centric world, as COVID-19 has made opening their doors and running workshops a fickle prospect.

I have a personal, vested interest in this line of inquiry: I have worked in marketing for a sex toy brand since 2016, with the past two or so years of my work mainly dedicated to the brand's social media strategy and management. As someone with a background in sex education and public health who didn't want to continue to

work in the non-profit public health space, I fell into the sex toy industry and quickly became enamored of it. Working under a Director of Marketing who had, for years, worked in the leading feminist sex toy stores, I felt that I'd found a strange niche in which my personal and professional politics could align enough, as long as I could make peace with a for-profit setting. That's not to say that the politics ever were, or even appeared to be, perfect. The industry is by no means a monolith; misogyny, racism, and sex negativity are certainly present. But it wasn't until the course of this research that I began to take a broader and more critical look at the claims and practices of even the most "progressive" cohort in the industry. I've been grateful for the opportunity to investigate the underpinnings of the political claims of the industry as well as my own. There's also a level of anxiety that comes with looking under the hood of such a generally comfortable ride.

When I first began my master's studies I was interested in sexual storytelling and, expanding on Plummer's 1995 definition of the practice, the ways in which sexual storytelling takes place on social media platforms. This was in the fall of 2016, after a number of years working as a sex educator and two as a reproductive health counselor in a public high school. It was also before the "Me Too" movement rocked Twitter (and me, and the world beyond). I had been curating a sex education Instagram account since 2014, and had watched as similar accounts popped up around mine. Meanwhile, the teenagers I worked with regularly spoke about their use of social media as a dating platform, as a place for their art to exist, and as a way of building community especially for trans and queer students.

From the start, Instagram has been a place for community building, storytelling, and activism to exist. That said, it's hard to exaggerate the transformation that Instagram has undergone in the past 6 years, as updated shopping tools have taken hold on the app. In one moment, you're swiping up to sign a petition, donate to a family that has been victim to police violence, or watching a live-stream of a protest. The next, you're prompted to buy a cute t-shirt to save the bees (how, exactly?) and getting served a well-targeted advertisement for Black-owned, artisan made, amber colored champagne coups hand blown in Poland (ps, they're gorgeous<sup>13</sup>). In the strange summer of 2020, Instagram was a tool for guides on how to protest<sup>14</sup> and accounts such as *inthistgetherLA* (with 131k followers at the time of writing) which compiled and posted local protests, on a weekly and even daily basis. The gap between the commercial and the political are glaringly obvious in a single digital space. At the same time, there are brands and industries that seek to narrow the gap between the ideological and the commercial, however authentically. The collection of essays *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times*, compiled by Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, investigate the role of capitalism in social movements, and vice versa. The essays explore not only the purchasing power of consumers, but trends within business to exploit that impetus. They will fundamentally inform this portion of the paper.

Do I believe that sex toy brands and retailers are trying to exploit this impetus? Yes and no. Pleasure made to be a corporeal act of defiance, pleasure as resistance, means that each individual (often, per the market, a cis-woman) armed with a vibrator is

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<sup>13</sup> Check them out at your own risk at <https://estellecoloredglass.com/>

<sup>14</sup> Hu, et al. "The Second Act of Social-Media Activism." *NewYorker.com*.

in power. The growing overlap of consumer and activist predates current politicized consumerism. But the ever-expanding role of social media has proffered a new way to personalize the message.

As I've hinted at above, this paper is broken into a few general sections, which explore the following: the history of the sex toy industry, the marketing of sex toys, sexual storytelling and social media, and a brief, informal case study of Wild Flower Sex. All sections reference concepts and core knowledge from the others, with the thread of how and why we talk about sex, and how that's used to sell sex toys, running through all. With all lofty expectations of interviews, deep analysis, and general ability to think dashed by the realities of creating this thesis over the course of the past 18 months, I will meander through these ideas largely through the use of secondary and primary sources. As it goes with all things the internet and all things sex and sexuality alike, the conversation is always shifting and evolving. I've stopped myself from opening new tabs, but rest be assured there is always more to say, and more connections to be found between the worlds of sexual storytelling, marketing, pleasure and resistance. My hopes lie in this being an interesting and even fun exploration, rather than a set of conclusions. Come along!

## HISTORY

If you've never been to a sex toy tradeshow—and I'm willing to wager you haven't—imagine a massive hotel ballroom filled to the gills with dils. In so many ways it's a typical tradeshow with its business meetings over white wine and branded pens. And then, of course, it's nothing like a typical tradeshow in terms of its wares. I've attended one of the industry's biggest shows, the Adult Novelties Manufacturers Expo or ANME, twice a year most years since I began working with Fun Factory in 2016, and have gotten to participate in every aspect of it. I've pitched product features and taglines, painstakingly set up the dozens of colorful silicone toys that grace the three walls of our booth, trouble-shot blinking clamplights, delivered coffees in the morning and champagnes in the afternoon, collected my share of business cards and handed my own out, met with folks from some of the most foundational companies in the industry, and taken it all apart again, packed into plain brown boxes as if it were never anything surprising at all.

From where our booth usually sits, in the northwest corner, we can see The Stockroom's display of puppy play masks to the right, where they almost invariably have a staff member doling out light doses of electric shock should you want to try. To the left, we have Doc Johnson's indomitable presence. My first year at the tradeshow, they were promoting their "Twerking Ass and Pussy," a life-sized, disembodied silicone rear-end which included the two aforementioned penetrable zones and a hidden motor that made it shake. Beyond these, there are booths filled with wares in pretty pastels and fake diamonds for buttons on the interface, there are booths that sell you whatever-they-sell with classically sexy lace and roses, there are cannabis massage oils, ball

stretchers, sex dice, velvet pillow wedges for easier positioning, and so much more.

All this to illustrate that there is no one thing that is a sex toy, just like there is no singular experience of pleasure. Vibrators and dildos, while arguably the most prominent players when it comes to historical arguments about female sexual pleasure and freedom, are only two of the many product categories that make up a rich industry. It's a strange history that has brought these many disparate renditions of sex into a single hotel ballroom, but one important consideration is that all of these items are considered adult novelties, and as such are not subject to strict manufacturing and material regulations. This offers freedom in terms of production, as well as many limitations in terms of advertising, which are descendants of obscenity laws first passed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Those laws (the last relics of which were in place in Texas until 2008!)<sup>15</sup> lumped pornography, condoms, or any “article of an immoral nature.”<sup>16</sup> Today, the blurred overlapping of sex toys and pornography is still prevalent. Despite sex toys not being age-restricted they are often associated with pornography, which is. This can lead to a variety of different roadblocks, including a companies domain being marked as illicit and therefore not eligible for advertising and social media being age-restricted or otherwise hidden. Recently, Fun Factory has been removed from two different SMS (text message) marketing platforms due to their observance of SHAFT regulations, the same regulations that control illicit sexual content, hatespeech, alcohol, firearms, and tobacco.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Lieberman, *Buzz: A Stimulating History of the Sex Toy*, 8

<sup>16</sup> Lieberman, *Buzz: A Stimulating History of the Sex Toy*, 30-32

<sup>17</sup> <https://help.postscript.io/hc/en-us/articles/1260804681769-SHAFT-Compliance-Criteria>

But what about the origins of the toys themselves? The sex toy is by no means a modern invention. Stone shaped phalluses dating back 28,000 years are believed by some archeologists to have served a sexual purpose, and depictions of people using objects for pleasure are found in art all over the world.<sup>18</sup> And this, of course, depends on items being recognizable to us as sex toys, which is a fairly limiting, prescriptive factor when you consider how vast the spectrum of human pleasure is. But, all of that being true, it's not where we'll start. We'll instead begin on the dildo's machinated colleague, the vibrator, which was invented much more recently.

There are a few different theories about how vibrators came to be on the market, and how they came to be marketed (which is, of course, what excites me). The most popular origin story maps the development of the first vibrator to a Victorian doctor's office, with a steam-operated motor so big it necessitated a separate room altogether, as a tool for the treatment of the elusive condition known as hysteria. Were you tired, withdrawn, sleepless, anxious, headachey, loopy? You might have hysteria, and if so, an orgasm could serve as a medical treatment. A male doctor, the story goes, fatigued by manually bringing their patients to climax, invented the vibrator as a solution to their own impending condition, carpal tunnel. I love this origin story because it has so many features of common sexual storytelling around the vibrator: accidental discovery, a medical cover story, male inadequacy, elusive orgasm achieved.<sup>19</sup>

It's worth noting that Hallie Lieberman, historian and author of *Buzz: A Stimulating History of the Sex Toy*, has been unable to find evidence of this story's validity in her research. That is, in part, because it may just not be true (or, as she puts

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<sup>18</sup> Lieberman, *Buzz: A Stimulating History of the Sex Toy*, 19

<sup>19</sup> I'll explore this in more detail in 3 – Social Media

it: “No such evidence exists for doctor-assisted masturbation by vibrator.”<sup>20</sup>). But in general, Lieberman points out, it’s difficult to find much early documentary evidence of the development, consumer purchase and use, and sale of sex toys at all. “Vibrators were probably used for masturbation in the first two decades of the 20th century,” writes Lieberman, “but there’s no way to prove they were.”<sup>21</sup>

Lieberman largely depends on marketing materials to analyze the cultural conversation around vibrators in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, not necessarily because it’s what interests her most but because it’s some of the only evidence that exists.<sup>22</sup> We *do* know that vibrators were both commercially available and profitable, these ads make that much clear. But, Lieberman argues, while these advertisements abounded in publications such as *The Scientific American*, *The New York Times*, and the Sears catalogue, in almost every case they were not overtly sexual. Lieberman repeats what is a refrain within the industry (at least for the marketers and brand managers I have worked for), while with a notable more refined and academic tone, that there is a “profound irony in the marketing of sexual products. Sex appeals were pervasive in the marketing of nonsexual goods such as sodapop and cigarettes, but sex was rarely used to sell products with actual sexual uses.”<sup>23</sup> Or, as I’ve heard it put and put it myself: sex sells everything except sex toys.

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<sup>20</sup> Lieberman, “Selling Sex Toys: Marketing and the Meaning of Vibrators in Early Twentieth-Century America,” 396

<sup>21</sup> Lieberman, *Buzz: A Stimulating History of the Sex Toy*, 35

<sup>22</sup> Lieberman writes, “Although the vibrator was a common consumer product in the early 1900s, historians have very little direct evidence for its use, either sexual or nonsexual. No records survive from vibrator companies, and men and women of the time rarely mentioned masturbation, even in their most private writings. Given the absence of direct evidence, marketing materials provide some of the best sources for accessing the meaning of vibrators.” “Selling Sex Toys,” 394

<sup>23</sup> “Selling Sex Toys...” 400

This effort to evade directly sexual messaging was both socially and legally informed. Socially, masturbation was largely considered to be immoral, or at the very least indecent. There are plenty of cultural relics of this distaste for self-pleasure, from enduring misconceptions about the danger of the act<sup>24</sup> to innocuous residuals like the (mostly false) pop-origin story of Kellogg's Corn Flakes.<sup>25</sup> Legally, the sale and marketing of masturbatory aids were a misdemeanor under The Comstock Act, an anti-obscenity law passed and enforced by one Anthony Comstock and in effect from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through much of the 20<sup>th</sup>.<sup>26</sup> Comstock personally combed publications for potential infractions, and, Lieberman writes, often purchased the items in hopes of proving they were obscene.<sup>27</sup> While it tickles me to imagine Mr. Comstock surrounded by these offensive rubber devices (and I'm sure he *never* tried them, not once), the threat of such a legal judgement was not taken lightly. Thus, manufacturers safely marketed their products under the guise of propriety, carefully navigating the laws through tricks of the written word, obscuring them as household products and health and beauty aids.<sup>28</sup> By carefully evading the potential legal and social consequences, vibrators flew under the radar and off the shelves for decades.

These marketing tactics were still in place as an enormous shift took place within the industry. In the late 60s, a formal discourse around female orgasm, pleasure, and sexual liberation gained traction, and was tied directly to the purchase of sex toys for personal use. As opposed to the earlier half of the century, this period offered a minor

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<sup>24</sup> Think: "I'll desensitize myself," "I'll ruin myself for partnered sex," "It's dirty."

<sup>25</sup> MacGuill, Dan. "Were Kellogg's Corn Flakes Created as an 'Anti-Masturbatory Morning Meal'?"

<sup>26</sup> Lieberman, "Selling Sex Toys," 402

<sup>27</sup> Lieberman, "Selling Sex Toys," 401

<sup>28</sup> Lieberman, "Selling Sex Toys," 402-404

increase in archival evidence of attitudes about sex toys and pleasure. In “Intimate Transactions: Sex Toys and the Sexual Discourse of Second-Wave Feminism,” published the same year as her book, Lieberman analyzes customer correspondence with Dell Williams, founder and owner of Eve’s Garden, in order to look at otherwise obfuscated attitudes towards sex toys and sexual pleasure. What it provides is some direct evidence of how people, women, internalized and processed the messaging around vibrators as tools for sexual liberation;<sup>29</sup> one such customer wrote, “I feel that I have to find my sexual independence so I can truly be loving.”<sup>30</sup> This article continues Lieberman’s work in looking at how the language around sex toys transformed over the decades, and draws particular attention to the function of feminist language in education and marketing in one of the foundational feminist sex shops. In one illustrative example, Dell Williams ran a mail order catalog for Eve’s Garden, in which she regularly inserted the language of feminism. One such ad was headlined by the text “*Liberating Vibrators!*” Lieberman reflects that, “Although the early ads weren’t flashy, the message in them was revolutionary. By modifying vibrators with the adjective liberating, Williams rebranded vibrators as tools of the women’s movement.”<sup>31</sup>

It’s difficult to overstate the impact that this approach to marketing sex toys,

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<sup>29</sup> To quote Lieberman at length, “When Eve’s Garden’s catalogs spread throughout the country, many 30 and 40-something women were able to obtain their first vibrators, which led to their first orgasms (LoPiccolo and Lobitz 1972; Hurlbert and Whittaker 1991). These orgasms were profound experiences that caused women to reexamine the most fundamental aspects of their lives. Women questioned their sexual orientations, chafed at traditional gender roles, and decided to end their marriages. These letters also reveal the limitations of the so-called sexual revolution of 1969, a revolution that was largely patriarchal, demonstrating that the sexual revolution was focused on partnered sexual practices, leaving masturbation and the tools used to engage in it to remain taboo.” From “Intimate Transactions,” 98

<sup>30</sup> Lieberman, “Intimate Transactions,” 112

<sup>31</sup> Lieberman, “Intimate Transactions,” 105

meaning one that centered female pleasure and sexual empowerment, had on the industry overall.<sup>32</sup> That said, it wasn't a complete transformation from obfuscation to transparency, from a mythos of Victorian prudishness to a mythos of feminist sexual freedom. Lieberman writes,

Vibrators' nonsexual uses allowed companies to manufacture and advertise them, electric companies to promote them, and consumers to purchase them without embarrassment or legal restrictions. Therefore, the history of the vibrator does not follow a straight line from camouflage to openness. 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.<sup>33</sup>

While dildos and other novelty items became more popular and increasingly available in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, as obscenity laws began to ease. Vibrators, enjoying the front-facing innocuousness of the health and beauty category, quietly sold throughout the decades.

The social and legal ramifications remain an important consideration, as they always have. Contemporarily, financial and algorithmic deliberations have been added to the menu. The language we use around sex toys and sexual pleasure shows this. As companies barter for strong SEO rankings, they navigate the sticky world of terminology and innuendo, which often rubs against the ways people actually talk about (and search

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<sup>32</sup> It is largely attributed to two figures: Dell Williams, mentioned above, and Betty Dodson.

<sup>33</sup> Lieberman, "Selling Sex Toys," 396

for) sex and sex toys. This contortionist practice of marketing had an enormous impact on how we have talked about sex toys over time and, while less legally necessary, is still in evidence today. Consider for example that the Hitachi company, makers of the iconic Magic Wand, denied its product's sexual uses until 2014.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Lieberman, "Selling Sex Toys," 394

## MARKETING SEX TOYS

In February of 2019, the anal sex toy brand b-Vibe launched their new campaign, “Every Body Has a Butt,”<sup>35</sup> designed to celebrate the butt as an “equal opportunity orifice.” It features activists, educators, sex therapists, and the brand’s CEO in group and solo portraits with various plugs from the brand’s product line, along with individual statements and videos for each participant.



# EVERY BODY HAS A BUTT

Every Body Has A Butt is an ode to the inclusive and fluid nature of anal play – an equal playing field in which all people can experience pleasure. b-Vibe was created to address the need for better quality anal products and to enhance education around this long-stigmatized part of sex. With this campaign, we’re featuring the derrières of people we admire, who help to continue our work to eradicate harmful stigmas and taboos surrounding anal play for a safer, more pleasurable world.

*bvibe.com*

<sup>35</sup>See: <https://www.bvibe.com/every-body-has-a-butt>

In their personal statements, the participants explain why they chose to partake in the campaign, with reasons including trans visibility, body positivity, sex education, and more. b-Vibe's dedicated webpage pitches the campaign thus: "Every Body Has A Butt is an ode to the inclusive and fluid nature of anal play – an equal playing field in which all people can experience pleasure."

The gait of this campaign isn't entirely new. Since they came on the scene in the 1970s, feminist toy shops have associated themselves with sex education, activism and a deep attention to the destigmatization of sex and pleasure.<sup>36</sup> As the toy industry has grown—in size, popularity, and profitability—certain manufacturers and brands have begun to adopt this feminist, education-oriented positioning as well.<sup>37</sup> However, the "Every Body Has a Butt" campaign strikes a notably progressive tone. It joins other brands such as Dame, Bellesa Co., and retailers such as old guard Babeland and Pleasure Chest, and new actors like Wildflower Sex, that either make direct political references, or at the very least quote the language of on- and offline activism, drawing tactics and talking points from popular social justice discourse. Even brands that tend to strike a more mainstream tone have leaned in (for example, Lelo partnered with Amber Rose, celebrity founder of the Slutwalk, a markedly political movement, for a shockingly apolitical sex toy campaign).<sup>38</sup>

As a sex educator turned marketer I have already had instances of feeling caught

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<sup>36</sup> Hallie Lieberman's "Intimate Transactions: Sex Toys and the Sexual Discourse of Second-Wave Feminism" offers a fascinating review of customer correspondence with retailer Eve's Garden, and shows the unique role that such shops played in shifting views of sex and feminism over time.

<sup>37</sup> see: Lieberman, Wilner and Huff, Attwood

<sup>38</sup> Harvey

between two worlds of messaging, an experience that I know is shared with others within the industry. Granted, the sex toy industry is chock full of educators and activists who design products and marketing campaigns, run purchasing and salesfloor teams, create educational programming from “ultimate blowjob” to “queering your sex” workshops, and pitch and coordinate with mainstream media outlets. That being said, at the end of the day the core charge is to make sales. Brands and retailers alike, even when grounded in an educational, activist background and sentiment, are operating within capitalism.<sup>39</sup>

These campaigns fit into a larger framework of marketing culture that has shifted over the last 30 years. While cause marketing arguably began with the March of Dimes campaign in 1976, the practice has boomed and transformed rapidly since the 1990s.<sup>40</sup> The Susan G Komen Foundation and their partnership with brands such as Campbell’s, BMW, and Yoplait is essentially the posterchild for cause-marketing, drawing notable ire from consumers and consumer watchdogs alike and leading to the term “pinkwashing” (meaning practices of motivating buyers by aligning products or brands with breast cancer awareness.)<sup>41</sup> As Laurie Gilmore Selleck writes in “Pretty in Pink: The Susan G. Komen Network and the Branding of the Breast Cancer Cause,”

while philanthropic brands must undertake many of the same strategies for success as corporate brands, and while philanthropic brands are not immune to the problems facing corporate brands, their cultural resonance and ultimate non-

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<sup>39</sup> For more, see Comella’s *Vibrator Nation*.

<sup>40</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Selleck, “Pretty in Pink,” 127

capitalist orientation do afford them a more readily earned and maintained social legitimacy than their corporate counterparts.<sup>42</sup>



*“Quiet” marketing from Tide after Hurricane Florence. 2018.*

In contrast with arguably performative altruism of brands where the purchase results in an act of good by the brand (a yogurt purchase funds breast cancer research, for example) or showier and less-direct marketing such as Tide and other large corporations “quietly” helping hurricane relief efforts, some brands are co-opting and performing consumer ethics more directly. By this I mean that they are not philanthropic brands such as Susan G Komen Foundation, but corporate brands that use the framing of a cause (climate change, racial equity, or sexual pleasure and liberation) to convince customers that they share the same set of ethics and values. There have been a few

<sup>42</sup> Selleck, “Pretty in Pink,” 120

major instances of brands virtue signaling, cause marketing and “woke-washing,” term of inspecific origin that combines the AAVE term “woke,” meaning to stay alert—especially to social conditions of racial injustice—with the popular concepts of green- and pinkwashing.<sup>43</sup> As visibility and popularization of social justice activism has grown on social media, associated vocabularies and tactics have been appropriated by various brands including Pepsi, Nike and Cheerios for the sake of ethics or value-driven marketing. Coinciding with a boom in social media advertising, brands have adopted “woke” representation—visually and verbally—in order to prove their relevance not only to their customers but those customers’ specific sociopolitical mores.

On occasion this involves actual political sway, through funding political campaigns or pulling lucrative sponsorships in cases where the politics in effect contradict brand “ideals.” These tactics fall outside of attaching the brand to a singular cause, but to a general politically progressive sentiment. They might involve concerted campaigns, or one-off messages that indicate a sense of social responsibility or brand politics. These tactics are often deployed on social media platforms, where these conversations have been taking place for a long time. There is certainly public critique of these sorts of cause campaigns, especially those that are considered obvious; for example, the fated Pepsi commercial with Kylie Jenner<sup>44</sup>, or BP Oil’s carbon footprint calculator (which casually places an onus on the consumer).

And so, in a general sense, on a consumer level, there are aesthetic complaints being made about the cynical performativity of this type of marketing and the central

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<sup>43</sup> The first instances of this particular phrasing seem to come up between 2016 and 2018. For more, see Vredenburg et al. “Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing?”

<sup>44</sup> See: [www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/business/kendall-jenner-pepsi-ad.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/business/kendall-jenner-pepsi-ad.html)

disconnect between consumption and activism.



Twitter.com

But, as Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser explore in their 2010 collection of essays, *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times*, the history is longer and deeper than a singular offender, or even a collection. And questions about the larger, potentially anesthetizing effect of such appropriations are crucial. According to Banet-Wiser and Mukherjee, the consumer politics of the 19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries centralized around the “liberatory promise of the market itself,” and the belief that consumer choices were the key to transforming the market and the sociopolitical conditions of citizens. As such, participating in the market meant wielding a certain amount of individual power.<sup>45</sup> The belief that inclusion and representation in the market was the ultimate signature of an equitable market and society is part of this as well.

<sup>45</sup> Source: <https://twitter.com/andrwhenderson/status/1187386101960454146>

<sup>46</sup> Banet-Wiser and Mukherjee, *Commodity Activism*, 8

Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Banet-Wiser and Mukherjee write that

our identities, rights, and ideologies are evermore precisely formulated within the logics of consumption and commodification rather than in opposition to them. Here, cultural notions of liberal democratic subjectivity transform into capitalist citizenship, and rituals of consumption increasingly stand in for other modes of democratic engagement with profound consequences for what counts as 'civic resistance.'

The context is two-fold: individuals have become branded and brands have become individuals. Shifts in regulation have allowed brands to increasingly act as political individuals, with a hand and checkbook in the making and breaking of environmental, financial, and labor regulations. The political sway is palpable. Meanwhile, citizens have been sold the idea that their most meaningful political tool is their ever-shrinking capital.

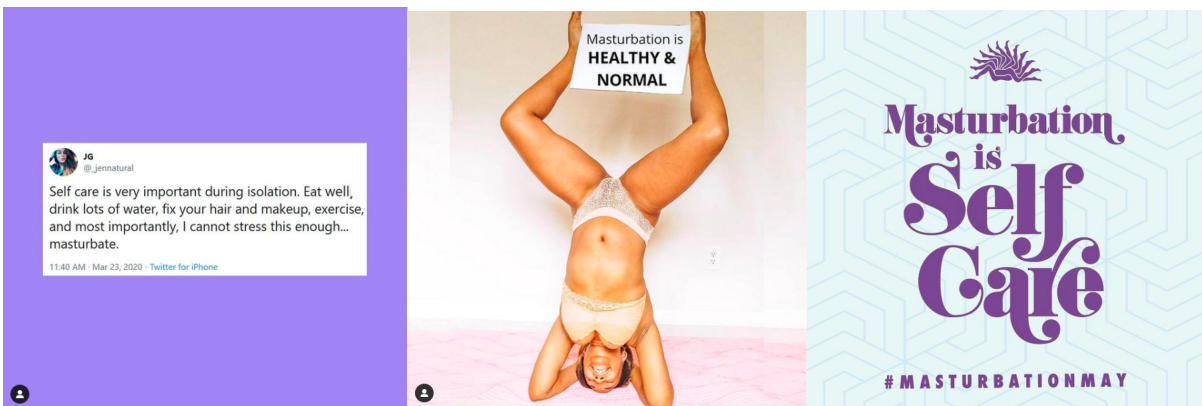
What role does this play when it comes to the contexts in which consumers purchase and brands market and sell sex, sexuality, and toys? Sexual liberation does not only exist when a purchase is involved, of course, but there is increasing investment in the sexual aspects of consumers' lives, from pleasure to pride.<sup>47</sup> With an eye turned to the \$917 billion dollar purchasing power of the LGBT community,<sup>48</sup> massive companies such as Target and Apple have released rainbow products from watchbands to full rainbow striped suits. There is an ever increasing critique of this tactic, and hearty

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<sup>47</sup><https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/rainbow-capitalism-raises-questions-about-corporate-commitments-and-pride-months-purpose>

<sup>48</sup> National LGBT Chamber of Commerce (NGLCC), <https://nglcc.org/report>

public discourse around the ways in which “rainbow marketing,” or “rainbow-washing,” has distracted from the actual foundational history of Pride. This is not to say that there aren’t individuals for whom these campaigns are meaningful, and that the donations to LGBTQ organizations so often paired with such an initiative offer no value. But when viewed from Banet-Wiser and Mukherjee’s observations about the evolving relationship between consumption and identity, the promises of such campaigns (representation, inclusion, justice) ring hollow. They write, “In the absence of larger frames of meaning, perpetual attention to the construction of ‘self’ through processes of consumption provides the only remaining continuity, or through-line, in our lives.”<sup>49</sup> Attention to the construction of self also implies attention to caring for that self; it’s a fairly small step from there to self-care, which has become an umbrella term under which auto erotic pleasure comfortably sits.



*Babeland, Fun Factory, and The Pleasure Chest on Instagram.com*

For the sex toy industry, the driving target consumer is another major profit

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<sup>49</sup> Banet-Wiser and Mukherjee, *Commodity Activism*, 25

driver, arguably the most desirable consumer of all, historically speaking: women.<sup>50</sup><sup>51</sup>

In the US alone, women account for \$5-15 trillion dollars worth in spending, annually.

Selling women on the idea that they need a sex toy to be sexually liberated, or that pleasure is their personal birthright (I am not saying that it is not, but the weight of this as a selling tool is hard to avoid), opens a door to billions of dollars of potential profit.

Some earnest attempts are made at tying sex toys to sex positivity, and sexual liberation, rooted in the feminist and educational past of the industry. Other liberation-lite attempts are made, generalized claims about embracing sexuality, the role of speaking out against sex, that don't push the limits of the algorithms, and walk a middleground in terms of being socially palatable.

The most cynical take would be: If a sex toy is a fun thing you want to try, you can try it. If sexual liberation is a part of your identity, you'll return to the purchase funnel. Like any industry, sex toys want to be a part of your identity.



*Health, satisfaction, empowerment. From satisfyer.com*

<sup>50</sup> <https://girlpowermarketing.com/statistics-purchasing-power-women/>

<sup>51</sup> Most surveys use binary gender markers to code participant data

## SOCIAL MEDIA & SEXUAL STORYTELLING

My personal foray into sex education on Instagram began in 2015. At the time I was a member of the AmeriCorps Community Healthcorps, teaching sexuality education in a New York City public high school. I wanted the account I created, Sexedstagram, to be a place where I could have a little more fun with sex ed, and touch on topics I so often either had to avoid or felt I lacked time for in my day-to-day work with students. After I moved on from that professional space I felt some regret that pleasure hadn't played a more central role in my curricula, but at the time the focus was definitely safety and prevention. Plus, with federal funding, there is a perpetual underlying anxiety about pushing the ticket.

I began posting educational and conversational posts. I wasn't using Instagram for personal sexual storytelling—which, in fact, I generally tend to stay away from<sup>52</sup>—but having an eye towards the specifically sexual in that space turned me onto the ways in which other people were doing so. Many of the folks using Instagram to talk and tell stories about sex and pleasure were other sex educators who taught elsewhere, in clinical and classroom settings like myself, or as employees of/partners with sex toy shops, or had other primary platforms such as blogs. Instagram offered a different sort of visibility, and a space for integrating talk about sex and pleasure into a “lifestyle” feed. With the growth in popularity of the Stories function on Instagram, educators have

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<sup>52</sup> Some educators choose to lean into personal sexual storytelling in their work, while others like myself tend to avoid it. It's partially a matter of personal comfort, and partially logistical. In part, I think that sharing a personal anecdote or filling in personal details can wrongly place the focus on my preferences or actions, rather than a more neutral, information-driven take. I think this also comes to some extent from my background in the clinical and classroom settings, where the personal was very much not to be shared.

increasingly adapted their work onto these platforms. This has been especially valuable in a year where so many other teaching opportunities have shuttered.

In recent years we have seen social media platforms used in increasingly political manners, and movements such as #MeToo and ProVoice have used these spaces to attempt to reshape dominant discourses about sexuality, specifically through the practice of storytelling.

Ken Plummer coined the term sexual storytelling in his 1995 *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*, and defined sexual stories as “the narratives of the intimate life, focused especially around the erotic, the gendered and the relational.”<sup>53</sup> Throughout the course of the book Plummer examines where and how we share coming out stories, stories of sexual assault, and what he calls “recovery stories.” He credits a growing abundance of sexual stories—formalized and broadcast to the world—to the increase of mass media outlets. Daily talk shows, college panels, new media movements spread these stories wider than ever before. In his portrait of the mid-90s media-scape writes that people “construct—even invent, though that may be too crass a term—tales of the intimate self, which may or may not bear a relationship to a truth.”<sup>54</sup> Plummer spends time exploring how sexual stories and the act of their telling are codified, which is not to insult either act or outcome, but to examine the larger frameworks that affect even so “personal” a divulgement.

Plummer emphasizes that his writing is part of a bigger theory of a sociology of stories and storytelling, that it's just an initial foray into these complicated stories and practices. But the framework that he lays out for how people tell stories about sex and

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<sup>53</sup> Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 6

<sup>54</sup> Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 34

how those narratives are organized to be recognizable remains relevant and is an important jumping off point for my study of these sorts of stories in social media. Storytelling in itself is a call to connection and legibility; the speaker might seek relief, solidarity, or catharsis and the listener the same. When it comes to stories about sex and identity, there seems particular impetus to cast the narrative net more widely in order to seek and give comfort and a sense of commune.<sup>55</sup>

Plummer and those that use his framework often point to the consistency (in terms of structure, language, and other signals) with which people tell stories about sex. This is not because our experiences are so consistent—what sort of sex educator would I be if I claimed them to be—but more likely it’s a tool for social connection. However, as noted, Plummer indicates that this consistency can have a pretty profound effect on how we tell the stories we tell, which might then simply inculcate a “new” rendition of what’s normal and good and sexually healthy. In a world inundated with sexual stories—and that was a world pre social media—Plummer writes that “no longer do people simply ‘tell’ their sexual stories to reveal the ‘truth’ of their sexual lives; instead, they turn themselves into *socially organised biographical objects*.”<sup>56</sup>

How do we tell stories about sex on the internet? When we share a story about sex, sexual pleasure, a sexual journey, a sexual assault, and we do so through the format of a post on Instagram or a Tweet, we do it in a way to be legible to that space,

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<sup>55</sup> There is something more to this about how sex and identity in particular set us away from our most-immediate circle (nuclear family, often broader) and have us seeking connection and affirmation beyond that specific community. Thinking about how specifically radical it was for adrienne marie brown to name her own grandmother as an inspiration and informer for sexual freedom in *Pleasure Activism*.

<sup>56</sup> Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 34

through that technology, and to our anticipated audience. It's not that the stories are apocryphal, they may be, but they and we are socially organized.

A number of researchers have expanded upon Plummer's concepts, and have done adjacent research on contemporary contexts of sexual storytelling including spreading into the world of social media. In her article, "True Tales of the First Time: Sexual Storytelling in the Virginity Loss Confessional Genre," Jodi McAlister looks at what she terms the virginity confessional genre to show "a development in confessional politics, relocating the interlocutor from the private to the public sphere."<sup>57</sup> Ironically, McAlister notes, the ways in which the virginity loss confession often are shared are not as a confession of sin but as a personal narrative. In sharing these stories, she argues, narratives challenge earlier silence and societal shame surrounding virginity loss, which she believes to be a powerful signal of a changing social acceptance of sex, writing, "the virginity loss confessional genre reproduces personal narratives of virginity loss in an effort not to judge them against a social standard, but to problematize that standard."<sup>58</sup> She notes that the confessional genre has emerged in part as a way of "dealing with the problems of postmodernism," much as Lieberman saw the customer correspondence with Eve's Garden.<sup>59</sup>

Like McAlister, Sara L. Crawley and K. L. Broad explore the shift from private to public in their discussion of coming out. In their article, "Be Your(Real Lesbian)Self," the authors assess storytelling practices on LGBT panels to investigate "how personal storying is done to an outside audience for social movement purposes."<sup>60</sup> Broad and

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<sup>57</sup> McAlister, "True Tales of the First Time," 118

<sup>58</sup> McAlister, "True Tales of the First Time," 115

<sup>59</sup> McAlister, "True Tales of the First Time," 118

<sup>60</sup> Crawley and Broad, "Be Your(Real Lesbian) Self," 44

Crawley lean into the activist implications of the sexual storytelling they describe, focusing on college panels across the United States, in which Crawley was a participant. They consider these panels as sharing a function with the talk show. They write,

...the talk show arena, with its suspicion of traditional authority and disinterest in the normal, opens up the cultural space for the telling of more queer stories of sexualities that complicate a cohesive narrative of gay and lesbian identity, but the competing interests in creating good television also compel the construction of people into categories once again.<sup>61</sup>

The “interests in creating good television” also rings particularly true as an influence on how sexual stories (and all stories) are curated and shared on social media, where the need for viewership and engagement inform how content and messaging is developed and displayed. This research locates the role of sexual stories such as coming out stories in the public forum, but unlike McAlister who points enthusiastically to the potential for these stories to transform dominant narratives through individual sharing, Broad and Crawley demonstrate due concern as to the risk of the routinization of these stories, the sharing of these stories, and therefore their impact over time. While the opportunities to share such stories increase exponentially, their impact may not.

In this vein, Leslie-Jean Thornton found that conversations about menstruation on Twitter tended to fit into dominant narratives about periods. Their article, “Time of

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<sup>61</sup> Crawley and Broad, “Be Your(Real Lesbian) Self,” 68

the Month' on Twitter: Taboo, Stereotype and Bonding in a No-Holds-Barred Public Arena," analyses 2,211 tweets regarding menstruation in order to explore "the character and seeming purposes of the perpetuation of menstrual prohibitions and stereotypes in a global publication medium that allows unregulated self-expression."<sup>62</sup> Thornton argues that, compared to Instagram and Facebook which tend to feature longer form posts more akin to the sexual stories which Plummer and McAlister explore, Twitter as a platform is, by design, oriented towards short, scathing or comedic takes. Thornton concludes by writing that "the tweets from this study appear to validate and perpetuate a previously constructed reality of how menstruating women should be viewed and treated."<sup>63</sup>

The works of Thornton, McAlister, Crawley and Broad expand compellingly on Plummer's initial premise, teasing out the edges and ushering the critique into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and onto the stages we now use for sharing. While their research specifically explores personal sexual stories, educators and brands use similar frameworks in their posts. One of the things that makes Instagram such a powerful platform for such stories is the perception of intimacy. However truthful, there is often the feeling that you're getting a glimpse into someone's personal life, and this makes it a particularly powerful space for vulnerable sharing.

Of course this way of using storytelling, and of using social media to do so, is in no way limited to conversations around sex and sexuality. The potential, and potential limitations, are much broader. In "What is Flint? Place, storytelling, and social media

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<sup>62</sup> Thornton, "Time of the Month on Twitter," 41

<sup>63</sup> Thornton, "Time of the Month on Twitter," 51

narrative reclamation during the Flint water crisis,” M. Rae Moors explores the ways in which digital activism and storytelling challenged dominant media narratives in Flint, Michigan, and defined an alternative, localized experience.<sup>64</sup> Moors noted that much research on digital activist discourse seems inclined toward a criticism of social media use, but that the impact of the storytelling in terms of visibility, community-building and space-making is still grounded. Moors goes on to write, “social media activism, when met with contestation by others who view such work as less meaningful than more traditional forms of activism, may help renegotiate what good citizenship actually entails.”<sup>65</sup> This question is one that is relevant in all social justice work.

Many of those using their social media presence to tell these stories are simultaneously wary of the limitations of that practice. This is not to undermine the validity of the stories, or the power of their telling. In “#MeToo and the promise and pitfalls of challenging rape culture through digital feminist activism” authors Mendes, Ringrose and Keller explore how wanting the activism of storytelling in these spaces to *be* the solution seems to lead to dissatisfaction, but that doesn’t undermine the importance and effect of the storytelling itself. Representation politics, while criticized, doesn’t mean that representation doesn’t matter. But what comes after the stories? What are we asking for when we are asking for results (from social media activism, from the analysis of that activism and the platforms on which it takes place)?

An additional consideration of this (and any) form of activism is who is laboring and how. Mendes et al. explore this in particular regard to digital activism in feminist groups. To quote at length:

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<sup>64</sup> Moors, “What is Fint?”, 2019

<sup>65</sup> Moors, “What is Fint?” 811

Like labour in offline settings, digital labour has been said to exploit the unpaid labour of those who use digital platforms and social media as sites of creativity, leisure, and increasingly, activism (see Duffy, 2015). Although more often than not such work is undertaken because of the individual's desire and passion for the subject (see also McRobbie, 2016), the fact remains that it is very difficult (and contentious) to seek financial compensation from this type of work. Like other types of 'women's work', the labour involved in running these digital feminist campaigns is highly affective, precarious and exploitative – and as such, we raise questions about the sustainability of such unpaid labour in light of online abuse, burn-out and other issues around work–life balance in the digital age.<sup>66</sup>

Activist educators such as Rachel Cargle and Ericka Hart have explored this in their social media, pointing in particular to the exploitation of black (and notably, black femme) pain, and the demands on them for very personal storytelling, and emotional energy towards their readers within these spaces. Both Hart and Cargle write, tour and teach. Each of them has consistently called out the free labor they perform on these platforms and encouraged their followers to do what they can to help make it have financial value.

Mendes et al. write that, "although it may be technologically easy for many groups to engage in digital feminist activism, there remain emotional, mental or practical barriers which create different experiences, and legitimate some feminist voices,

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<sup>66</sup> Mendes et al., "#MeToo and the promise and pitfalls of challenging rape culture through digital feminist activism," 239

perspectives and experiences over others.”<sup>67</sup> While Hart and Cargle both have followings in the hundreds of thousands, and are therefore certainly received as legitimate in these spaces, the demands on their time and emotional energy as queer black women are different than others who utilize the platforms. This is part of larger considerations of activism, emotional labor, exploitation and centering, from which the internet is not immune. It is also a part of the use of these tools for activism that brands, with teams of employees and the shield of business, may be less belabored by.

Each of the authors noted above pays attention to the ways in which the venues themselves inform the organization of these stories. That is to say, the platforms that “host” such stories are not neutral stages. There is variation between the different platforms, and ultimately, they are built environments. To put it sloppily, the platforms through which people ‘signify,’ storytell, and connect are an understanding of the world in their own right.

The specific language, imagery, and tone used by these various accounts is worthy of concentrated discourse analysis, as are the platforms themselves. In his article, “Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis,” André Brock zeroes in on discourse analysis in internet and digital settings, describing Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA), a “multimodal analytic technique for the investigation of Internet and digital phenomena, artifacts, and culture.”<sup>68</sup> A central assertion of CDTA is that internet and communication technologies, (ICTs,) social media platforms, apps, etc are not neutral channels for activism or sharing. While various scholars argue that such

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<sup>67</sup> Mendes et al., “#MeToo and the promise and pitfalls of challenging rape culture through digital feminist activism,” 237

<sup>68</sup> Brock, “Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis,” 1012

platforms provide an unparalleled opportunity to host alternative discussions and create a different sense of space and location for activists and whole movements, Brock and others make the point that certain standards, identities, practices, and accesses are still powerfully centered. Specifically: white, heterosexual, cismale.

Brock argues that the ICTs that are the intermediaries are also actors. The internet itself acts as a knowledge system, a structural replication of existing hegemonies. And it is important to consider the implications of this on the discourse that “passes through them” or is published through these tools. Is that to say and ICT is a discourse? Is that to say it is a reality? He goes on to write that,

the association of Whiteness with the role of “default Internet identity” works as an electronic and ideological reification of the practices and beliefs of the White, male, middle-class actors who designed and initially dominated the social structure of the Internet.<sup>69</sup>

The internet itself acts as a knowledge system, a structural replication of existing hegemonies. And it is important to consider the implications of this on the discourse that “passes through them” or is published through these tools. I find this particularly interesting within the context of sex toy industry accounts, where social justice activism, education, and marketing intermingle.

Like Hart and Cargle do in their day-to-day social media activism, the authors discussed above center the importance of identifying and airing our own biases as

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<sup>69</sup> Brock, “Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis,” 1016

activists, followers, etc. They all speak to the importance not only of reflexivity on the part of the author, but also the willingness to “unmask” the biases and relations of the systems, structures, tools that are creating, hosting, and being used to analyze discourse. In *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, Jørgensen and Phillips write that “an important reason why meaning systems are so stable is that many of our understandings of the world are naturalised; that is, we view them not as understandings of the world but as the world.” Through the practice of discourse analysis, they urge researchers to “transform” their own assumptions about the world into “potential objects of discussion and criticism.”<sup>70</sup> This is a powerful, if potentially dizzying, approach to any of the truths discussed above: from the “truth” of testimonials in any of the many sexual storytelling practices, to the “truth” of technology, imagined to be unbiased by design, to the “truth” of any academic research or analysis.

This is uncomfortable work. There’s a desire for a degree of consistency and of neutrality of data, which Brock describes an ongoing attachment to, especially from the standpoint of someone seeking to be published, their work to be shared. Brock argues that his method of Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis is “precisely formulated to expose that validity and replicability are false constructs of positivism, that each researcher brings their disciplinary, cultural, and social perspectives to the research they conduct.”<sup>71</sup>

What about the stories themselves, are they challenging discourse, reaffirming it? In the conclusion of his piece, Brock writes that the “digital artifacts” we pull from ICTs—and he looks specifically at tweets from Black Twitter for this research—are

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<sup>70</sup> Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, 4

<sup>71</sup> Brock, “Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis,” 1027

affected from conception to the point one hits “send” by sociocultural ideologies, which are then baked into the design of the technologies we use to share, protest, storytell. He writes,

design ideologies are “written” into technologies for legibility by users. Thus, solo ICT users are responding to external mediations of self proffered by ICT design and an interface intended to rhetorically shape the actions of the user while navigating offline cultural and social influences on identity and the self.<sup>72</sup>

Stories are told in these spaces within existing vocabularies and social context, and then through the design of these ICTs; the sharing of them does not happen in a vacuum. By virtue of both discourse and design, templates emerge. Now, certainly, stories are even more codified through the use of hashtags and social campaigns. Part of the forward motion of these tools is that they make stories familiar. Consider, for example, the structure of a digital activism moment/movement such as #MeToo, built largely on the use of the hashtag itself. These tools facilitate sharing—someone who may have previously chosen not to share an intimate story might do so if there is a template or hashtag in place, or if they are seeing that sharing all over their social channels—and also risk a prefabrication of the elements of the stories themselves, to some degree.

Hashtags and campaigns and the ICTs through which they are shared preformat personal narratives—but the templatization of course is not a new concern. It’s also

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<sup>72</sup> Brock, “Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis,” 1026

related to the ways in which we shape personal storytelling, and especially ‘victim narratives’ for the sake of recognizability, and therefore the likelihood of help, state recognition, etc. For example, outside of these digital spaces, Julietta Hua writes on the way in which trafficking victim narratives are formatted and warped in order to be viewed as valid (to gain something from a system). She writes, “agency and testimony must therefore be understood as a negotiation more than as a transparent act.”<sup>73</sup>

Finally, in addition to pursuing legibility when it comes to the stories we tell about sex and pleasure, on digital platforms one must also consider *the algorithm*, spoken of as if it were some all-powerful and unknowable will. These stories and those who share them ache not only for visibility, shared context, and belonging, but also for algorithmic relevance. Increasingly, spoken language is monitored with AI<sup>74</sup>, and while this was done with the intention of protecting users from unwanted or harmful content, some people find that they can no longer see content that they do want to see. These types of content scans are more likely to affect non-white, disabled, fat, and LGBTQ accounts<sup>75</sup>, and frequently hide sex positive and educational content from people’s feeds. Users of the app including creators, brands, and regular pedestrian users have started to alter written and even spoken language to avoid this reality. For example, as content creator Ena Da (@park\_slope\_arsonist) observed recently in her Instagram stories:

language has evolved basically in recent times to get around very strict platform guidelines and website guidelines. Like on TikTok, instead of saying “suicide,” for

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<sup>73</sup> Hua, *Trafficking Women’s Human Rights*, 46

<sup>74</sup> <https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/shedding-more-light-on-how-instagram-works>

<sup>75</sup> Blunt et al., *Posting into the Void*

example, people would start saying “sewer side,” or say “unalive.” And it suddenly became a big, popular term on the sites and now in TikTok, the algorithm suppresses videos that use that word.

When it comes to how this shows up in sex toy and sex education content, accounts will routinely intentionally misspell words, or replace letters with symbols. For example, you might see “secs” instead of “sex,” or “an@l” instead of “anal.” Like individuals, sex toy brands that cannot depend on paid ad exposure strive for clickability and relevance in the app, with an aim towards eventual purchases. The algorithm is always changing, which means how, where, and when digital artifacts show up change, too. Increases in shadowbanning, especially for activists whose work is related to sex, transform the digital archive in real time.

## WILD FLOWER SEX



*Instagram.com*

When it comes to the appropriation of social justice discourse and strategy by brands, as well as storytelling justice in digital spaces, there may be no more perfect, and perfectly niche, example than the various infractions of online sex toy retailer Wild Flower Sex. Wild Flower Sex is one of a few smaller sex toy retailers that has made impressive gains exclusively online. As with other such retailers, the company has used social media to buoy their brand image. In the past three years, the company has been called out on more than one occasion for practices and objectives that are believed to be inherently racist, and which act as loaded examples of the ways in which white

supremacy, capitalism, and sex-negativity play out within the sex toy industry and beyond.

An article “Dildon’t Disrespect Black Femmes” published on Medium.com on July 31<sup>st</sup>, by a collection of black femmes who work in the sex education, influencer, and sex work worlds. The contributors were La’Shaunae Steward, Ashleigh Nicole Tribble, Ev’Yan Whitney, Cameron Glover, Venus Cuffs, and Karmenife X. Each person shared their experiences of working with Wild Flower Sex, an online sex toy shop that has a large presence on Instagram. A through line of their various experiences with Amy and Nick were feelings of exploitation, tokenism, and manipulation. Karmenife X, a dominatrix who had “The issue here is black women and femmes being dehumanized and viewed as mouthpieces not human beings with autonomy.”<sup>76</sup>

In a follow-up article on WearYourVoiceMag.com, writer and sexuality professional Cameron Glover summarized the situation as follows:

Amy and Nick, the couple and co-founders of Wild Flower Sex, would repeatedly try to make the Black femmes that they worked with choose between them and Unbound Babes, another sex toy company based in New York ... When the Black femmes would rightfully refuse to be pitted in a sex company-vs-sex company feud of Wild Flower’s own making, they were punished with isolation, abuse of social capital via unfollowing and ghosting correspondence. But to make matters worse, Wild Flower would actively conspire to have various Black femmes in jeopardy of losing future gigs, by emailing and reaching out to event

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<sup>76</sup> Whitney et al., “Don’t Disrespect Black Femmes,” Medium.com

organizers and space owners in the hopes of having them removed or blacklisted. In a space where Black femmes are already fighting for what little space is afforded to us, to have two white people use their social capital and public power to actively try to ensure that Black femmes lost jobs and income is reprehensible and deliberately violent.<sup>77</sup>

Glover and the other contributors pay special notice to the fact that these are not isolated incidents, both in working with Wild Flower Sex specifically and in the professional sexuality spaces as a whole. Black educators are underrepresented, and continue to be tokenized, both as an attempt to demonstrate diversity and on the basis of tired, offensive tropes about Black hypersexuality.<sup>78</sup> The sex toy industry is inextricable from larger worlds of sexuality education and sex work, and while each face localized problems, the series of articles detailing the complaints about Wild Flower Sex highlight the overarching implications that a lack of access, diversity, and equity have when it comes to any work that deals with sexuality.

The aptly titled article, “A Response from Wild Flower,” published on the same site on August 12th. Despite the initial piece very intentionally naming and detailing personal experiences and correspondence with the owners, Amy and Nick Boyajian, the response was published under the company’s name. In their response, they dismiss the claims of Steward, Tribble, Whitney, Glover, Venus Cuffs, and Karmenife X. They write,

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<sup>77</sup> Glover adds, “Wild Flower’s reasoning for this was that one of Unbound’s investors was Peter Thiel, a right-wing conservative and known Trump supporter (and for further note: Thiel has also backed companies such as Lyft, Spotify, Instagram, Facebook, and Postmates.) Though this may be unsettling, this was something that Unbound has always been upfront about with the Black femmes involved.”

<sup>78</sup> Glover, in conversation with Whitney, [WearYourVoiceMag.com](http://WearYourVoiceMag.com)

“unlike the article penned by our accusers, we will not resort to dishonest tactics like questioning or guessing people’s motives or intentions, stereotyping, sloganeering, or playing into people’s fears. We will instead simply state the facts and hope that people can come to their own conclusions.”<sup>79</sup> The response does not take account for the harm caused, except to state that the authors’ strong moral compass has sometime guided them to act in ways that, in retrospect, may be harmful to those in the middle.<sup>80</sup>

Frankly, it’s a difficult response to read objectively. It instead seems to demonstrate in a more sinister way the power of white innocence, and of the tools of neutrality, tone, and influence. It relies on the reader to believe their actions were truly done in ignorance, and that they are unaware of the weight of their clout and privilege. Rather than the acknowledgement and commitment to learn that the Black femmes who wrote the original article asked for, Nick and Amy of Wild Flower Sex close with the following statement: “From the pain that this has caused, we hope that we can all learn a lesson on how to better communicate as a community going forward.” They evade the accountability, and pin blame on the community as a whole.

Were this the only instance of Wild Flower Sex’s actions and motives being called into question, perhaps it would be a disappointing but passable response. Perhaps. But, of course, it isn’t. In the **Fall of 2020**, Wild Flower Sex was again called to account, this time for their attempt to trademark the term “Enby” – the name of one of their branded products – and submitting a legal counter to an existing online retailer

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<sup>79</sup> “A Response from Wild Flower Sex,” Medium.com

<sup>80</sup> They write, “We have always had a strong moral compass on political issues and it clouded our vision in a way that caused us to upset them and not see the situation from their perspective.”

named Shop Enby.<sup>81</sup> What could, to some, appear a simple trademark pursuit, was complicated by the fact that the general sentiment that Enby, as an identity term, should not be “owned.” Whatsmore, the founders of Shop Enby are Black and trans.

Retailers that work strictly in e-commerce are inherently reliant on digital spaces, and many do much of their brand building on Instagram. The availability of these platforms as a space for call outs, ins, and other difficult conversations about these topics has been explored by Brock and Moors—they are, at once, a public forum, where conversations otherwise lost to mainstream coverage can get attention and lead to action and even restorative justice. By the same token, they are highly “policed” and often lean into the same hierarchies of offline coverage. Consider again Brock’s central consideration of by and for whom these platforms were developed (hint: it’s not queer non-white people). These digital exchanges are weighty with social politics of representation and grievability. And online, as off-, cis-passing, non-racialized people often find themselves with the benefit of the doubt, and their actions are often viewed through the lens of rationality rather than emotionality. Meanwhile, Black people and POC are faced with complex matrices of legibility, with the need to justify this dissatisfaction over and over.

The original article brings up questions of labor, economy, capitalism, autonomy, sexism, racism and faux wokeness, all on a digital platform. Like other black femmes who use such platforms as a part of their work, such as the aforementioned Rachel Cargle and Ericka Hart, the contributors to the article express the weight of the double

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<sup>81</sup> Note: Enby is an identity term that comes from the pronunciation of the acronym for the term nonbinary, or NB. When someone identifies as nonbinary, it means that their experience and/or expression of gender falls outside of or beyond the gender binary, where there are only two boxes: man/male and woman/female.

labor that happens in this space. Both the emotional labor of speaking out in the first place, and that of them defending and restating their experiences against the backdrop of barely ambiguously racial victim blaming and a lack of willingness to believe the accounts. In addition to the emotional impact of the manipulation in the first place, a number of the contributors refer to the specific anxiety of these sorts of call outs, and the risk of retribution and silencing. The fact that the contributors were all Black femmes means of course that they are burdened with very specific stereotypes about tone and attitude when attempting to call attention to wrongs. Ev'Yan Whitney, the organizer and contributing author of the article, writes:

All of us have been hesitant to share. Amy and Nick are well known in the community and to speak up about our experiences with them, especially as Black femmes, had us fearing that we're going to look like "angry Black women." And the fact that we had to even consider not speaking up for fear of validating a racist trope speaks to the weight of what it means to be a Black femme in this space. To be clear, we have a right to our anger. And we have a right to have our stories heard.<sup>82</sup>

Whitney and the others are aware of the politics of their testimonies, the possibility of both compassion and action from their individual communities and the communities in which they work. By the same token, I believe that Amy and Nick Boyjian's reply blatantly utilizes tonal tools of white supremacy<sup>83</sup> to deny the claims of the others.

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<sup>82</sup> Whitney, "Don't Disrespect Black Femmes," Medium.com

<sup>83</sup> Such as tone policing, what else, and what framework here to ID.

The precarity of these exchanges, the cloaked supremacy of Wild Flower Sex's response, bring to mind Michalinos Zembylas' engagement with Butler's explorations of who is grievable, and how, in *Bodies That Matter*. He writes,

Once we consider how the psychosocial and political operations of power produce "who will be a grievable human" and what "acts" are "permissible" for "public grieving" (2004a, p. 37), then we may begin to realize how the regulation of social and political affect establishes a prohibition of grieving others' lives and extends the aims of violence.<sup>84</sup>

The people behind Wild Flower continue to defend their position as more grievable than Enby's, and this is built on their whiteness and class privilege. On July 1st, there was another series of posts<sup>85</sup> by the brand accusing Enby of gaslighting them and trying to claim ownership of a community term, the exact claims that the folks behind Enby and various other Black people within the sex and pleasure space had made about Wild Flower. In the newest series of posts, framed as an update on the law suit, Wild Flower use legalese and presumptions of innocence on their part, and subtle and not-so-subtly imply ill-will and ineptitude on the part of the Black people who have accused them, to shield themselves from true accountability and an honest pursuit of a better, more inclusive and more compassionate sex toy industry. This is the worst case example of the appropriation of social justice language to defend what can, by not too

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<sup>84</sup> Zembylas, quoting Butler, "Theorizing 'Difficult Knowledge' in the Aftermath of the 'Affective Turn'," 402

<sup>85</sup>See the post here: [https://www.instagram.com/p/CQysqs\\_J-YR/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CQysqs_J-YR/)

broadly sweeping of a motion, be called white supremacy in action and business.

This public “exchange” is an example of uncomfortable conversations about race, exploitation, labor, and social justice within the niche sex toy community (and beyond), as well as how justice is pursued through public, digital testimonies. But, beyond that, it is an illustration of the flatfootedness, shortsightedness, and self-indulgence that so often occurs when social justice is talked but not walked.

## NOW MORE THAN EVER (CONCLUSION)

I don't know if I'll ever have the words to describe what it was like to try and market butt plugs, dildos and vibrators in the throes of a global pandemic. To try to remain cheerful and optimistically horny (as a brand) while obsessively tracking infection and death rates, trapped in my apartment, trapped in a foreign country, leaning out the window at 7pm to wail on a pot like my neighbors and into my bed by 9pm to wail into my pillow (probably also like my neighbors). As the constrictive, worried boundaries of the pandemic transmogrified into normality, people took to the streets in protest over the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, the US election went sourer and sourer, thoroughly propaganda'd mobs marched on the capitol, and I tried to figure out how to make masturbation sound fun on Instagram for the zillionth time in a row.

The phrase heard over and over again, from NPR to the NYT, from hopeful Instagram posts to the email from that perfume shop I visited 4 years ago, was "now more than ever..." I have more than 175 emails in my inbox from 2020 containing the phrase. How can 175 different things truly warrant the phrase? This encapsulates a particular aspect of the ever high piling woes of the year plus. A sense of constantly running out of time, or being at the precipice of radical transformation, and with a personal responsibility to it. Now, more than ever, we need your support. Now, more than ever, it's time to stand up for what's right. Now, more than ever, you deserve an orgasm.

Now, more than ever, you deserve an orgasm. A colleague of mine assured me again and again that the content we developed, not to mention the products we sold,

were, in fact, important. Who am I to trivialize the power of an orgasm? The fact is that people did and do not only deserve pleasure, but need pleasure. In the words of artist and educator Rashida KhanBey Miller “Pleasure is our fuel, not our reward.”

There isn't a hard stop to this conversation, a final argument or goal in mind. Perhaps that is because, for the moment, I don't see my way out of this work. That said, I will continue to be wary of the ways in which businesses, mine included, are using this framework and potentially exploiting the current conditions to make emotional or reactionary sales. And, though many of the ways in which this happens are subtler than those methods showcased by Wild Flower, or a major corporation releasing a rainbow edition of their product, the overwhelming sentiment does seem to be that the individuals being marketed to are increasingly aware and critical as well.

As I wrote in the introduction to this paper, there is a history of critical reflection on social media marketing that companies should be a part of, from both a consumer and marketer perspective. I believe that these conversations are taking place, and I can account for that at least within the US company that I work for, but, as overplayed as it is, there is much more work to be done.

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