

The problem with sex shops 'for women'

September 6 2017, by Rachel Wood



Pop in on your way to Pret. Credit: Gerard Stolk, CC BY-NC

The launch of a [sex toy collection](#) to tie-in with the Comedy Central series *Broad City* calls to mind another connection between sex toys and women on television. In a 1998 episode of *Sex and the City*, Carrie

Bradshaw and her friends visited a sex shop to buy "Rabbit" vibrators. Several of the women that I interviewed for my [research](#) on women and sex shopping mentioned that episode as a watershed moment in the normalisation of sex shopping for women.

Sex shops aimed at [women](#) customers are now an established part of consumer culture, from the high street to online [shopping](#) and designer boutiques. Jacqueline Gold, CEO of Ann Summers, has said that that popping into one of her stores is now "just part of a regular shopping trip" and research would seem to back that up.

But the idea of sex shops for women as "normal" can come at a price. Going shopping to "spice up" your sex life, improve your orgasms and look sexy in lingerie involves a great deal of pressure to be an "empowered" modern woman. At the same time, when I interviewed women I was struck by just how ordinary and unglamorous sexual consumption can really be.

Sex shops for women

Eve's Garden, the first sex shop "for women", opened in New York in 1974. Its owner Dell Williams described the store as a political space and an extension of the women's rights movement. In the UK, the feminist magazine Spare Rib ran articles on liberating your orgasm using a vibrator, alongside regular mail order vibrator advertisements. One of these, in 1975, stated that the Harmony vibrator could be used "if we dare suggest it, purely for personal pleasure".

Not all feminists of this period agreed that sex shops were in the interests of the movement, however. In 1980, the group Women Against Violence Against Women led a night of protest against sex shops, porn cinemas and strip clubs in Leeds. Activists picketed, glued doors shut, threw paint and smashed windows.

Despite opposition of this kind, the notion of sex shopping for women became further established in 1981 when the Ann Summers party plan was developed. Women could buy sex toys and lingerie from the Ann Summers party hostess in the comfort of their own living rooms.

So by the time the infamous episode of Sex and the City aired in the late 1990s, female viewers were ready to embrace the idea of a vibrator as the latest fun, fashionable accessory.

Normalisation?

But what does it really mean to say sex shopping for women has been "normalised"? When the normalised becomes the normal, anything outside those boundaries could be seen as abnormal and unhealthy. When sex shops are mainstreamed, they start to dictate what is and isn't normal.

The women I interviewed weren't always comfortable visiting a sex shop but they almost always identified their feelings of embarrassment, discomfort or reluctance as a "problem" that they needed to fix. Sex shopping is presented as central to the kind of happy, healthy, confident sexual femininity that women today are told they can and should achieve.

Sex shops for women sell us a narrow idea of "good sex". This means endless "mind-blowing" orgasms, roleplay sessions, and lingerie to drive a partner wild. But not all women can fit into this idea of female sexuality, not all women want to, and nor should they have to. One might think this pressure would be an easy thing to avoid, but even the woman I interviewed who had never visited a sex shop thought she should be "spicing up" her marriage.

Without dismissing the problems that come along with the normalisation

of sex shopping for women, there is another way to approach sexual consumption. When talking to women about their use of vibrators, what struck me was the ordinariness and familiarity of women's mundane masturbation routines with a favourite vibrator.

Far from the "spiced up" view of women's sexuality, using a vibrator is more often an entirely unglamorous quick fix, a way to relieve tension or boredom, or a cure for a hangover. When these objects become part of women's ordinary sex lives, they no longer fit the racy, titillating idea of "good sex" that sex shops promote.

Continuing the legacy of the "feminist" sex shop, there are some [sex shops](#) that have a more inclusive idea of women's sexuality. These kinds of spaces offer a woman the possibility of buying a sex toy without being bombarded with restrictive messages about the kind of sex she should be having – and the kind of woman she should be.

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