

ALL THE BUZZZZZ:
WOMEN MAKING GENDER AND SEXUALITY AT SEX-TOY PARTIES IN ST. LOUIS

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This ethnography explores the popular culture of in-home female-only sex-toy sales parties in St. Louis, Missouri. In particular, it examines how women socially construct gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and identity, through consumptive practices and conversations. As female-only spaces, women create these parties as safe spaces to consume intimate merchandise, perform dynamic identities, and enact captivating performances of gender and sexuality. At sex-toy-parties, women undergo sexual liberations; and they make revealing statements about their sexual identities, behaviors, fetishes, and deviances. Women bond and gossip about everything from national politics to neighborhood church scandals. Women at these intimate-product parties discuss and reveal intimate sexual desires, taboos, and indulgences. They also speak openly about their newly acquired sexual commodities and sexual liberations. In a conservative and southern cultured space, like St. Louis, these parties are intriguing spaces to better understand just how women socially construct their sexual identities, alter their sexual behaviors, and become enlightened about their bodies, minds, souls, and sexualities.

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Introduction: Sex on the Beach & Vibrating Bullets

As the sunrise sends rays of light through her bedroom window, Alexandria (Lexi) rolls over, awakens, and realizes she's more than just a little hungover. She had had a few more than a couple of margaritas last night at her sister's sex-toy party. Lexi desperately battles to inventory or recollect exactly what all she drank last night, and comes up with: 6-8 strawberry-cherry gelatin shots, 3 margaritas, and about 3 glasses of Spanish cava (champagne). In a rather macabre manner, Lexi scrapes herself off the bed and into a hot revitalizing and sobering shower. During her shower, Lexi remembers that a couple of rounds of vodka lemon shots fluttered like butterflies about the party sales-presentation as well. Ten minutes later, still in the shower, Lexi miraculously remembers purchasing some sexy gadgets and creams last night, and suddenly decides to exit the shower and go hunt down the receipt from her purchase. On paper, according to the receipt, Lexi ordered: a cotton-candy flavored pouch of something eatable like 'Pop Rocks' candy and she ordered a set of sugary tropical fruit flavored 'Pixi-Stix' like sweet powdery candy filled tubes. Both products were said to make oral sex more enjoyable she rationalizes and justifies the spending. Next on the invoice, as Lexi, reads vertically down the list: one neon- pink 'Booty Call', a small to medium sized silicone hard surface-attachable butt plug and a 'Mr. Reliable', a clear transparent dual-action vibrator. Next column and much to her horror, Lexi even ordered 2 ultra-sexy and ultra-sheer lingerie sets. Lastly, in the third column, right before the sobering grand total on the receipt, Lexi realizes that she also ordered the lavender-vanilla beginners bondage set. Lastly, Lexi is horrified and realizes that she charged nearly \$200 on her already maxed out credit card. More disturbing than that reality, Lexi remembers that she is a single gal with no one to share the majority of the items purchased with...

This is a story about sex in the city, the city of St. Louis. This sexy narrative is was inspired by anthropological endeavors that explored sexuality (and gender) as lived and performed by women at in-home female-only sex-toy parties in St. Louis, Missouri. As evident in the overall success of sex-toy parties, and their popularity, women were still spending money on (consuming) sex-toys. What's more, women were still investing in their sexual pleasure and gratification. However, due to a rather dismal economy, other in-home sales party businesses that feature (sell) things like: candles, jewelry, handbags, and kitchenware suffered a decline in the actual in-home-parties that women hosted. While many women couldn't afford the costs associated with hosting a sex-toy party (lots of alcohol and a decent spread of party dips), many women bought sex-toys over the phone, and on the sex-toy party sales representative's webpage. Somehow, in a rather dismal economic climate, sex still sold. Like the alcohol business, the sex-toy business not only remained steady, but thrived (Davis, 2007:5). In addition to purchasing sex-toys at sex-toy parties, women purchased sex-toys on late night on cable TV channels. Where women had previously purchased products like Victoria Principle's skincare system, Paula Abdul's fashion accessories, and Paula Dean's cookware; women were purchasing products like glass dildos and triple-action vibrators. With their credit-cards in hand, Women phoned in to television sales programs like *Shop Erotica* on the Oxygen channel and QVC channel's late night sale program slot, *The Joy of Romance*.

Married and single women alike purchased and used sex-toys. At sex-toy parties married women purchased sexy gadgets, creams, and lingerie, to add pizzazz their lackluster sex lives. Single women could no longer justify spending money on going out to bars every weekend night in search random sexual encounters. For many single

women, staying at home with sex-toys, instead of spending money on cover charges and premium cocktails, became a sexy self-loving ‘stay-cation’ for one. An additional benefit to the self-loving ‘stay-cation’ is that solitary sex (masturbation) is the safest sex practice. Besides being the safest sex practice biologically speaking (no STDs), it is the safest sex act emotionally and spiritually for women. Especially for single women who have grown jaded and remorseful by the frequency of one-night-stands, and what they symbolize mentally, physically, and emotionally. Some women buy their first sex-toys at a sex-shop. However, most of the women in this ethnography, bought their first sex-toys at in-home sex-toy parties. As an ethnographic space, the in-home sex-toy party is not only dynamic and chaotic, but also the stuff of *Sodom & Gomorrah*, in a very conservative and southern Bible-belt cultured town such as St. Louis.

Orientations

The majority of data collected for this ethnography came from participant-observation at over 20 in-home female-only sex-toy parties. The majority of the parties took place over 3 years in the metropolitan St. Louis area (2006-2009). Sometimes I attended parties almost every weekend. At other times, months passed in between parties. I worked as an in-home sex-toy party sale-representative for a portion of the field-experience (2 years) and then I attended the parties of other sales-representatives (1 year). I attended the in-home parties of 5 different sex-toy-party companies. From my perspective, based on data collected from focus group, informal, and oral history interviews, women were making rather noteworthy statements about how they socially constructed their ideologies around gender, sexuality, and class. Initially, in the pre-dissertation phase of this project, I was unsure of exactly what statements women were

making at the parties. Even back then it seemed something dynamic and compelling was happening in the cultural space of a sex-toy party.

I attended my first sex-toy party in 1997. Back then sex-toy parties were not what they have metamorphosed into nowadays. Nowadays, in-home sex-toy parties are the grand-children of billion dollar corporations. There are at least 5 major in-home party businesses that feature (sell) sex-toys. They are companies like: *Pleasure Parties*, *Pure Romance*, and *Surprise Parties*. In terms of business sales format, these companies replicate other party-businesses like; *Tupperware*, *Mary Kay Cosmetics*, *Avon*, and *Pampered Chef*. In terms of marketing and target audiences, these companies all strive to appeal to women. These companies all use the home party format of selling merchandise to women in groups at parties. However, the parties that feature (sell) sex-toys and other intimate merchandise were all the buzz in St. Louis. Where women *wanted* new kitchenware and cosmetics at some parties, at sex-toy parties they *needed* a new dual-action vibrator and a tube of anal sex cream.

Of all the in-home parties that occurred in the everyday lives of women in St. Louis, sex-toy parties were all the *buzzzzzz*. On an elementary level, the *buzzzzzz* exemplifies how frequently the parties occurred, the overall popularity of the parties. By *buzzzzzz* I mean the buzzing (humming) of actual vibrating sex-toys. The *buzzzzzz* of 12 vibrators in a living room full of intoxicated women; the *buzzzzzz* as an experience in the fevered pitch of 12 different vibrators rivaling the roar of horny rowdy women shopping (trying out) new vibrators. The *buzzzzzz* is indicative of the American popular culture of not only the parties, but sex-toys overall. The *buzzzzzz* is about the commodity, the [supply and demand] of sex-toys in contemporary American society. Nowadays, women can

purchase (consume) sex-toys at a sex-toy party, in a feminist sex-toy shop, online, and on TV. Mostly, and from a sex-positive feminist perspective, the *buzzzzzz* is about how electrifying the experience of an in-home female-only sex-toy party was. From my perspective, the *buzzzzzz* is about my own sexual liberation through the party experiences in the field. Lastly, the *buzzzzzz* symbolizes the spiritual, physical, and mental sexual enlightenment (liberation) a women experiences when she *gifts* herself her first authentic orgasm.

This project is centered on the social space of the actual in-home sex-toy party. This ethnography in its essence is a peep-hole view on to what happens, behind closed doors, at female-only sex-toy parties in St. Louis, or Middle America. From my view, as female-only spaces, these parties are unique spaces to better understand women, and how they socially construct not only their sexualities, but also their notions of gender and class. Gender performances, be they masculine, feminine, or somewhere in between. Traditionally, Anthropologists have explored cultures that they perceived as foreign, distant, or other. This ethnography is based on domestic culture in the United States. This project is domestic anthropology, based on American popular culture. This project is a native ethnography, as I am native to St. Louis. Oscillating between theoretical perspectives that are Marxist in nature (postmodern) to personal ethnographic field experiences, I took care to position this ethnography on sound anthropological ground. This sound anthropological ground is where the ethnographies of sexuality conducted by MaCaughey & French (2001), Manalansan (2003), Frank (2002), and Curtis (2004), are most useful intellectual backdrops for my narrative about women and sex-toy parties. Overall, I seek to make a contribution to the rather lackluster socio-cultural

anthropological record of women and their social constructions of sexuality and gender in contemporary American culture.

For most heterosexual men, the mere thought of women and sex-toys is arousing. The mere image of a bunch of drunken women shopping for dildo and vibrators is even more arousing and intriguing. That said, the sex-toy party serves as both a taboo space for women (female-only), and yet some men really get into their women (sex partners) going to a sex-toy party. Yet for some heterosexual men the idea of women and sex-toys is intimidating. For some men, the sex-toy party presented a particular threat to their manhood, or masculinity. Historically, men have been afraid of and/or intimidated by the mere idea of female sexuality. This was especially the case as it relates to women masturbating, self loving, enjoying authentic pleasure (real orgasms), and taking control of their sex lives. Even in modern American society, the subject of sexuality is still taboo in both private and public domains. As a socio-geographical space, St. Louis is a great place to examine the social construction of sexuality (and gender) because St. Louis is centrally located at America's core; not only geographically, but also culturally. Lastly, in feminist spirit, I am invested in breaking the social shackles placed on a woman's sexuality, mind, body, and soul. Mostly, I hope this sexy ethnography will incite sexual confidence and self-love in women, even at the cost of masturbation.

St. Louis is the corporate home to Anheuser Busch, Tums, Ralston Purina, and Energizer Battery. As stated earlier, St. Louis is Middle America because St. Louis is geographically centered in the American landscape. St. Louis rests on the social and geographical borders of what are *north* and *south*, and *east* and *west*. St. Louis is both culturally and geographically located at the axis of America. All things considered, the

social space of a sex-toy party is extremely unique in that women are encouraged to become sexually liberated. In St. Louis, at sex-toy parties, women's constructions of sexual identities were refashioned, codified, and negotiated. Examining the social taboos of masturbation, sexual indecency, sexual aggression, was interesting (and helpful) for thinking about women's social constructions of sexuality and sexual liberations.

As stated earlier, the actual in-home sex-toy party is the field research space, or site. In my initial field research agenda, the goal was to explore how sex-toy parties became *liminal* (Turner, 1972) highly contested spaces, where women express and perform rather noteworthy versions of sexuality, gender, and class. Much of the anthropological literature on sexuality, although ethnographically rich in its description of community building in sexual cultures, fails to attend to the complex processes by which a woman's sexual liberation occurs. In the social space of an in-home, female-only, sex-toy party, women identify and express sexual liberation through their consumptive practices (Curtis, 2004). During a sex-toy party, women assemble in a safe space, and thus become familiar enough to share not only the social space, but also the party experience. Simply understood, it is *their* space to behave (posture/perform) and consume (alcohol/sex-toys) as they wish. At a sex-toy party, by the end of a sales presentation, women are introduced to, persuaded to try a large array of sexual products. Besides a garden variety of dildos and vibrators, women are taunted and tantalized to purchase everything from; scented massage oils and candles, to anal beads, fuzzy hand cuffs, and even portable sex-swings and stripper poles. As it occurred, the event of a sex-toy party was certainly a *rite of passage* type of experience for many women party attendees. What's more, the party sales representatives were svengalian in how they

coaxed women into buying everything from spa kits to eatable oral sex (throat numbing) gels.

Ever since Arnold Van Gennep's *Les Rites de Passage* (1909), the act of *rite of passage* has become part and parcel of anthropological investigation. Van Gennep saw in human ritual acts three successive stages: separation, margin, and aggregation. The Turnerian perspective on *rites of passage* focuses on the stage of margin, or *liminality*. In *Betwixt and Between* (1964) Victor Turner describes the power of *communitas* and how people experience *rites of passage*. Appropriately here, Turner's approach viewed people in the *rite of passage* as passing from one stage to the next, and then emerging as a new social group and/or individual afterwards. In the case of the socio-cultural space of the in-home female-only sex-toy party, there is *communitas*. A women's first sex-toy party is a different experience as compared to her fifth sex-toy party. Many attendees likened the first party experience, to the experience of losing their virginity. There are stages of a sex-toy party in which women pass through. Ultimately, after the sex-toy party ends, women remerge as new women, new women with new agendas in bed. Furthermore, at sex-toy parties, women assemble as a group of strangers who are rather shy at first, and are uncertain of what will occur at the party. Cocktail by cocktail, they loosen up, and some even get to their *liminal* phases before others. The *liminal* phase at a sex-toy party is the two-hour sales presentation. Throughout the sales presentation, women are exposed to all kinds of sex gadgets, creams, and lingerie. Throughout the sales presentation, women are also forced to deal with the realities of their individual sex lives. After a sex-toy party experience, the subject of authentic sexual pleasure (stop faking it...real

orgasms) is at the forefront of women's beliefs around their not only their own sexual pleasure, but also sexual liberation.

As home-based businesses (entrepreneurships) similar to *Tupperware*, sex-toy parties have become a means by which to 'make ends meet' for many women. Some sex-toy party sales representatives were making enough money to even put their kids through college. The sex-toy party sales-representative makes more money than other types of in-home party sales-representatives. The sex-toy party sales-representative is a woman who is well trained and eager to sell her sexual merchandise. Sales-representatives began their businesses by buying a starter kit. These starter kits range from \$500.00 to \$1000.00 with party business like *Pure Romance* and *Passion Parties*. Once the starter kit is purchased, the sales-representative must then learn absolutely everything about the sexual merchandise. Both *Pure Romance* and *Passion Parties* provide their representatives with training books and DVDs. Then she books as many parties as possible to really put the 'rubber on the road' to a successful party business.

As stated earlier, I observed and participated in sex-toy party culture by working as a party sales-representative. Overall, I wanted to explore and better understand the dynamic and optimistic energy at sex-toy parties. The party space became a place where women did and said some rather miraculous things. I even wanted to better understand what happened to women after the parties ended. Mostly I wanted to understand if the sex-toy experience had impacted their sex-lives as it had mine. That explained, the field experiences and social interactions with women in St. Louis, challenged my own sexual taboos, mores, and practices. A number of social theorists (Hill Collins, 2005; Cossman, 2007; Rubin, 1998), in their effort to understand how sexuality is constructed across time

and space, have long recognized the advantage of denaturalizing sexuality by deconstructing the links between sexual practice, desire, and identity. In my view, by deconstructing the links, a more accurate perspective appears from which to think about what women's sexual practices really mean in contemporary society.

At sex-toy parties in St. Louis, sexual actions spoke louder than words. In St. Louis, women are nurtured (socialized) into ultra-traditional, conservative, southern cultural ideologies around social decency, feminine gender, and what makes a good Christian woman. Sex-toy parties, in their essence, present women attendees with an opportunity to reconnect with, and gamble against, their beliefs about sexual behavior in general. That was especially the case when women at parties deemed certain sexual behaviors as normal/abnormal, moral/immoral, and decent/indecent. For example, half of the women invited to sex-toy parties didn't actually attend the parties. In St. Louis, decent women don't masturbate, and they would never get intoxicated, raunchy, and expressive about their sexual practices in public. In St. Louis, at sex-toy parties, conservative, decent, God-fearing women never considered taking control of their sex lives. Moreover, they almost seemed to advocate faking orgasms to keep their sexual partners happy in bed.

From my ethnographic field research experiences, I will focus on the women who actually had the *chutzpah* to attend the several highly intoxicated, raunchy, and expressive sex-toy parties I attended in St. Louis. At the parties, when the hostess and guests mentally tallied-up exactly who attended, the women who were invited and didn't attend parties (the no-shows), were instantly labeled as sexually un-liberated. It seemed that some women were shackled to and paralyzed by a pseudo-conservative, hypocritical,

southern cultural ideology that involves absolutely no sexual pleasure (or power) for women...in bed.

Socio-geographically, St. Louis is most conservative and southern cultured in that people, especially women, seemed to be shackled to the past. They are in their essence bound by [and to] xenophobia, racism, misogyny, and homophobia. Simply understood, in St. Louis, there are proper ways people, especially women, should act, dress, speak, marry, and even have sex. In St. Louis women grow up mired in dichotomies of good *vs.* evil, decent *vs.* indecent, and moral *vs.* immoral. After a couple of cocktails, at sex-toy parties, women say (and do) some rather noteworthy things. During conversations at sex-toy parties, women seemed to *confess* their secret perversions and sexual desires. In short, they “tell all their business”...about their sexual performances, practices, and preferences. This *confession* occurs primarily in two modes: 1) as the sex toys are passed around, women verbally respond to them. Any women in the room with ‘experience’ are heard screaming, “that’s great!” or “I bought two of them.” Secondly, Women at sex-toy parties *want* to talk about sex. Interesting is what happens when the anal sex-toys are passed around.

During the sales presentation portion of the party, women verbally share what they actually do in bed with fellow party attendees. Sometimes these conversations occurred after the sex-toy party sales presentation is over, while women are filling out their order forms, and waiting to go into the private room to actually purchase showcased items. Sometimes, at sex-toy parties, women really performed (demonstrated) just *who* has the real power in their sex lives. Overtime it became clear that women at parties *empowered* not only themselves, but each other as they engaged in discursive acts. Sex-

toy parties are chock-full of rowdy, loud, and drunken women who are very engaged in and committed to appearing erudite on the subject of sex-toys. At parties, women also went through identity and personality transformations as the sex-toy parties transgressed. The idea was to become completely unruly, expressive, and aggressive about sexual behavior. This was especially the case when there was alcohol woven into the party experience. Alcoholic beverages or 'girlie drinks' were culturally universal at the parties in St. Louis.

In the southern cultured and conservative space of St. Louis, at sex-toy parties, it seemed merely purchasing sexy toys, creams, and lingerie was symbolically mapped as an act of sexual liberation. Additionally, I suggest women at sex-toy parties consume sex merchandise in a light that frames them as modern women (not southern belles) who are liberated enough, and have the *chutzpah* to, take charge of their sexual lives. A reoccurring theme by the end of a sex-toy party was "I don't need a man now!" What that implied for single women was that they could stay in on the weekends, and still have great sex. For married women it meant they had access to and the tools needed for an interesting, sexy, hot, and passionate sex-life again.

This new found sexual liberation (revolution) simultaneously occurred as the parties commenced. On paper, everyone attends a sex-toy party to support the party hostess. As southern etiquette would have it, customarily, decent women attend and buy at least one item. That understood, almost instantly by going through the sex-toy party experience, party attendees (women) are changing their modes of sexual behavior by simply purchasing items like neon green anal beads and lavender-vanilla bondage sets. Married or single, party attendees leave the party with a new bag of tricks to please not

only her lover, but also herself. Single women get excited about their newfound safe (safest) sex practices, including self-love, or masturbation. In the sex-toy party moment, women are ultimately learning to really *love* themselves and become sexually independent *via* not only the sex-toy party experience, but also the purchasing of new dildos and vibrators.

Sex-toy party merchandise is costly and the average party attendee spends more than she intends to. Ironically, the sexually erudite and financially driven sales-representative will convince party-attendees that they *deserve* to spend money on themselves for a change. The sales-representative is most savvy in how she convinces the women to purchase sexy items for their own sexual gratification. Power for some attendees comes in no longer needing a man (in bed) to have an authentic orgasm. The purchasing (consumption) of sex-toys is thus a means to become a sexual diva or a modern sex goddess who knows how to pleasure herself with and/or without a man. Some women even claimed to have become addicted to masturbating with sex-toys. Most all women complained about the financial dimension of the party experience. As stated earlier, sex-toy parties are a business based on sales and profits. Most party attendees spend far more than they planned to spend. Women with credit cards clearly were at an advantage, financially speaking.

As consumers at sex-toy parties, women perform, affirm, and transform social meanings of what it means to be sexy and liberated. In terms of social class, it was very interesting to observe the social experience of poor women at sex-toy parties who cannot afford the costly sex merchandise. Clearly, they had a different overall party experience. Poor women who could not afford to drop \$150 on dildos usually cowered in the back of

the party sales-presentation. What's more, they never entered the private sales room to purchase items. Though they were present for the sales-presentation, they could not afford to purchase merchandise to take home. Clearly these women attendees had an overall distinctive party experience. Many women who couldn't afford the merchandise, would state that they would call their orders in on their next pay day. Often, I never heard from them. At sex-toy parties, purchasing sex merchandise was part and parcel to social bonding, class and gender posturing, and the rite of passage or *communitas*. Consumption is a good place to examine the symbolic aspects of identity formation as well as how group membership (experience) is acquired in symbolic communities (Curtis, 2004).

In this ethnography, women's sexuality is explored and mapped as a social construction. The social context (time and space) of sexuality was 2006-2009, in St. Louis. Though it was 2006-2009, it seemed like it was 1973, just after the *Sexual Revolution*. That explained, in St. Louis, sexuality was what it was. That was certainly the case in a social space where intoxicated, horny, riled-up women who survived sex-toy party sales-presentations, made very interesting statements about, and performances of, their sexual attitudes and behaviors. At a sex-toy party, after the sales presentations ends, sexuality is choosing what flavors, colors, and sizes women want in sex merchandise like dual-action vibrators and butt-plugs. Not only were women making sexualities, but they were also making plans for changes in their modes of sexual behaviors. For most women, the idea of sex for one (or masturbation) was a new self-loving liberating idea. In the field, I was intrigued by the many ways the parties incited change in women's sexual practices, ideas, newly formed habits, and addictions. Clearly, after sex-toy parties ended, some women party-attendees began masturbating with the sex-toys they

purchased at the parties. At the same time, women who frequented the parties, and who were already masturbating (with toys), were motivated to masturbate more often. In St. Louis, masturbation is still a taboo sexual practice for women. What's more, the notion of authentic self-love was even more unfamiliar to some women in St. Louis at sex-toy parties.

After a sex-toy party, the implications of women masturbating are many. The decent southern woman does not masturbate. The decent southern woman is still mentally wrapped around the idea of her pleasure only happening in the company of a male. Though it was the mid 2000s, women still took on Victorian era definitions about what is means to be a decent and proper women and wife. Simply understood, some women in St. Louis believed that only whores and desperate women resorted to masturbation. St. Louis is very religious, and particular sexual acts and ways of thinking are 'dirty' and indecent if they are non-procreative. However, in the cultural underbelly of St. Louis, lies the "dirty south". People in St. Louis may have claimed to be God-fearing decent people, but they are devilish as well.

At sex-toy parties in St. Louis, while some women attendees seemed sexually liberated, many women were afraid to even attend parties. It was common to have a party-hostess invite 40 women, and then only have 20 women actually show up. Of that courageous fifty-percent, there were still some curious behaviors and conversations happening. Some women at parties bought a lot of merchandise, while others only bought one item. Some women struggled with being in charge of their sex lives and had to call their sexual partners before purchasing anything. Some women purchased sex-toys with vibrato and gusto, especially if they were intoxicated on lemon-drop shots. Not for

nothing, the majority of women who attended and purchased at sex-toy parties underwent sexual liberations. By liberation I mean just talking about sex, and being in a private space where one can, and is encouraged to be rather masculine, bodacious, and thunderous about her sexuality. In the field, at sex-toy parties, I was most invested in grappling with the significance of attending a sex-toy party. Moreover, I wanted to better understand why and how, in the social space of the party, women in St. Louis construct their sexual identities. Identities, be they liberated or oppressed, be they free or shackled, be they masculine or feminine.

In Chapter 1: *Watermelon Jell-O Shots & Fuzzy Handcuffs: Socio-Sexual History*, I will discuss the socio-sexual history of sex-toys. I will begin with a short history of St. Louis as a social space. In the field, it was paramount to understand exactly where women ‘were coming from’ at sex-toy parties in St. Louis. In my Feminist agenda, I needed to understand how and why women were so sexually shackled (conservative, southern) at sex-toy parties. Early in the field experience, I was shocked (disappointed) by how many no-shows or absent invitees there were at the sex-toy parties. Women still attended the other in-home sales parties, such as *Tupperware* and *CandleLite*. I struggled with the reasons why some women chose to ignore (avoid) invitations to sex-toy parties, while some women were serial sex-toy party attendees.

As a participant-observer and sales-representative, I still needed to turn a profit from the parties. This was especially the case with the parties I ordered new merchandise to showcase during the sales-presentation. Mostly, I wanted to better understand why some women in St. Louis, who didn’t attend the parties and/or attended and bought very little, developed their rather bleak ideologies about women and sexuality. To better

understand, I turned to history. Then I thought about my own ideologies around women, gender, and sexuality. I remembered my first sex-toy party experience and how I didn't need to buy a dildo there. I didn't need to purchase any dildos, or spend money on my sexuality, or sexual pleasure. At the time, I had a regular sexual partner. I didn't need to masturbate. Overtime, as I learned more about the history of St. Louis, my research space (and home town) it dawned on me that I too was a product of my own pseudo-conservative, God-fearing, southern culture. Ultimately, I sought to better understand the role of history in culture, and why women attend sex-toy parties and behaved as they did. The latter half of the chapter explores the social history of dildos, vibrators, and the study of the female orgasm. Then I will discuss some selected histories of the overall sex-toy party business.

Then in Chapter 2: *Cherry Mimosas & Neon Pink Anal Beads: Orientations*, my goal was to define and situate the social constructions of gender and sexuality. Above all my goal in this chapter was to make an anthropological statement about gender, sexuality, and consumption at women's sex-toy parties. I will also discuss the many ways gender, sexuality, and consumption were socially constructed and experienced while at the parties.

In Chapter 3: *Lemon-Drop Shots & Strap-On Dildos: Feminisms*, I will discuss all things Feminist in the project. This project in its essence is a Feminist ethnography. However Feminisms are complicated. There are several different philosophies within the larger body of what scholars define and describe as Feminism. For this ethnography, I have selected and will discuss: the history of Feminism in the United States, American Feminism, and Sex-Positive Feminism. Mostly I will underscore the many Feminist tones

in the social event of an in-home female-only sex-toy party. I will also discuss the Feminist essence of the sex-toy party sales-representative. The sales-representative was certainly a *gatekeeper* to women party attendee's authentic pleasure and sense of sexual liberation.

Then Chapter 4: *Cosmopolitans & Triple-Action Vibrators: The Sex-Toy Party*, is the ethnographic present or thick description of the actual sex-toy party. In this Chapter, my goal was to really describe the intoxicated chaotic and sheer excitement of a sex-toy party. Additionally, I will describe the Five Phases of a sex-toy party experience. In Phase One, I will conduct an anthropology of the foodways (and cocktails) of sex-toy parties. This Chapter portrays an in the moment experience at sex-toy parties. The experience of a sex-toy party is complicated. Women enter the party space as strangers, or maybe acquaintances at best. Then by the end of the event, women are bonded and have gone through a life-altering experience. They went through sex-life altering experiences as well.

Then Chapter 5: *Cadillac Margaritas & Crotchless Panties: The Interviews*, I will discuss the data collected from the interviews conducted in the field. I conducted a number of interviews with different women party-attendees at different phases of their social *communitas*, sexual liberations, and consumption of sex-toy merchandise. I also spoke with sex-toy party sales-representatives and party-hostesses. I also conducted focus group interviews and sexual oral history interviews. Additionally, I will discuss collected data from participant-observations at over 20 sex-toy parties in St. Louis. Lastly, I collected over 200 photographic images of women at sex-toy parties. In this ethnography, I will only present images that portray women in a positive light. In short,

though I had IRB clearance for photographs of women at sex-toy parties, I opted not to use images that gamble with women's identities in this sexy and provocative ethnography. However, there are several images of provocative things like triple-action vibrators, glass dildos, and hand-held male masturbators.

Lastly in Chapter 6: *Pineapple Bellinis & Frozen Glass Anal Beads: Analysis*, I will further analyze the data collected during field research. I was struck by what did and did not happen in the field, hypothetically speaking. Often than not, some rather intriguing behaviors and personalities emerged in the field. In the pre-dissertation phase of this project, I sought to understand the role of ethnicity in how when purchased merchandise at the sex-toy parties. Once in the field, it became clear that women did not consume sex-toy party merchandise based on ethnicity. Moreover, sex-toy party consumption was not informed by women's ethnicity. Overall, consumption was more influenced by women's social class.

In terms of gender and sexuality in particular, I was fascinated by the women who had to call their sexual partners for permission to purchase items, before they actually purchased items at the sex-toys parties. I was similarly fascinated by the women at two Lesbian parties I attended. Mostly I was fascinated by how those women (and the parties) were different from heterosexual women's parties. Additionally, I was struck by the women who claimed to have become addicted to masturbation (with dildos and vibrators) after the parties ended. However, I was most struck by how intoxicated women got at sex-toy parties. How they lost track of the money they spent, how they complained about growing bored with their sex-toys and *needed* new ones.

Lastly, each chapter in this ethnography begins with a composite or vignette. These vignettes are based on the perspectives (experiences) of the women in sex-toy party culture. The narrative voice is blend of my own, and the voices of the many women with whom I crossed paths with in sex-toy party culture in the field. These women are the sex-toy party hostesses, sales-representatives, and party attendees. Ultimately, every step of the way, I was inspired by these women. I was inspired by and grateful for their candor, intelligence, humor, and spirit.

Chapter 1: Watermelon Jell-O Shots & Fuzzy Handcuffs: Socio-Sexual History

It's Friday afternoon and Christine is at work. Just making it back to her desk after a lunch break, she starts a post-it note list of tasks that needed to be completed by 5pm. After taking a mental inventory of what needs to happen professionally, Christine suddenly decides to focus on the personal domain of tasks that needed to be completed in order to assure success at her sex-toy party tomorrow night. She remembers to resend the party E-vite (again) to remind her guest about the sexy party. Christine originally sent the online invitations to 40 women. She invited a couple of the gals from the office, females members of her extended family, females members of her married couples friends, and some neighborhood women to her first ever in-home sex-toy party. A woman from church who is a sales representative, begged her to host a party. Familiar with the business dimensions of the in-home parties like Avon, Mary Kay, and Pampered Chef, Christine set a date for the party. The sales representative furnished Christine with a product catalog and wish list form. She told Christine that she'd get free gifts based on who attended and purchased items at the party. Next, Christine sets out to fine tune her grocery list for the event. Just before leaving the office, Christine checks the online invitation website and learns that she has 27 confirmed party attendees. She then decides to add the makings for Jell-O shots to her grocery list. She looks online for the Jell-O shots recipe and then decides to do a little research on sex toys. She enters the words 'sex toy party' into the keywords space and comes up with a ton sites that sell sex toys and 7 companies that hosts in-home sex toy parties. As Christine scrolls down the page she notices the name Joanne Webb. She then learns that Joanne Webb is woman in Texas who was ostracized and arrested for selling sex toys at in-home parties. She then wonders what happens at these parties that could get a woman arrested. What the hell kind of brouhaha had she signed up for? She reads through a couple more links and decided to focus on the menu and cocktails for the party. In her mind, she wants to have a great party, complete with a great spread of party dips and fun tropical lady-like cocktails. She has to have a better spread than the last party she attended. But mostly, Christine has to get the women drunk enough to purchase a lot at the party. The more merchandise guests purchase, the more free sex-toys she gets. Christine reads down the grocery list and sighs, "we gotta do Jell-O shots" and underlines vodka on the list. She then thinks about the actual women who will attend the party and if they'll let loose and have a good time or not. How much vodka will it take to get these women drunk enough to forget about what's decent and lady-like? Will they be devils on Saturday night and angels on Sunday morning? In other words, will they get wasted enough to buy a bunch of sex toys and still make it to church in Sunday morning? Christine then calls her husband to remind him about the party. She needs her husband to clean the house for the party, as well as to disappear during the party...

St. Louis is the second largest city in the state of Missouri. St. Louis (city) has an estimated population of 354,361. The greater St. Louis metropolitan area population is estimated at 2,879,934 (Sandweiss, 2001). The city was founded in 1764 just south of the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. St. Louis was settled by colonial French traders Pierre Laclède and René Auguste Chouteau, who named the settlement after King Louis IX of France (Sandweiss, 2001; McNulty, 1998). The city of St. Louis, as well as the state of Missouri, were both parts of the Spanish Empire after the French were defeated in the Seven Years War (Ryder, 2004). In 1800, the land was secretly transferred back to France, whose leader, Napoleon Bonaparte, sold it to the United States in 1803. The vestiges of French and Spanish colonization make St. Louis one of the largest centers of Roman Catholicism in the United States. Nicknamed the "Gateway to the West" for its role in the westward expansion of the United States, in 1969 the Gateway Arch built as part of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial. Since then the Arch has become the iconic image of St. Louis (Sandweiss, 2001).



Figure 1 Gateway Arch

Because of St. Louis' geographic location in the United States, where north meets south and west meets east, the Town can culturally be described as Southern, yet Midwestern in many ways. Simply understood, people in St. Louis are God-fearing. The Gospel music classics, *I Shall Not Be Moved*, *Call Him Up*, and *Jesus Can Work It Out* speaks volumes about how people in St. Louis have faith, are God-fearing, and are living in the Bible-belt. In St. Louis, people go to church on Sundays, and they stay there...all day. Ironically, people joke about how in St. Louis, there's a church on every corner...and a bar across the street. Navigating through dichotomies of good vs. evil, decent vs. indecent, and moral vs. immoral are part and parcel to living in St. Louis, culturally speaking. St. Louis is low-frills, blue collar, Midwestern, Southern, hardworking town. In St. Louis women who are called 'thick' are sexy and attractive. Being called 'thick' is a good thing; for in the South, it is 'just fine' to have a little "extra meat on your bones." In St. Louis, decent moral women move from their father's house, to their husband's house. In what is described as a Madonna/whore complex, in St. Louis women aspire to be an angel in the kitchen, and a devil in the bedroom. In *Sex in the South: Unbuckling the Bible Belt*, author Suzy Parker speaks to the southern sex taboo that she experienced during her experiences at in-home female-only sex-toy parties. Parker suggested that the Madonna/white complex in *South* cross out as a "split personality" that women seem to be afflicted with (2003:12).

Sometimes, the male partners of female party-attendees were threatened by the mere idea of 'his' women going to a sex-toy party. Some men were nervous about the female-only space of a sex-toy party. Some partners were resentful because somehow the purchase a vibrator (or dildo) made them feel obsolete in the overall sexual relationship.

This was especially the case in St. Louis, a southern cultured space where the mere idea of women, sex-toys, and in-home parties is sexy, intriguing, and arousing, yet nasty, vulgar, and taboo. I argue that for women, at sex-toy parties, modes of being normal, decent, moral, sexy, and liberated are unique to St. Louis, both geographically and culturally. To better understand how and why women behave like they do at sex-toy parties, I suggest we look to the past. Simply put, to understand where women are today in St. Louis, we need to understand where they are coming from, historically speaking.

To lay a solid foundation on which to begin the conversation on women and sex-toy parties in St. Louis, I will focus on: The American Vibrator Company, the history of sex-toys, the history of the female orgasm, and lastly, some history about the business of sex-toy parties. This is paramount where history is directly related to how women behaved in St. Louis at in-home female-only sex-toy parties. At parties in St. Louis, while some women wanted and needed to be perceived by fellow party attendees as sexually liberated, some women wanted and needed to be perceived as sexually decent and religious.

The History of Dildos

Dildos in one form or another have been present in society throughout history. Artifacts from the Upper Paleolithic, which have previously been described as batons were most likely used for sexual purposes. However, there appears to be hesitation on the part of archaeologists to label these items as sex-toys. In *The Prehistory of Sex: Four Million Years of Human Sexual Culture* (1996), archaeologist Timothy Taylor suggested, "Looking at the size, shape, and—some cases—explicit symbolism of the ice age batons, it seems disingenuous to avoid the most obvious and straightforward interpretation. But it

has been avoided.” (1996) The world's oldest known dildo is a siltstone 20-centimeter phallus from the Upper Paleolithic period 30,000 years ago that was found in *Hohle Fels* Cave near Ulm, Germany. Findings of the archaeologists show that ancient Egyptians used dildos 2,500 years ago. The first dildos were made of stone, tar, wood, and other materials that could be shaped as penises and that were firm enough to be used as penetrative sex-toys (Taylor, 1996).

In ancient Greece, Francios Lissarrague in *The Sexual Life of Satyrs* stated, “In paintings of women, we find manipulation of the male genitals, whether in the form of an olisbos (a dildo) or a phallus-bird (Halperin, 1990:53). Then in *Aspects of Baubo: Ancient Texts and Context*, Maurice Oleander notes the in *Herodias* the term *baubo* appears as masculine form of the noun: *baubon*. In a dialog between two women, who are close friends, *baubo* refers to a leather phallus—an object whose smooth surfaces give rise to sweet dreams (Halperin, 1990:84).



Figure 2 Greek olisbos

In ancient China, women in the 15th century used dildos made of lacquered wood with textured surfaces (Taylor, 1996). With the invention of modern materials, making dildos of different shapes, sizes, colors and textures became possible. Historically, in identifying certain acts as more or less sinful, a ranking of sexual acts and pleasures was created that outlawed all but heterosexual coitus. These restrictions served not to just distinguish between heterosexual sex (acceptable) and any other source of sexual pleasure (unacceptable) (Hawkes, 2007:68). In Renaissance literature and art, the most severe judgment was reserved for women who emulated men sexually. Women accused of using dildos in sexual acts suffered severe treatment. One of them was sentenced to be burned alive, and the other hanged, punishments dictated, not by their sexualities so much as by their transvestitism and the use of a dildo (Dollimore in Hawkes, 1999:103).

The American Vibrator Company & The Female Orgasm

The American Vibrator Company was established in St. Louis in 1907. The American Vibrator Company catalog was the first catalog published for women to purchase masturbatory devices. Before the American Vibrator Company catalog, and mail order services existed, women had to go through extremes to obtain a vibrator (Maines, 1998:14).

Why has electrical massage taken the place of the manual, or Swedish method? Simply because it can be applied more rapidly, uniformly and deeply than by hand, and for as long a period as may be desired. The professional masseur can not only not reach as deeply as can mechanical vibration, but is manifestly unable to prolong his treatment for a sufficient length of time to accomplish the results attained by modern vibratory machinery, which never tires. The number and strength of the movements that can be applied by hand are extremely limited; the perfectly adjusted American Vibrator runs indefinitely and is susceptible of a variety and rapidity of movements utterly impossible of human attainment. (Emphasis in the original)



Figure 3 American Vibrator Company Advertisements

During Medieval times, ideologies of the female body were far more positive than they have become today. Then, the female body was adored, honored, and cherished. Though there were physical differences between male and female bodies, the female body was more accepted in those times. Interestingly, in medieval times, it was believed that the female orgasm was a crucial component for conception (Young, 1997). As societies changed, so did ideologies around sexuality and women’s orgasms. By the 18th Century there was no longer a need to “heat up” the female body in pursuit of orgasm, nor conception (Young, 1997). Then by the 19th Century, the Victorian era, women bodies were being stuffed into corsets, both physically and psychologically. In the Victorian era, bourgeoisie women (decent women) simply didn’t have orgasms (Maines, 1999). To achieve orgasm was considered gosh, and not the appropriate behavior of decent women. Simply, it was not proper etiquette for women to achieve orgasm. This new discourse of the female body and what was proper etiquette, is part and parcel to Victorian social construction of sexuality. By the 19th Century, some even questioned if

women had orgasms at all. Due to all of the social control over sexual behavior, some proper middle-class women developed symptoms from sexual dissatisfaction.

Women were complaining about symptoms from sexual inactivity or neglect. Doctors diagnosed women with a disease called Hysteria. “Hysteria Paraxis” or “womb disease” was said to be caused by not having sufficient amounts of sexual intercourse. Simply, women needed to participate in sexual intercourse as a means of working the muscles in female vaginal and reproductive spaces. They simply suffered from sexual inactivity or neglect. This name “Hysteria” was assigned as a “social camouflage” (Maines, 1999:42) so that people could talk about the “disease” using a pleasant scientific name. The most immediate cure for a “revolt of the uterus” was for women to have orgasms. At first doctors sent females home to simply have more (regular) sexual intercourse with their husbands. When that didn’t work, other early remedies included: horseback riding, swinging, and carriage rides (Maines, 1999: 39). When those didn’t work, women returned to the doctor for a massage technique. Symptoms of Hysteria were: yawning, itching, stomach upsets, insomnia, reading French novels while wearing tight corsets, disagreeing with husbands, too much bicycling, anxiety, and drinking alcohol (Maines, 1999: 39). With numerous and trivial symptoms, many women were diagnosed with Hysteria and the “disease” became a money maker for doctors.

Then when the Hydrotherapy vibrator was invented in 1869, doctors figured out that they could take on more patients and offered more (shorter) vaginal massages. Then in 1883 Mortimer Granville invented the electric vibrator (Maines, 1998). This invention made the need of going to the doctor’s office for Hysteria treatments obsolete. The inventions of electricity lead to the invention of other home appliances, like the light bulb

in 1876, and the sewing machine in 1889. Women were able to buy a home vibrator for \$200 at a time when people paid \$300 for a house (Maines, 1998). The electric toaster and vibrator are contemporary inventions and they both preceded the electric iron. These new electrical gadgets were marketed towards women as “general purpose” items in catalogues produced by companies like Sears & Roebuck and General Electric.

Advancements in advertising and mail ordering now opened the market of vibrators to women who had previously had to go to the doctor office for relief from Hysteria. These new electric vibrators were less expensive than a doctor’s visit and ranged from 5-20 dollars a piece (Maines, 1998). Back then there was no social stigma attached to selling, shipping, or talking about vibrators.



Figure 4 Catalog Advertisement Vibrator

Then in the 1920s, with the popularity of stage films, which showed women using vibrators, the “social camouflage” was blown. There was no longer a language to hide behind. Women who were photographed using vibrators were not the decent women in society. Women were photographed using vibrators for pornographic purposes, old-fashion porn stars. Vibrators were suddenly considered “bad taste” and taken out of the

sales catalogs. Then vibrators went underground for 40 years until the Sex Revolution in the 1960s. As for the disease “Hysteria Paraxis”, it was removed from the American Psychological Association list in 1952 and was replaced by homosexuality, then classified as a mental disorder.

Selected History of the Sex-Toy Party Business

Pure Romance

I worked as a sales-representative for *Pure Romance* during 2 years of my field research experience. At the time, *Pure Romance* was the largest and most popular sex-toy party business. Moreover, the sex-toy party that initially inspired this ethnographic endeavor was a party thrown by a *Pure Romance* sales-representative. *Pure Romance* is a well run machine. In 1983, while on maternity leave from her job as a medical assistant for four pediatricians, Patty Brisben took a break at home to watch *The Phil Donahue Show*. On that particular day, it featured a company that was recruiting women to sell adult bedroom toys in home party settings. Intrigued, Brisben realized she identified with these women. As a divorced mother of four, she was always looking for a source of income that would allow her to provide for her family, while remaining actively involved in children’s lives. Shortly after watching the show, Brisben signed up as a distributor. After only a year, she was so successful that she resigned from her position as a medical assistant to pursue her new full-time career.



Figure 5 Patty Brisben

By 1993, with only \$5000 and 55 Sale Representatives, Brisben self-funded and motivated the launch of *Slumber Parties*, her own in-home sex-toy party company. During the first few years of business, Brisben own and operated *Slumber Parties* from the basement of her home. Nowadays, employees fill orders from a 47, 0000-square-foot distribution center in Loveland, Ohio. For years *Slumber Parties* led the sex-toy party industry specializing in relationship enhancement. In 2000, Brisben enrolled her son, Chris Cicchinelli, to oversee the day-to-day operation of the business facility. Overtime, Brisben and Cicchinelli realized that *Slumber Parties* had become more than just a distributor for sex-toys. They realized that the parties provided women with a means to not only take charge of their lives financially but also their sexuality. Soon, *Slumber Parties* went national and within 2 years changed its name and became *Pure Romance*.



In the Fall of 2003, Brisben and Cicchinelli began re-branding the new name, first throughout the West Coast and Southwest, then moving on to tackle the East Coast and Midwest. The venture leads to a total overhaul of over 60 markets. By the beginning of 2004, *Pure Romance* was in full swing, and to the United States by storm. Nowadays

Pure Romance continues to raise the industry's standards with innovative designs, high-quality products, unique packaging, and their commitment to providing a safe and comfortable environment for both the sales representatives and customers. Pure Romance spends over \$3 million in advertising and training sales representatives.

Passion Parties

Pat Davis is the CEO of *Passion Parties*, a national sex toy supplier based in Las Vegas. Launched in the mid 1990s, Davis's company supplies kits and training to more than 20,000 independent sales representatives, who organize product promotions in homes across the United States. Davis, like Brisben, believes the parties offer a greater awareness of sexual aids among women who, like herself, are not comfortable going into their local sex shop. Davis suggests that women of all ages are far more sexually empowered than they were a generation ago. She attributes this fact to the growth in sales in the sex toy party business. According to Davis, "I think shows like *Sex in the City* have made it far more open for women to look at these issues and speak more frankly about sex" (Davis, 2007:4). Davis, like Brisben, started *Passion Parties* to present women with an option to make more and support their families.



Figure 6 Pat Davis

Joanne Webb

Joanne Webb is a woman in Texas, who was arrested for selling sex-toys at an in-home sex-toy party in 2004. Webb was a sex toy party sales representative for *Passion Parties*. Webb's story speaks volumes about how people in the South socially construct mores, norms, and sexualities. Webb was formally charged with obscenity and intent to sell sexual devices, as well as possessing too many sexual devices in one home. In Burleson Texas, the legal limit of sexual devices per home was 5. At sex-toy parties, the sales representative presents far more than 5 sexual devices. Women who are "into" sex-toys can certainly possess more than 5 sexual devices. Webb was a grade school teacher and an active member in church. Conversations with married women at church inspired her to pursue the in-home party sales of sex-toys. Webb wanted to do something to bring and keep couples together through sexual education. In the south, a proper churchgoing woman never really talks about sex. She decided to start selling sex toys for *Passion Parties*. In addition to helping women with sexuality, Webb soon learned that working as a sales rep yields great supplementary income.

Webb's in-home business did so well that she decided to join the local Chamber of Commerce and help maintain an already solid close knit community. For 4 years Webb enjoyed the lifestyle of a woman who had built a highly prosperous and successful in-home business as well as a solid relationship with her church and civic communities. One day she, she received a phone call from the local police and soon discovered that she was being arrested for selling and owning sex devices. Webb had been busted by selling sex-toys to undercover cops who posed as a couple in need at a party. They even bought several items and led Webb to believe they were friends after the party. Webb even

cared enough to do a follow up call to see if things in their sexual lives had improved because of the sexual devices she sold to them. Charged with promotion of obscene devices and merely having more than 5 sex-toys, Webb hired an attorney. According to the Police, obscene devices are any materials intended to arouse the genitals. Eventually, the Court dropped the charges. Unfortunately, it was too late as Webb's husband suffered a nervous breakdown and they were forced to file bankruptcy.



Figure 7 Joanne Webb

Joanne Webb's story is of historical significance for many reasons in this project. It speaks to the social oppression of women's sexuality in society. The fact that Webb's case happened in Texas, a southern state in the Bible belt, speaks volumes about how both men and women feel about women being assertive and powerful in their sex lives. She was prosecuted down to the law that was still "on the books." The absurdity of a law that demanded women have less than 5 sexual devices in their possession at one time and in one space. Sex law is the most adamant instrument of sexual stratification and erotic persecution (Rubin 1986: 165). At an in-home sex-toy party, when women who were invited don't attend, the hostess and sales representative are most disappointed. At

low attendance parties women don't purchase as much and the sales representative doesn't make as much profit. The party hostess is most upset as she has cleaned, cooked, and prepared for the party for a week, or sometimes more. The hostess also understands that she won't have as much money to purchase her desired items on the party hostess discount. A low-attendance sex-toy party is not the same experience for party goers as a high-attendance party. In St. Louis, there's something to be said about the women who actually show up at sex-toy parties and purchase items to enhance their sex lives. These women are modern unshackled women who actively take charge of their sex lives and who seek out all sorts of merchandise to perform and practice their sexual liberations.

Chapter 2: Cherry Mimosas & Neon Pink Anal Beads: Orientations

The sales presentation phase of the party is about to begin. Angela and Lexi decide to top off their frozen margaritas and grab seats in the circle, right in the middle, but close to the kitchen, and to the margaritas. Then, Jennifer, the sales representative, distributes order forms, catalogs, and pencils to each woman in the circle of seats. She then reaches into a box and grabs a large clear storage bag of tiny penis shaped pencil topper erasers. Each woman in the circle of seats must then select a pencil topper penis eraser. The penis erasers are available in two skin tones, beige and brown, or vanilla and chocolate. The circle of giggly women then organizes their sales presentation materials neatly on their laps, take a big swing of their cocktails, and buckle their proverbial seat belts. Jennifer begins the sales presentation slowly. She presents the sexy games, books, and bachelorette party items. One of the games is a sex card game and it is passed around the circle of giggly women. Pictured on the cards are various couples involved in a variety of sexual positions. To many of the women in the circle, the images are exotic, kinky, and contortionist. Jennifer notices that some of the women are getting visually aroused, as they commence to cackle, howl, and even stand up and demonstrate just how the positions work. Woman by woman, as the card game makes it way around the large circle of tipsy women, the "lobster" and "frog" positions appear to be favorites. Angela and Lexi, who are tipsier than the rest, are on the floor demonstrating. All the same while, Jennifer is getting frustrated. She still has a one hour sales presentation to get through. Mostly Jennifer is anxious to get through the sales presentation to the more expensive items. She needs to at least make enough profit to cover the extra \$100 she spent on display merchandise, game prizes, and door prizes for the party. Already, in the living room full of tipsy giggly women, things are all out of control. Jennifer is already fed up with the drunken and disorderly women. She had only just begun the presentation with the sex card game and already the women are riled up. She's apprehensive about proceeding to the tingly nipple and lip balm. Jennifer suddenly realizes that this party was her 17th party and that she has grown bored with this phase of the parties. As she watches the demonstration of the "lobster" and "frog" sex card game positions, she can't imagine what will happen when she gets to present more hard-core sex toys like: the fuzzy handcuffs, the "peter rabbit", the "Big Daddy", and all the anal toys. This party is full of upper-class White women, and Jennifer is excited about making some loot at the party. She is motivated by the possibility of making some serious loot. She knows that White upper-class women spend more money at parties, than Black women. Jennifer also knows she'll make decent money at this party because all the women are diligently noting their catalogs and order forms as the merchandise flows around the circle. She can also count on Angela and Lexi to edge the others on to buy everything. Jennifer knows she'll have a successful party mostly because the majority of the women are married. She knows these women have their husband's credit cards, and will want to spend a lot to spruce things up in their marriages, as well as in their bedrooms. Jennifer then cowgirls up and proceeds with the sales presentation. On to the cotton-candy flavored tingly nipple cream, the dual-action vibrators, the dildos, the portable sex swings, and the stripper poles...

Sexuality

The mere idea of a sex-toy party can challenge and sometimes dismantle a woman's senses of self and decency. The social ramifications of women buying dildos and vibrators in the public space of a sex-toy shop, versus the private space of the in-home female only sex-toy party are many. For example, a woman purchasing a dual-ended dildo makes particular statements about a woman's sexuality. These statements suggests that she is lesbian and/or into double penetration intercourse. Culturally speaking, these statements are intriguing in both public and private spheres, as well as in physical and psychological spheres (Appadurai, 1996). The public space of buying sex-toys is masculine and women usually feel "grossed out" or "sleazy" shopping in these spaces. Some women claim to have heard men ejaculated in the back rooms of these types of stores. Some women even claimed that these shops smelled like ejaculated sperm, cigarettes, and male body odors.



Figure 8 Dual-Ended Dildo

As spaces to purchase sex-toys, most of these establishments are male owned shops, complete with pornographic materials such as magazines, films, and back rooms where people can watch sex acts in an array of formats. Besides the masculine and seedy

atmosphere of a sex-toy shop, women can not open the packaging and really familiarize themselves with the gadgets. Nor can they actually taste and smell the sexy creams, oils, and powders in public sex-toy spaces. Many women who shop online or on TV have similar impersonal purchasing experiences. The private space of buying sex-toys, like at in-home sex-toy parties, is the polar opposite. For women who attend sex-toy parties, the space of an in-home party is highly feminine in its essence. There women are safe, free, encouraged, and inspired to shop and purchase sex-toys. Being a female-only space, the experience of an in-home party is inherently feminine. However, in St. Louis, women go through a life altering experiences at sex-toy parties. Just for women to attend, seems to make a statement about one's decency, sexuality, and wealth. All of these sorts of statements are what I sought to better understand. I found the statements about and performances of sexuality at sex-toy parties to be extremely curious.

As for sex-toy culture and American women, women who use sex-toys, use them to masturbate. What's more, two-thirds (2/3) of American women use sex-toys (Rye & Meaney, 2007). Compared to men, women have more varied techniques of masturbation (Masters & Johnson, 1966). Educated women use sex-toys more (Laumann, 1994). Lesbians are more likely to use sex-toys than people of other sexual orientations (Fahs, 2007). Eighty percent of women, who own a vibrator, only used it during partnered sex (Davis, 1996). Some women even create names for their sex toys. This naming of an inanimate sex object, speaks volumes about women who develop relationships with their toys (Fahs, 2007: 181). Nowadays, sex-toys have become what women purchase regularly. For many women who attended the parties, buying a new vibrator was almost as important as purchasing/investing in a great hair dryer or a bra.

Sexuality includes a large spectrum of practices, ideologies, and politics. Defining (mapping) the social construction of sexuality is even more complicated. For many reasons, people are prone to link sexuality to gender. However, in this project, my goal was to examine sexuality and gender as separate components of culture at sex-toy parties. In *Thinking Sex* (1984) Gayle Rubin suggested that we treat sexuality and gender as separate units of analysis. To combine gender and sexuality means that there is an automatic biological heteronormative construction of the concepts. Sexuality in this project refers not only to sexual practices and consumption, but also to the instincts, drives, and behaviors associated with the pursuit of sexual attractiveness and the satisfaction of erotic desire (Lyons & Lyons, 2004; Moore, Newlyn, & Fisher, 2010; Parker & Aggleton, 2003). In this project sexuality is examined as a social construction based on performance and identity. As female-only spaces, women create sex toy parties as safe spaces to discourse about, consume, and construct intriguing versions of sexuality. A number of social theorists, in their effort to understand how sexuality is constructed in culture, contextually, across time and space, have recognized the advantage of deconstructing sexuality (culturally) by deconstructing sexuality's links between sexual practice, desire, and sexual identity (Curtis, 2004; Frank, 2002; Manalansan, 2003).

In American society, sexuality is a topic that few people understand. Most people don't even want to talk (speak) about sexuality. In St. Louis, sexuality is *evil*. In the case of the sex-toy party, women feel *sinful* just by attending a party. The mere concept of attending a party where women talk about their sexualities and purchase sex-toys is sinful. In St. Louis, women were not socialized into aggressive (nonconformist) sex or gender roles. The idea was to keep decency and be a good Christian woman. From my

view sexuality is all about a woman's: ideology (beliefs), culture (values, norms, and mores), acts & behaviors (nonprocreative sex), identity, and sexual orientation (attractiveness/arousal). Women in St. Louis were bombarded with conflicting messages about sexuality on the daily basis. Thus the sex-toy party became a space where women could 'get away' from normative, sex-negative, decent culture in St. Louis. The sex-toy party was in its essence a space for women to really do (and be) what they wanted.

St. Louis, as a Midwestern Bible-Belt town is severely conservative. Women there struggle with how to mark, perform, and maintain their constantly negotiated notions of sexuality. This is especially the case when at sex-toy parties almost every behavior expressed a feature of sexuality. Many theorists suggest sexuality is all about one's sexual desires and performances (Butler, 1993; Collins, 2005; Frank, 2002; Manalansan, 2003; Peiss, 1998; Schwartz & Rutter, 1998). Sexual performances (behavior) refer to the sexual acts people engage in. These acts involve not only petting and intercourse, but also seduction and courtship. Sexual acts also involve the things people do alone for pleasure and stimulation. Sexual desire, on the other hand, is the motivation to engage in sexual acts (Illouz, 1997). Here, desire directly correlates with what turns people on sexually (Schwartz & Rutter 1998, Laqueur 2003, Sweeney 2006). The sexual customs, values, and expectations of a culture, passed on to the young through teaching and by example, exert a powerful influence over individuals (Schwartz and Rutter 1998:15). Lastly, research on sexuality should be placed within the context of society and institutions, social relations, and social networks. Of particular importance is how patterns of behavior are influenced by normative and societal structures. Historically, Anthropologists have focused on sexual behavior within cultural contexts.

Here sexuality was reflected in the values, beliefs, social relations, rituals, and symbolism of cultural groups and their individual members (Lyons & Lyons, 2004).

In St. Louis, women at sex toy parties were consuming more than just sex-toys, they were also making intriguing class and sexuality statements *via* consumption. These statements are linked, and are thus embedded in sexual meaning, practices, and everyday experiences. For example, Foucault's *Repressive Hypothesis* (1978) presented a useful perspective to describe how concepts of power, knowledge, and conflict are constructed through sexual discourse. Foucault suggested that sexual repression was relative to late capitalism and is not automatically liberated through economic realms. In His schema, women can only be liberated through an ongoing dialogue (or discourse) in which sexuality is the revelation of truth and liberation. Curious is the decent (southern-belle) woman, at a sex-toy party, who struggles through the proclivities of provinciality and sexual repression. She is mired in dichotomies of moral/immoral, decent/indecent, normal/abnormal sex acts and consumptions.



Figure 9 Sex Toys

St. Louis is useful space for understanding sexuality because the women there are so Southern cultured. Women battle to remain “southern-belle decent.” Living in a duality of good vs. evil, they aspire to be an “angel in the kitchen, and a devil in the bedroom.” Women in St. Louis strongly identify with being a good cook. For these

women, proper decent women, being a good cook means that you can always keep a man happy. These good cook women also have voluptuous bodies. These women are not shy or afraid of indulging in hot sauce, butter, gravy, or dessert. Women say things like “only a dog wants bone” to emphasize that a bodacious curvier body is more acceptable and desirable to men sexually. Young girls are raised in these environments and they learn what men want from a very early age. For adolescent girls, sexuality is taught through their sexual identity and sexual desire and fantasy. Many of these concepts of sexuality are taught to little girls in the of childhood and are social products (Rubin, 1975:166). To really get at the social construction of sexuality (and gender), it is imperative to understand the relations of its production.

Culturally, *sexual scripts* (Gagnon & Simon, 1973) have been used as guidelines for appropriate sexual behavior and sexual encounters. Sexual scripts are very useful for interpreting how sexual behaviors and encounters are learned through social interactions. Moreover, *sexual scripts* can be useful for interpreting gender as a form of social construction. *Sexual Script Theory* argues that the subjective understanding of each woman, about her own sexuality, determines her choice of sexual actions, and the subsequent qualitative experiencing of those sexual acts and behaviors. Here, sexual scripts may dictate what one should be doing at a particular time and in a particular place if one is to play the role characteristically associated with that script. Similar to scripts that stage actors use to guide their behavior, social scripts instruct members of a society as to appropriate behavior and the meanings to attach to certain sexual behaviors.

According to Judith Butler, in *Bodies That Matter* (1986), the mere concept of sexuality is from the start a normative social construction. In this sense, sexuality not

only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs. That is a body whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power. The power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls (Butler, 1986:34). Here Butler is influenced by the work of Jacques Derrida, in which arch-writing is a form of violent etching, engraving, or carving. We carve a significant reality upon the face of an otherwise smooth and meaningless surface. Butler uses this as a metaphor but considers the etching violent because it forcibly denies other possibilities. According to Butler, sex is “that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility (1986:2).



Figure 10 Japanese Dual-Action Vibrators

Gender

Many scholars on sexuality argue that *gender* refers not to something we *are*, but to something we *do*. From their perspective gender is thus a social construction. Judith Butler suggests gender (gender roles) is all about a constant performance, where males and females act out the roles society assigns them. In St. Louis, women learn gender, their place in society, and how to act moral/immoral, decent/indecent, and normal/abnormal. Gender is the result of socially constructed ideas about the behavior,

actions, and roles a particular sex (male/female/intersex) performs. Here gender is not directly related to one's sex (biology). Cultural traits typically assigned to a particular sex finalize the assignment of gender. Here the biological differences which play a role in classifying either sex is interchangeable with the definition of gender within the social context. The mere space of a sex-toy party is an inherently feminine space. Just by the nature of the space being a female-only space, it is hyper-feminine. Most sex-toy party companies do not allow men (or children) to attend the parties. Most parties are designed (decorated) to be hyper-feminine with shades of pink and red. Most sex-toy party hostesses served 'girly' cocktails that were feminine, not masculine like whiskey, or beer.

Central in Judith Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* (1990) is that people culturally constructed gender through the repetition of stylized acts in time. These stylized bodily acts, in their repetition, establish the appearance of an essential, ontological "core" gender. Here, Butler theorizes gender, along with sex and sexuality, as performative. The performance of gender (and sexuality) is located at the construction of the gendered, sexed, desiring subject within "regulative discourses." Here, Butler argued against biological binary sexes of male/female and suggested that the sexed body is itself culturally constructed by "regulative discourses". The sexed body, once established as a "natural" and unquestioned "fact," is the alibi for constructions of gender and sexuality (1990: 24). Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*, argued that social agents develop strategies which are adapted to the needs of the social worlds that they inhabit. These strategies are unconscious, and act on the level of a bodily logic. A central aspect of *habitus* is its embodiment: the everyday walking the walking and talking the talk of gender and sexuality (1982). In St. Louis, if people break the social norms and/or roles

of gender performance, it is automatically assumed the person is deviant sexually, or homosexual.

Sexuality /Gender/Masturbation

Solitary sex, self-pleasure, or masturbation as a sexual act (or behavior) has always been taboo for women (Laqueur 2003, Maines 1998). Equally troubling is the apparent 'double standard' on women when it comes to masturbation (sex acts & behaviors). Simply understood, at sex-toy parties in St. Louis, masturbating was not feminine in terms of gender roles. Throughout history, girls have been discouraged from or punished for masturbation. They were raised to believe that sex acts for sex sake (pleasure) was indecent and immoral (Schwartz and Rutter 1998:44). In society, women who have a lot of sex (acts) are marked as whores, or promiscuous. In St. Louis at sex-toy parties, many women were horrified (or disgusted) by the mere thought of masturbation. Women there were not raised to be 'into' masturbation. Many of the women at the parties had only learned to masturbate from the party experience. For males, it was the complete opposite in which boys are praised for their healthy libidos. Boys are raised in American society to be masculine and masturbate.

At the sex-toy parties, women's social norms were contested (deviance) by one's sexual aggressiveness, enthusiasm, and practices. Schwartz & Rutter in *Gender of Sexuality* (1997) defined masturbation as strictly pleasure-focused, nonprocreative sex, which because it is fundamentally antisocial, society stigmatizes it. They go further to state that masturbation is the most common act, especially among people outside of committed relationships (1997:42). In short, most single women in society masturbate. They further suggested that masturbation is the least dangerous, the most controllable by

a person's own wishes, and the least likely [sex act] to lead to misunderstandings (1997:44). As women's desires for sexual equality have increased over the years since the *Sexual Revolution*, their acceptance of masturbation has grown. Higher rates of masturbation are associated with higher rates of other sexual skills, including the ability to have orgasms.

From a feminist's perspective, an orgasm is considered a woman's right, regardless of where and with whom she has it. The focus on the individual and pleasure and the lack of concern for sex within relationships are major departures from the essentialist view of sex as procreative and properly confined to marriage. Not for nothing, nowadays, a fairly extensive video and sex toy business exists, which is highly popular among middle and upper class women. Feminist sex-shops sell a wide variety of vibrators for single women, women in pairs with men, or women paired with other women. Women learn to respond sexually by themselves, for themselves (Schwartz & Rutter, 1997:45). According to Gayle Rubin, popular sexual culture ideology is a noxious stew made up of ideas of sexual sin, concepts of psychology inferiority, anti-communism, mob hysteria, accusations of witchcraft, and xenophobia (Parker & Aggleton, 2009:212). A woman masturbating has never been a comfortable concept, but the philosophy (ideology) of sex-toy parties is that women masturbate (with sex-toys) regularly, or whenever she desires. As stated earlier, women enter the space of a sex-toy party to consume merchandise that is hyper-gendered. Most of the sex-toys sold at the parties were intended to either solo or mutual masturbation practices once home after the party.



Figure 11 Sex-Toys

The ancient Greeks had a relaxed attitude toward the act of masturbation. They regarded the act of masturbation as a normal and healthy substitute for other forms of sexual pleasure. They considered it a safety valve against destructive sexual frustration. The Greeks even dealt with female masturbation in both their art and writings. One common term used for it was *anaphlan*, which roughly translates as "up-fire" (Hawkes, 2004:118). Writings on masturbation and its negative consequences illustrate the boundaries of and what was considered decent sexuality in ancient Greek culture, or society. The first writing on masturbation was the anonymous *Onania* in 1710. This pamphlet on the risks and ills of masturbation is said to have been a bloodcurdling and terrorizing warning against masturbation. *Onania* claimed that young masturbators would suffer from stunted growth, both mentally and physically. What was worse, women who masturbated would suffer from imbecility, which was characterized as hysterical fits and bareness (Hawkes, 2004: 118).

In the late 18th Century, during the times of the Marquis de Sade, the joys of mutual orgasm were celebrated, while masturbation was increasingly pathologized as dangerous for both the mind and body (Laqueur, 2003). The powerful 19th Century stigma on masturbation lingered in less potent, modified forms, such as the idea that

masturbation is an inferior substitute for partnered encounters (Parker & Aggleton, 209: 158). Foucault suggested that 19th Century society conceptualized masturbation as a perversion at the core of many psychological and physical problems, and homosexuality as a mental illness. In short, 19th Century psychology, “annexed the whole of the sexual perversions as its own province” (1976:29). He clarified:

Social controls sprung up everywhere that ” screened the sexuality of couples, parents, and children , dangerous and endangered adolescents—undertaking to protect, separate, and forewarn, signaling perils everywhere, awakening peoples attention, calling for a diagnosis, piling reports, organizing therapies.

By the late 19th Century, female masturbation was viewed as an attack on patriarchy and the order of all things reproductive. By the early 20th Century, discourse both medical and social around masturbation insisted that women who masturbated wouldn't be capable of a “normal” heterosexual reproduction. As if to say that the women's vagina won't respond to the male penis effectively. Masturbation somehow equaled asexuality, bisexuality, or homosexuality. By the 1950s, from the research of Kinsey, masturbation was the second most common sexual activity in women and 95% of the women in the study achieved orgasm from doing it (Kinsey 1953: 171).

At sex-toy parties, I observed that many women began by saying they were “grossed out” by the idea of anal sex. They pass the display anal sex-toys around without deeply checking them out, or shopping them. It's almost as if they were passing around a stinky dead decomposing frog. Out in the public space of the sales-presentation and pass-around of merchandise, very few women came out and openly admitted they participated in anal sex. But...in the private space of the sales room, many women purchased sex-toys and creams for anal play. All the same while, some women struggled ideologically purchasing an actual sex-toy, many women just bought sexy pheromone infused candles,

or other non-sexual intercourse items. The idea of being in power over their own sex-lives overwhelmed many women initially. At the majority of the parties, the magic happened when a woman took another woman by the hand, and guided her on the way to a sexual liberation through learning to masturbate. Like having a great big-sister, many times, at sex-toy parties, women bonded over their sexual practices and behaviors. There was always someone who had bought, tried, and used most of the merchandise. There was always someone who was gregarious about her sexuality, someone who was always loud and proud about her open-mind and *libida*.



Figure 12 Glass Dildos

Consumption

Consumption is the way we purchase and use goods that are available on the marketplace. There are two definitions of consumption that point to the utilization of products and five definitions that point to destruction, evaporation, decay, and waste. This dual nature of consumption is reflected in the literature on the topic. On the one hand, authors such as Naomi Klein (*No Logo*, 1999) have written on the cultural alienation that results from industrial consumption, building on the earlier work of Frankfurt School scholars such as Theodor Adorno. On the other hand, students of

culture have focused on how individuals use consumption to signal their identity, resist domination, and gain status. Both approaches are reflected in the research on the relevance of consumption for the study of gender, sexuality, and identity.

The social identity approach focuses on how gender groups use consumption to define and signal their identity. In defining their identity, individuals must be able to differentiate themselves from others by drawing on criteria of commonality and a sense of shared belonging within their subgroup. This internal identification process must be recognized by outsiders for an objectified collective identity to emerge. Consumption plays a crucial role in internal and external definitions of collective identity. Molnar and Lamont (2001) show that 1) cultural producers (here specifically, marketing specialists) identify and define categories of consumers, such as “the female consumer,” which categories become objectified and shape the cultural tools available for the formation of collective identities; 2) such cultural producers offer cues and cultural models to people about ways to achieve full social membership; 3) individuals use consumption to signal aspiration to membership in symbolic communities (as citizens, middle class people, etc.); and 4) consumers perform, affirm, and transform the social meaning attributed to specific collective categories.

Examining consumption is a particularly fortuitous for examining the symbolic aspects of collective identity. Here the emphasis is on the dynamic between internal and external processes of desire (motivation). Here examining the consumptive practices of women at sex-toy parties was useful as consumption is informed by the symbolic efficacy in identity processes. Here “identity work” does not require that individuals be connected through networks and engage in face-to-face contact. The private space of the

sex-toy party, where women purchase their desired merchandise can operate either at the level of bounded subcultures (women at parties), or at the level of a widely shared cultural structure (women in society) that exist beyond the enactment of specific interpersonal ties. Consumption thus constitutes a useful lens for understanding how membership is acquired in symbolic communities (Lamont & Molnár, 2001).

In *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (1997), Don Slater surveys theories of consumer culture in relation to the rise of modernity. He investigated the emergence of commercial society, the relation between needs and social structures, the reproduction of social order, prosperity and progress, and changing identities in the post-traditional world. Slater's perspective is most useful in understanding sex-toy party culture because women at parties are aggressively pressured to purchase sex-toy merchandise. The sales-representatives in the sex-toy party business are aggressively trained to sell a lot of everything. The women who attend the parties are virtually ostracized if they do not purchase at least one item. This high-pressure sales environment drives sales and thus consumption. In *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young* (1990), Paul Willis views consumer goods as instruments that can be employed to express resistance and deviance in mainstream society. Through not purchasing merchandise at sex-toy parties, women could transform the meaning of commodities thereby counteracting the alienating force of modern mass consumer culture.

At sex-toy parties in St. Louis, the modern search for identity, or who (and how) women wanted to appear as, was based to a great extent on the acquisition of cultural codes. These codes were things like getting highly intoxicated and consuming sex-toy

merchandise. Nowadays, the symbols that serve as signifiers of a woman's social class, sexual liberation, and gender performance are reinforced by the constant stimulation through media. Women are convinced to purchase sex-toys and sex merchandise in a way that creates for them a patchwork identity, made up of fragments stemming from a host of differing cultural ideologies. In the case of the sex toy party, a woman does not simply become an integral part of party sub-culture, but rather the social custom of purchasing sex-toys acts as a membership card to group. At parties, the performance of the normative cultural codes operates a signifier of the validity of a woman who identifies as a wealthy woman who is sexually liberated enough to purchase the merchandise. This is also proof that one is capable of becoming integrated into the group as an individual. At sex-toy parties women consumed as members of consumer targeted group, who performed quasi-religious acts of consumption, the name of cultural self-conception (Willis, 1990:27).

Consumption is a material realization, or attempted realization, of the image of a good life. Consumption, in the most general sense, is a particular means for creating an identity, one that is realized in a material reorganization of time and space (Friedman, 2004:39). Women at sex toy parties want to appear as modern educated women who are intellectually mature in matters of the bedroom. For women at sex-toy parties, despite the sexual explicitness inherent in the language, the sex-toy party atmosphere attempts to retain some sense of refinement (decency) by avoiding rapaciously sexy words for sex organs (McCaughney & French, 2001). During the sales presentation, words like "pussy" and "beaver" are avoided. At the same time, more clinical words like "clitoris" and "vagina" are also avoided. Instead the sales representative used nicer, less abrasive

words such as “button” or “bean” for clitoris, “lily” for vulva, “muffin” for vagina, and “we-we” for penis. Though women at sex-toy parties wanted to come across as wealthy, educated, and sexually liberated, there were times when they still struggled with their identities.

In terms of socioeconomic status and consumption at sex-toy parties, women with more money spent more money on sex-toys. The wealthier women not only purchased more sex-toy merchandise, but they also reported that they never managed to use all the items they bought at the parties. Some of the women complained about not using their toys because of the hassle of buying batteries, many batteries. Some women even complained about growing bored with the toys they had previously bought at the parties. Some women claimed they had surprisingly become ‘turned on’ by their new vibrators. Then after a couple masturbatory sessions, they were in essence ‘turned off’ by them. Women at parties, after the sales-presentation phase, back in the private sales-room identify as sexually active and definitely sex-positive. This identity occurs in a couple of fashions: 1) they have their name stamped on the credit card they use to purchase [consume] the actual sex-toy merchandise and 2) they perform (enact) the class, sexuality, and gender roles. In late modernity it is self-identity that is both produced and marketed. In late capitalism, the key to self-identity is choice (Hawkes, 2004:21). Much of the apparent moral neutrality of commodified sex lies in its being divided off from intimate pleasure and desires.

As stated earlier, sex sells. Unfortunately, at sex-toy parties, what constitutes sexuality is presented in a pre-packaged format, with the meanings ready-made for consumption. Just as supermarkets entice with their ready-made meanings, the sex-toy

party sales-representative makes promises of sensual experiences, sexual pleasure, and erotic titillation. These promises are presented in forms that are easy to process and unthreatening (Hawkes, 2004:22). Our personal identity is created out of elements that are created by others, and marketed aggressively and seductively. The dominant modes of consumption are based upon an individualized sense of selfhood, well-being, and the notion of free choice (Tomlinson, 1990:13). The illusion of freedom is dangerous because our choices have been designed for us. This is especially the case at sex-toy parties as the private sales-room, after the presentation ends, becomes a rather high-pressure sales environment.

As stated earlier, it is customary (and proper etiquette) that women purchase at least one item. To purchase at least one item is socially acceptable even if it is a less expensive candle, a book, or a sexual game. At parties, when women exit the back sales-room, and have not (visibly) purchased anything, when leave the sales-room empty handed, they are instantly shunned and labeled as deviant by not only the sales-representative and the party hostess, but also the party attendees. Acts of consumption represent ways of fulfilling desires that are identified with highly valued life styles. The highly valued life style, in the case of sex-toy parties is imagined as being wealthy enough to purchase a big bag full of sex-toy merchandise, and coming off as sexually liberated enough to enjoy everything stuffed into the bag. Simply understood, women at sex-toy parties, at the very least, want to appear to be sexually liberated. They also want to come across as having control over and being proud of their ferocious sexual appetites. Before the party occurred, women were very shy and conservative about the overall concept of women masturbating with gusto. In this way the party experience bring on a

sexual liberation. The party-attendee leaves the party with a plethora of gadgets and education dedicated to her own sexual pleasure.

Many scholars have examined the links between identity and consumption as they relate to the idea of fetishism. Here fetishism is predicated on the assumption that there are natural vs. unnatural needs for people to consume. Thinking about how women consume at sex-toy parties intersected with fetishism, draws attention to a number of theoretical perspectives concerned with the social construction of sexuality (Liqueur 2003, McBride 2004, Frank 2000, Seidman 2003). Furthermore, approaching sexuality from a lens on fetishism would help sex theorists resist cataloguing the varieties of sexual acts and behaviors around sexual identities. In her ethnography on women's sex-toy parties, Debra Curtis (2004), suggested commodification and consumption are central to the production of identities and lifestyles in late-capitalism. Thus the pursuit of self-identification is synonymous with consumption. Symbolic aspects of consumption are interesting when examining how women access one's sexuality. From a Marxist perspective this means that at sex-toy parties, only wealthy women, women with checkbooks and/or credit cards have a means by which to legitimize their fetishes. They are the only women whom thus have the capital to consume the sexy commodities, and the privilege of appearing (coming off as) wealthy, modern, and sexually liberated.

Millions of Americans belong to swingers clubs, and tens of millions more patronize strip clubs, massage parlors, adult bookstores, nude beaches, view X-rated DVDs, attend sex-toy parties, and other forms of adult entertainment. The social sanction against many of these sex acts and behaviors are so strong that almost no one will stand up and defend what he or she does, much less assert its wholesomeness (Klein, 2006).

There are many positives to women owning and playing with sex-toys. Sex toys are a way for women to own their bodies, taking charge of their sexual satisfaction (Price & Shildrick, 1999). One reason sex-toy parties, as a form of sexual entertainment are outlawed is that it legitimizes women's ownership of their bodies and sexuality (Klein, 2006: 90). Sex-toy parties have become popular culture and are, nowadays, a normal means for women to purchase and consume sex-toy merchandise. The normalization of the sexualized subject in popular culture signals a transformation in the terms of sexual citizenship (Cossman, 2007).

In my view, sexual citizenship means the right to stand for one's own sexual pleasure. By sexual citizenship I mean the right to be proud of one's own sexual practices. Mostly by sexual citizenship I mean the right to authentic orgasms, and women not having to 'fake it' any longer. Sex-toy parties are about self-help and self-actualization, but they are also about women taking greater responsibility for their sex-lives. The popular culture sex-toy party is a modality of citizenship with a new emphasis on women's sexual pleasure—one that disrupts the foreclosure on women's sexual agency (Cossman, 2007:40). In *Pop-Porn: Pornography in American Culture* (2007) Hall & Bishop, eloquently illustrate what I believe is the link between sexuality and consumption. In what they term as "subcultural capital" the emphasis is on popularity and who (and how) the consumer wants to across to others. They seemed to describe current popular trends as "subcultural chic" or "minority chic" (fashion) like being Gay or Feminist. At sex-toy parties, the *subcultural capital* is about women being liberated, and coming off as what I believe is "liberated chic".

At sex-toy parties, there was a philosophy (agenda) to “empowerment through commodification.” Though the rhetoric during a sex-toy party sales-presentation was all about women becoming sexually liberated enough to masturbate (with toys), there were larger rhetorical statements being made around women’s wallets. Masked by Sex-Positive Feminism, the sales-representatives were trained to convince (push) party-attendees to consuming all kinds to sex-toys, massage oils, lingerie, and anal-sex cream. At some parties, the promise of a sexual revolution, or liberation, was presented to party-attendees in a palimpsest, or trope of consumption. The women were sold the idea of authentic orgasm and sexual liberation as if their individual consumption was the substitute for a larger social justice act (Hall & Bishop, 2007:135). Everyone needed to purchase (consume) a large amount at parties because like in other in-home parties, the party-hostess gets a ‘kick-back’ or discount based on how much her party profits. For all the women who attended the parties, and consumed sex-toy party merchandise, there was never a guarantee of sexual liberation once they left party, and were inside their bedrooms.

Chapter 3: Lemon-Drop Shots & Strap-On Dildos: Feminisms

It's Saturday night, and Jennifer, is battling to make it through the final portion of a two-hour sales presentation. It's another wild and chaotic sex-toy party. She literally has to scream or yell to be heard at this point in the evening and she knows she'll be hoarse in the morning. She continues in battle to be heard over the noise of the toys vibrating and buzzing. She just wants to finish her two-hour sales presentation and go take orders in the private room. Women are crazy and can barely sit in their seats anymore. They are all completely wasted. They have all knocked-back 5 margaritas and three Jell-O shots each. As this point in the party, Jennifer is the only sober soul in the room. Even Christine the party hostess is wasted. Jennifer knew the situation would come to this...a site of empty Jell-O shots cups, empty margarita glasses, and a bunch of anal beads, sexy creams, dildos, and other gadgets strewn throughout the room. The sales presentation has grown out of control with drunk, randy, and rowdy women. Then before she knows it, the sales presentation is finally completed. Jennifer then gathers the merchandise, the dildos, vibrators, creams, and lingerie, and leaves the living room to organize the private sales room in back. She does not know what she's heading into, but hopes and prays that the party attendees purchase a lot. For Jennifer, the stress now shifts from having to yell and keep a party full of drunk, randy, and rowdy women on the same page (of the catalog) during the presentation, to the stress of keeping a straight face when someone orders three tubes of anal sex numbing gel. Mostly, Jennifer needs to prepare to become not only a saleswoman, but also a gynecologist, sexologist, and therapist, all at one time. In addition, in the private sales room, she needs to be an accountant. She needs to remember, in all the drunken chaos, to charge enough for the shipping & handling costs. As she prepares the room for the intoxicated and horny women to shop, she thinks about her role as a sexual big sister, friend, and mentor. During the sales presentation, she remembers how difficult it was to get the women to not only relax, but also open their minds to the idea of their own sexual pleasure. Many of the women had never masturbated. Many of the women acted as if they felt guilty just talking about masturbation and authentic sexual pleasure. Many of the women at the party, claimed to fake orgasm regularly. Jennifer then realizes that maybe she also plays the role of a feminist, encouraging the drunken women to really learn to love themselves. For many of the women, Jennifer is the gatekeeper to their self-love and authentic pleasure. During the sales presentation, Jennifer remembers selling the women on the idea of authentic pleasure. She also remembers getting them all rowdy about the idea of masturbating for 2 hours and having multiple orgasms all alone...

The *Sexual Revolution* is believed to have begun in the 1920s. The 1920s, the *Roaring 20s*, was the era of the flapper dancer and the bootlegger (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988; Allyn, 2001). During the *Roaring 20s* women raised their skirt hems, danced the Charleston, and make provocative statements about sexuality. From my view the 1920s were a time when women's notions of self were conflicted with their notions of decency and indecency. Somehow at the time, alcohol and dresses cut above the knee were made deviant, or evil. Women, who were courageous and deviant, drank alcohol, wore short dresses, and celebrated their sexual selves. These women were in essence breaking through the chains placed on not only their sexuality, but also their decency. These chains were placed on women during the Victorian Era. The *Roaring 20s* presented a moment in time for which women rallied together and made social change. In essence 1920s women reclaimed their bodies and their sense of pride in their bodies. The fashion of the time called for displaying more flesh (body) and the application of cosmetics.

Then during the *World Wars*, with most of the men away fighting in the military, women were called to hold the country together. They took jobs in factories, while raising their families. They also took on the many gender roles men left behind. In the 1950s, after the *Wars* ended, women returned to the domestic sphere and reclaimed their traditional (pre-War) gender roles. In the 1950's women, took pride in performing the traditional gender role of the domesticated goddess. The mere idea of a sexually liberated woman intimidated many. Even more intimidating was the idea of prioritizing a woman's sexual pleasure in bed. American society placed stigmas and labels on women who prioritize their sexual gratification, or pleasure. Women with *libidas* were labeled as whores, freaks, and indecent. A woman's sexuality was not to be displayed outside the

bedroom. A woman's sexuality belonged to first her father, and then her husband. She was raised to not do anything (sexually) that would bring shame to the family name. In other words, women were raised to not become whores or freaks. Then once she was married her husband was in placed in charge of not only her sexual body, but also her sexual soul. In the 1950s there were women who certainly had to negotiate the chaotic place of being an angel in the kitchen, and a devil in the bedroom.

Then, in the early 1960s, American culture underwent a dramatic shift. Everything women believed about sex, sexuality, and their bodies also shifted. Through social change many of the American cultural traditions, values, norms, and taboos shift in regards to sexuality. In the 1960s, all kinds of sexual acts, ideologies, and lifestyles, became more socially acceptable (Allyn, 2001; Petersen, 1999). Then when the birth control *pill* became available in 1962, women could relax and participate more often in sexual intercourse. They could focus on their sexual satisfaction as well. Single women's sexuality changed in that they could participate in casual sex with different partners. Furthermore, the birth control pill gave women control over not only their bodies, but also their sex-lives. The invention of the *pill* in 1962 is a major landmark in the *Sexual Revolution*, because the pill forced women in society to stand up (and against) the chains placed on their sexuality in the 1950s. The invention of the *pill* is also noteworthy as many Feminists mark this era as the start of *Second-Wave Feminism*.

In 1963 Betty Friedan published *Feminine Mystique*. The *Feminist Movement* was swinging into its *second-wave* and influential literature such as *Feminine Mystique*, helped change American ideologies of the women's role (power) in relation to her sexuality. In the *Feminine Mystique*, Friedan tackles the issue of the domestic role of

women in 1950's America, and the feeling of dissatisfaction it brought with it. Friedan believed that women should not conform to a *Feminine Mystique* that had been created (housewife/domestic goddess), and that they should participate in if not enjoy the act of sex. The book itself was very popular on college campuses everywhere. *Feminine Mystique* was most important in that it created a new way of thinking the domesticity and the role of women (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988: 309).

Feminism refers to political, cultural, and economic movements against the social oppression and inequality suffered by women and children in society. The overall aim of Feminism is to argue for equal rights between men and women in society. These rights include, and are not limited to, legal protection and inclusion in politics, business, scholarship, and the recognition and building of women's cultures and power. The goals of Feminism are similar to the goals of Women's Studies, as discipline. Feminism is controversial for challenging traditions in many fields, as well as for supporting shifting the political balance toward women. Some feminists argue that men cause and benefit from sexism. While others argue that all people are harmed by gender roles, and therefore that Feminism is for women and men.

Feminist theory emerged from the Feminist movements and includes theories about the origins of gender inequality, as well as the social construction of sexuality and gender (Burns-Ardolino, 2007; Williams & Stein, 2002; Zack, 2005). Feminist activists have campaigned for women's rights to business ownership, real-estate ownership, voting, and other political rights. Other Feminists promote women's rights to bodily integrity and reproductive rights. Many Feminists oppose domestic violence, sexual

harassment, and sexual assault. In economics, they have advocated for workplace rights, including equal pay and career growth.

The Feminists movements and theoretical developments were historically led predominantly by middle-class White women from Western Europe and North America. Since then, more women have argued for and created additional Feminisms. *Proto-Feminism* preceded Feminism and is based on sources other than Feminists' literature (Andersen, 2007). Feminists' writings began to appear by authors like Christine de Pizan in the 15th century and Mary Wollstonecraft in the late 18th century (Andersen, 2007). Starting in the 19th century, Feminism tended to arise in what is now referred to as *waves*, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom. First-wave feminism sought equality in property rights, changes in the marriage relationship, and eventually, in women's suffrage, or women's right to vote.

The *wave* or era of feminism, known as *second-wave* feminism, is marked by feminist accomplishments that began in the 1960s. Second-wave feminists believed social inequalities in society were all interdependent. They also advocated combating these inequalities in the everyday scholarship and lifestyles of feminist activists (Jarrett-Macauley, 1996). The movement encouraged women to embrace the everyday aspects of their own personal lives as deeply politicized, and reflective of a sexist and racist structure of power in society. If *first-wave* feminism focused upon absolute women's rights such as voting rights and the right to work outside the home, than *second-wave* feminism was largely concerned with issues of inequality, ranging from the political to the sexual. Second-wave feminism fostered a common female identity in which all

women could find political solidarity, a tendency that *third-wave feminism* would later criticize extensively (Collins, 1990; Williams 2000:12).

Third-wave feminism, as an era of feminism, began in the late 1980s. Third-wave feminists are critical of the perceived failures of *second-wave feminism*. Third-wave feminists distinguish themselves by focusing on the intersections and complexities of gender with race, sexuality, and class (Zack 2005, Hobson 2004). *Third-wave feminism* sought to challenge essentialist definitions of femininity. *Third-wave feminists* claim that *second-wave feminists* based their academic arguments solely on the experience of White middle class women. *Third-Wave Feminism* began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This last *wave* of Feminism examines feminism across class and race boundaries (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Postmodern Feminists argue that sex and gender are socially constructed and that it is impossible to generalize women's experiences across cultures and histories, and that dichotomies of traditional gender, feminism, and politics are too limiting (Andersen, 2007; McRobbie, 2009:4).

Although women openly discuss sexual experiences and desires at sex toy parties, the space of the party and the agenda of the sales-representative emphasized women's sexuality while still placing them in a gender regime in which they lack real power (Curtis, 2004). Somehow, at sex toy parties, women are portrayed as sexually aggressive, but their bodies are portrayed as generally passive. In *Latex & Lingerie* (2003) Merle Storr describes these elements of a sex-toy party as a "post feminist" phenomenon. Here, the sex-positive and sex-libratory agenda at sex-toy parties is inauthentic. Post-Feminist, Ariel Levy, in her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2005) criticized Sex-Positive Feminists as not only being commodified, but also raunchy. Levy, while not being fully opposed to

Sex-Positive Feminism, and not wishing to specifically proscribe certain forms of sexual behavior, she sees a popularized form of sex-positivity as constituting a kind of "raunch culture" in which women internalize objectifying male views of themselves and other women (37). Levy believes it is a mistake to see this as empowering and further holds women should develop their own forms of sexual expression.

Sex-Positive Feminism

Sex-Positive Feminism is believed by many to have been created *en lieu* of the *Sex-Positive Movement*. The *Sex-Positive Movement* is an ideology which promotes and embraces open sexuality with few limits. According to sexologist Carol Queen sex positivity is:

an attitude towards human sexuality that regards all consensual sexual activities as fundamentally healthy and pleasurable, and encourages sexual pleasure and experimentation. The sex-positive movement is a social and philosophical movement that advocates these attitudes. The sex-positive movement advocates sex education and safer sex as part of its campaign. (1997:5)

The movement makes no moral distinctions among types of sexual activities, regarding these choices as matters of personal preference. The terms and concept of *sex-positive* and *sex-negative* are generally attributed to Wilhelm Reich. His hypothesis was that some societies view sexual expression as essentially good and healthy, while other societies take an overall negative view of sexuality and seek to repress and control the sex drive.

Like Reich, some contemporary advocates of sex-positivity define their philosophy in contrast to sex-negativity, which they identify as the dominant view of sex in Western culture and many non-Western cultures. According to these advocates, traditional Christian views of human sexuality define traditional Western values in relation to this subject. Thus, such proponents of sex-positivity claim that under the Western, Christian tradition, sex is seen as a destructive force except when it is redeemed

by the saving grace of procreation, and sexual pleasure is seen as sinful. Sexual acts are ranked hierarchically, with marital heterosexuality at the top of the hierarchy and masturbation, homosexuality, and other sexualities that deviate from societal norms closer to the bottom. The sex-positive movement does not in general make moral or ethical distinctions between heterosexual or homosexual sex. Nor does the philosophy shun or stigmatize female masturbation, regarding choices as matters of personal preference. Most elements of the sex-positive movement advocate comprehensive and accurate sex education as part of its campaign.

Some sex-positive theorists have analyzed sex-positivity in terms of intersection of race/culture, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, and spirituality. Farajaje-Jones (2000) highlighted the connection between white supremacist ideology and what he termed "erotophobia". Several definitions of sex-positivity have been offered by sexologist Carol Queen:

Sex-positive, a term that's coming into cultural awareness, isn't a dippy love-child celebration of forgone – it's a simple yet radical affirmation that we each grow our own passions on a different medium, that instead of having two or three or even half a dozen sexual orientations, we should be thinking in terms of millions. "Sex-positive" respects each of our unique sexual profiles, even as we acknowledge that some of us have been damaged by a culture that tries to eradicate sexual difference and possibility. It's the cultural philosophy that understands sexuality as a *potentially* positive force in one's life, and it can, of course, be contrasted with sex-negativity, which sees sex as problematic, disruptive, and dangerous. Sex-positivity allows for and in fact celebrates sexual diversity, differing desires and relationships structures, and individual choices based on consent. (1996:10)

Sex-Positive Feminism centers on the idea that sexual freedom is an essential component of women's freedom. As such, sex-positive feminists oppose legal or social efforts to control sexual activities between consenting adults, whether these efforts are initiated by the government, other feminists, opponents of feminism, or any other institution. They embrace sexual minority groups, endorsing the value of coalition-building with members of groups targeted by sex-negativity. Sex-positive feminism is connected with the sex-

positive movement. Gayle Rubin (1984) summarizes the conflict over sex within

Feminism:

There have been two strains of feminist thought on the subject. One tendency has criticized the restrictions on women's sexual behavior and denounced the high costs imposed on women for being sexually active. This tradition of feminist sexual thought has called for a sexual liberation that would work for women as well as for men. The second tendency has considered sexual liberalization to be inherently a mere extension of male privilege. This tradition resonates with conservative, anti-sexual discourse. (1984:55)

Sex-positive feminism, also known as Pro-Sex Feminism, Sex-Radical Feminism, or Sexually Liberal Feminism, is a movement that began in the early 1980s. Sex-Positive Feminism is associated with the Sex-Positive movement. Sex-Positive Feminists come to a sex-positive stance from a deep distrust in the patriarchy's ability to secure women's best interest in sexually limiting laws.

Some Feminists became involved in the Sex-Positive Feminist movement in response to efforts by anti-pornography Feminists, such as Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin who put pornography at the center of a feminist explanation of women's oppression (McElroy, 1995). This period of intense debate and acrimony between sex-positive and anti-pornography feminists during the early 1980s, is often referred to as the "Feminist Sex Wars". Other Sex-Positive Feminists became involved in a direct response to what they saw as patriarchal control of sexuality. Sex-Positive Feminists authors include: Susie Bright, Gayle Rubin, Carol Queen, and Betty Dodson, is regarded as the grandmother of the Movement. Sex-Positive Feminism argued that sexual freedom is an essential component of women's freedom. As such, Sex-Positive Feminists oppose legal or social efforts to control sexual activities between consenting adults, whether these efforts are initiated politically, by other feminists, by opponents of feminism, or any other

social institution. They embrace sexual minority groups, endorsing the value of coalition-building with members of groups targeted or made deviant by society (Dodson, 1996).

Sex-positive feminists reject the vilification of male sexuality that they attribute to many radical feminists, and instead embrace the entire range of human sexuality. They argue that the patriarchy limits sexual expression and are in favor of giving people of all genders more sexual opportunities, rather than restricting pornography (Queen, 1996). Sex-positive feminists generally reject sexual essentialism, defined by (Rubin, 1984) as "the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions". Rather, they see sexual orientation and gender as social constructs that are heavily influenced by society.



Figure 13 Sexual Revolution Advertisement

Some Sex-Positive Feminists identify women's sexual liberation as the real motive behind the Women's Movement. Naomi Wolf wrote, "Orgasm is the body's natural call to feminist politics." (2001) Authors such as Gayle Rubin (1984) and Wendy McElroy (1995) argued that sex-positive feminism's roots date back to the 19th century, in the work of sex reformers and workers for sex education and access to contraception such as Alfred Kinsey and later Shere Hite.

Gayle Rubin (Parker & Aggleton, 2003:345) explained:

There have been two strains of feminist thought on the subject. One tendency has criticized the restrictions on women's sexual behavior and denounced the high costs imposed on women for being sexually active. This tradition of feminist sexual thought has called for a sexual liberation that would work for women as well as for men. The second tendency has considered sexual liberalization to be inherently a mere extension of male privilege. This tradition resonates with conservative, anti-sexual discourse.

On the other hand, there were also feminists, such as Betty Dodson, who saw women's sexual pleasure and masturbation as central to women's liberation.

Betty Dodson held the first one-woman show of erotic art at the Wickersham Gallery in New York City in 1968. She left the art world to teach sex to women. She is widely known as a pioneer in women's sexual liberation, having sold more than 1 million copies of her book, *Sex for One* (1996). Dodson's first book, *Liberating Masturbation*, was self-published and became a Feminist classic. Much of Dodson's notoriety came from her advocacy of masturbation. For more than 30 years, she has conducted workshops for groups of women in which women talk, explore their own bodies, and masturbate together. Dodson considers too much is made of sexual labels and embraces them all by calling herself a heterosexual, bisexual lesbian.

In 1973, The National Organization for Women organized a Women's Sexuality Conference in New York. There, Dell Williams met Betty Dodson and was inspired. In 1974, Dell Williams opened *Eve's Garden*. Eve's Garden was a small store that took on feminist and sex-positive philosophy that offered for sale vibrators, books, and other products to enhance and liberate women's sexuality.

Yes, it's OK to play!

When you explore yourself sexually, you discover a new side of yourself—what you like, what feels good, what you might want to share with a partner. Toys let you try something new!



Figure 14 Sex-Positive Advertisement

At first, she operated a mail order business, and later she opened a storefront business in New York City. The first store of its kind, Williams advertised it as a "feminist" sexuality boutique and mail order catalog service created by women for women and their partners. According to Williams, "When I was born, in 1922, women didn't have orgasms and didn't know where or what a clitoris was" (Williams & Vannucci, 2002:18). She was nearly 50 before she worked up the courage to purchase a vibrator.

Some Sex-Positive researchers, like Shere Hite, have focused on understanding how individuals regard sexual experience and the meaning it holds for them. Hite has criticized Masters and Johnson's work for uncritically incorporating cultural attitudes on sexual behavior into their research (Hite, 1976). For example, Hite's work showed that 70% of women who do not have orgasms through intercourse are able to achieve orgasm easily by masturbation. She has criticized Masters and Johnson's argument that enough clitoral stimulation to achieve orgasm should be provided by thrusting during intercourse, and the inference that the failure of this is a sign of female "sexual dysfunction". While not denying that both Kinsey and Masters and Johnson have been a crucial step in sex

research, she believes that people must understand the cultural and personal construction of sexual experience to make the research relevant to sexual behavior outside the laboratory, and in the lives of women (Hite 1976, 2006).



Figure 15 Love Yourself Advertisement

This ethnography of women at sex-toy parties is in its essence Feminist. On a primary level, I intended to spotlight women and how they behave at in-home female-only sex-toy parties. As a woman, I had found the experience of a sex-toy party liberating in many ways. I was committed to inspiring women, inside and outside academia, regardless of skin tone, to celebrate their womanhood. As I got further into the project, and learned about the many types of Feminism, I became obsessed with educating women about their right to self-love and to authentic sexual pleasure. Conducting the research in St. Louis, a space that is religious, southern, and male dominated culturally, only complicated the process.

Dildos, vibrators and other sex-toys are the vehicles on the route to a self-reflexive body project of female orgasm. This body project, achieved primarily through an individualistic, capitalistic consumption also offers critique of normative discourses of heterosexual sex and identity (McCaughey & French, 2001). That said, I argue that at

sex-toy parties, though women assume their purchases are symbolic of liberation, is just another form of containment, or subjugation. While I do think that women's experimentation with sex-toys, and discussions about sex with other women might heighten their expectations for sex and foster a critique of male-centered sexuality, I am concerned with the deep-rooted rhetoric of romance, and the increasing commodification of heteronormative and homogeneous sexuality and lifestyles. In short, women attend sex-toy parties and use sex-toys as part of an overall lifestyle project of pleasure and empowerment. Life politics can be distinguished from the "emancipation politics" that characterized, for example, the first and second waves of the feminist movement. Emancipation politics are political efforts in which groups attempt to overcome a structural form of oppression, or overcome the oppressive restrictions of traditional customs (Giddens, 1991:215).

Tupperware & Sex-Toy Parties as Feminist

Both Tupperware and sex-toy parties as sites of Feminism. With both parties, the sales-representatives are women who are granted with the opportunity to support themselves and their families. The sales-representatives are also the gatekeepers to the party attendees' happiness. In both parties, the sales-representative is encouraged to (trained to) befriend the party hostess and the attendees. Many of these conversations and friendly acts occurred after the parties ended. In both cases, the sales-representatives must really now their merchandise, and sells their merchandise ultimately. Mostly the sales-representative has the wellness of women in the forefront of their sales schema. There are many parallels in the business of in-home Tupperware and sex-toy parties. The sex-toy party sales format (and agenda) follows the exact pattern of a Tupperware party.

The main goal is to sell merchandise to groups of women at parties held in a home. However, at sex-toy parties, the merchandise sold is for in the bedroom, rather than in the kitchen. The merchandise at sex-toy parties fosters an even greater sense of intimacy between the women. This has both positive and negative consequences for thinking about the commodification of sexuality and sex organs, and consumption in our capitalist culture (McCaughey & French, 2001). As Alison Clarke noted in *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America* (1999), historically women have often found empowerment through in-home sales parties. That said, the in-home party sales format has been a popular marketing technique for decades. *Wear-Ever Aluminum Cooking Products* formally devised the in-home hostess party in the 1920s. Madam C. J. Walker and Annie Turbo Malone's "agent-operator" distribution system of selling cosmetics and hair care to African-American women was its precursor; and was established in St. Louis, Missouri (Clarke, 1999: 82-85).

At the time, many companies saw that socializing while shopping, reduced consumer resistance, and made buying products, like cosmetics & kitchenware acceptable among women (Clarke, 1999:86). Like Tupperware parties, sex-toy parties, are held by and for women in the tradition of in-home marketing. Like Tupperware parties, at sex-toy parties, party hostesses serve food and drink that appeal to women. Like Tupperware parties, sex-toy parties, are events where women get together and indulge in their guilty pleasures. Both parties have sales demonstrations, or presentations. Both parties push products that are promised to improve the domestic lives of women. Both parties employ highly tactile sales techniques in a fun, intimate atmosphere of female bonding. Since sex-toy party sales representatives sell merchandise for private bedroom pleasures, they

foster an even greater sense of intimacy between the women. The Tupperware party plan system blurred the boundaries between domesticity and commerce, work and leisure, friend and colleague, consumer and employee (Clarke, 1999: 108).

With in-home sales, informal networking on the part of the sales-representative is paramount. With both Tupperware and sex-toy parties, the sale representative has to recruit potential party hostesses. In both parties, the hostesses themselves receive a percentage of the evening's sales in free products. Tupperware parties set up a highly tactile, sensual atmosphere in which women were encouraged to handle the products (Clarke, 1999: 108). The creation of a physical and active party atmosphere is imperative in both types of parties as well. The sales representatives at both parties, creates games that break down the inhibitions and passivity of the party attendees. Significantly, many of these techniques allow women to bond through the exclusion or critique of men. Rather than stroking the male ego, women can focus on their own pleasure. This anti-male exclusionary rhetoric at parties, conscientiously constructs the party as a safe space for women. The creation of intimacy and group solidarity, proven to be crucial at Tupperware parties, is relatively easy to accomplish at sex-toy parties. Getting women to speak out about their desires is another way to foster intimacy and camaraderie among party attendees. With both Tupperware and sex-toy parties, women whether they are the party sales representative, the hostess, or attendee, go through an experience that is empowering, liberating, and exhilarating.

HEALTH Education MONTHLY PURE Romance

2

How can a woman have an orgasm?

There are many different ways that women can reach orgasm; there is some advice on a good place to start. She should find an opportunity when she can be alone and have time to experiment with and explore her genitals. She may use fingers or a small vibrator to touch her genitals and discover the pleasurable sensations. Most women achieve orgasm by stimulating the clitoris (on the outside) rather than stimulating inside the vagina, so it may be helpful to start in that area first. Move fingers or the vibrator around to different areas to see what each part feels like as it is stimulated.

During arousal, blood flows to the vagina and often to a woman's chest and lips. The vagina also typically becomes more lubricated and this can vary from one woman to the next. Women may also get more or less lubricated during different situations. For example, through oral sex, masturbation or intercourse, different partners or different times of the month, it is this lubrication that helps make intercourse more comfortable and not painful. The inner two-thirds of the vagina actually expand to accommodate a penis or other object, like a vibrator or fingers. Women breathe faster, the heart rate increases, and the inner lips of the vagina get filled with blood and often enlarge and become deeper in color. The clitoris often increases in size as well. Many times, this process of arousal can better prepare the body for orgasm.

Orgasms are intense, sometimes overwhelming feelings. Some women may feel like they are losing control and that is normal. As a woman gets more aroused and closer to orgasm, she will feel her breathing increase and her heart beat faster. As she experiences increased pleasurable feelings in her genitals, she should be sure to relax her mind and body and let herself go.

If orgasm occurs, sexual arousal greatly increases for most women. There are often rhythmic contractions of the vagina, the uterus, and the pelvic muscles. Following orgasm, sexual arousal usually goes back down to its pre-orgasm state, though many women can have orgasms soon after (unlike most men).

What if a woman can't have an orgasm?

Many women experience stress and anxiety due to the pressures of not being able to reach orgasm. Stress and anxiety can make it even more difficult to climax, creating a vicious cycle of no orgasm. Because of this, women are encouraged to focus less on reaching orgasm and more on enjoying the experience. Focusing on the pleasurable sensations that a woman feels with a partner can help rid the mind and body of stress, and may help her reach orgasm. Many women find it helpful to clear their mind first, before engaging in sexual activity. When a woman is with a partner, she can light some candles, put on some sexy music, take a bath, and share a massage. This will help both people relax and reduce any stress. When becoming intimate with a partner, pay close attention to the sensual touches and feelings being experienced. Try not to let any stray thoughts about orgasm creep into the mind. If the woman is able to be completely in the moment and really enjoy what she and her partner are doing with each other, this may help her reach orgasm.

3

1) Ex-T-Cee

Ex-T-Cee is best for first time female users. It is subtle and also comes in an Original formula for women who are sensitive and prone to infection (it does not contain any added color, flavor, or scent). Ex-T-Cee is a menthol based product that is air-activated and will provide a cool, tingly sensation to the genitals. Only a pea-sized amount should be applied to the clitoris. This is a great product for women who are already in tune to their sensitivity level and may not need a lot of added stimulation.

2) X-Scream

X-Scream is our maximum arousal cream and contains twice the amount of menthol as Nympho Niagra, making it very powerful. Because of this, it is not recommended for first-time female users, unless the woman is taking medications with severe sexual side effects (such as anti-depressants) or is experiencing a loss of sensation. X-Scream is also edible and is a urines arousal cream. Only a pea-sized amount should be applied to the clitoris.

3) Nympho Niagra

Nympho Niagra is great for women who are prone to infection because it does not contain any added color, flavor, or scent. It is a menthol-based arousal cream that is air-activated and will provide a cool, tingly sensation to the genitals. Because Nympho Niagra contains menthol, it is more powerful than Ex-T-Cee. Only a pea-sized amount should be applied to the clitoris.

4) Dust Me Pink (with Blindfold)

This foreplay tool can allow couples to explore new areas of each other's bodies. Sometimes the monotony of sexual activity can cause a decrease in desire. Dust Me Pink is a great product to find other "hot spots" to keep the flame alive! Using Dust Me Pink with Pure Romance's Blindfold can help increase arousal even more by taking away one of the senses, the other sensory touch, will intensify creating a very pleasurable experience.

5

FOREPLAY ITEMS

Foreplay is a wonderful way for women to help increase their arousal in preparation for sexual activity. Foreplay helps to prepare the body for intercourse by producing natural vaginal lubrication and increasing the size of the vagina to make penetration as comfortable as possible. Foreplay activities are great for women experiencing a decrease in their libido, because it will help increase their arousal.

Foreplay is often more about creating an experience for customers. Intimacy and sexuality are not about the destination, but about the journey. Foreplay is also about having fun and allowing partners to reconnect.

Figure 16 Feminist Philosophy in Catalog

The Sex-Toy Party Sales-Representative as Feminist

At times, Feminist philosophies are difficult to map out and/or define. My goal is to demonstrate what I suggest is authentic Feminism through the work of the Sex-Toy Party Sale-Representative. From my perspective, through my own participant observation experiences, these women are real authentic Feminists. Sales-Representatives play many roles in the moments of a sex-toy party. They are the gatekeepers to a woman's authentic pleasure, and [authentic] orgasms. At any give moment during a party, they become psychologists and psychiatrists, sex personal trainers, and cool big sisters. These roles emerge in addition to being a sales-woman who sells sex-toys. These women have to master the female (and male) sex anatomy, chemistry, and accountancy. They are in their essences, virtual 'jacks of all trades.'

Simply understood, Sex-Toy Party Sale-Representatives are many things. Some representative I met in the field, left selling other in-home party companies that featured things like candles, purses, cosmetics, and cookware. Sex-toy party sales-representatives make decent money for the actual work they do. Furthermore, they are in essence being paid to party. They are being paid to educated women about their bodies, souls, and sexual rights. To be a saleswoman in male dominated society is extremely difficult whether one sells health club memberships, automobiles, or computers. To be a saleswoman who sells sex-toys is a whole other 'ball of wax.' Selling sex-toys requires a whole other skill set than just typical sales skills. Mostly, the sex-toy party sales representative has to be a woman who is most comfortable and confident with her own sexuality.

top 10
REASONS TO BECOME A
PURE ROMANCE CONSULTANT

- 10. YOU'VE HAD ENOUGH OF THE DAILY GRIND.**
Say goodbye to an unfulfilling, uninspired workplace!
- 9. YOU HAVE PLACES TO GO, PEOPLE TO SEE.**
You set your own schedule and work when you want!
- 8. YOU'RE GOOD AT BEING IN CHARGE.**
Grow your own business and develop your own team!
- 7. YOU WANT SUPPORT, AND NOT JUST UNDERWIRE.**
Extensive training opportunities ensure your success!
- 6. A MORE PASSIONATE LOVE LIFE WOULD BE NICE.**
Where else can you work and reap such meaningful rewards?
- 5. YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO TRAVEL.**
With \$4 million in incentives awarded annually, now you can!
- 4. IT'S TIME YOU CONTROLLED HOW MUCH YOU EARN.**
Work part time, full time, anytime! It's all up to you!
- 3. YOU KNOW WORK DOESN'T HAVE TO BE A JOB.**
In this career, laughter, friendships, and fun are encouraged!
- 2. YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO BE A PART OF HISTORY.**
Join a growing company that is changing the way we see sexuality!
- 1. YOU'RE READY TO LIVE THE AMERICAN DREAM.**
Your income. Your business. Your future—finally, you can live the life you've always wanted to live!

The advertisement includes three photographs: a group of four women smiling, a woman holding a pink box overflowing with cash, and a close-up of a woman laughing joyfully.

Figure 17 Advertisement for Sales Representative

Sex-toy party sales-representatives have the typical motivations for conducting in-home party sales businesses. Simply understood, many of the women need the cash. There are many options of merchandise women can sale at in-home parties. Most saleswomen in America sell cosmetics like *Avon & Mary Kay*, cookware like *Pampered Chef*, and others sell everything from designer handbags to candles. The woman who opts to sell sex-toys is a particular personality. Not always a classic beauty in the sense of being a sex goddess, some of the sales representatives were rather unattractive by American beauty standards. Some of the sales representatives were missing teeth, some of them needed a manicure, and some were obese. Somehow in all the talk about sex, these women still manage to align themselves with women at parties and win them over, convincing them to purchase...a lot.

Each saleswoman begins her in-home party business by purchasing a starter kit of sexy creams, dildos, and vibrators. On average, starter kits cost between \$150 and \$400. It is at the discretion of the individual sales representative as to how much she spends on the starter kits. At sex-toy parties, the more merchandise to showcase during the sales presentation, the better.



Figure 18 Starter Kit

The starter kit usually pays for itself after 2 successful parties. From time to time, the sales representative adds new merchandise to enhance the display sales merchandise. Simply understood, the more options available in colors, sizes, and flavors, that women can try at the parties, the more the sales-representative sells in the private sales room.



Figure 19 The Sex-Toy Party Sales Consultant

The sales representative must also order and pay for other party goods such as: order forms, catalogs, clip boards, opaque bags, pencils, erasers, and door prizes. She must also maintain a hefty stock of cotton swabs, moist wipes, and batteries. The sales-representative usually must be on solid financial ground before she begins ‘doing’ parties. She has to be computer savvy and good with handling money, or credit cards. In addition, the sales representative must run her sex-toy party business as if it were any other business. Each company has their way of conducting business. Depending on the company, there are programs to help representatives establish and grow their businesses. There are even training DVDs and sales workshops. With all the stuff of the sex-toy

party business, some representatives have to make an office in their homes just to have a space to hold everything for their business.



Figure 20 Ad for Hosting a Party

As for the actual sex-toy party merchandise, representatives are trained to have most of the merchandise shown in the sales catalog on hand at parties. Basically, the larger idea of a sex-toy party is that women can leave with vibrators and dildos. It is quite a difficult task to keep an overwhelming inventory of 40 “Mr. Reliable” dual-action vibrators, 10 glass dildos, swings & whips, and a plethora of sexy cream, oils, and gels, on hand, at home, and away from family members, visitors, and lovers. Some representatives have such great businesses that they can afford to rent a small office space somewhere close to home, and on the way to next sex-toy party. Many sales-representatives complained about having to schlep from party to party with giant boxes, trunks, and crates. Many sales representatives laughed about driving around town, party to party, with the “hot” merchandise in their vehicles. They called it “driving dirty” and had horror stories (nightmares) about being pulled over by police officers in route to a sex-toy party. Sales representatives are courageous women who are passionate about what they do for work. Sex-toy party sales representative are funny, gregarious, and

above all, they know how to “break the ice” at a party. A strange business is one that makes the sales- representative really (really) get to know the clients.

As stated earlier, sex-toy party sales-representatives are authentic Feminists. They are the gatekeepers to women’s sexual pleasure. They are the sex educators that women feel comfortable enough to ask just about any questions in regards to the most intimate and forbidden sex acts. The merchandise that they are selling is illegal in some states, but they must still know everything about their goods and wares. They must be erudite on things like the chemical compound of the gels, creams, oils, and personal lubricants. They must be erudite on things like the measurements of each of the dildos, vibrators, and anal toys. They have to know things like how many and what type of batteries each gadget takes. They have to be skilled at things like hoisting the sex swing to the ceiling, or how to erect the portable stripper pole. Sex-toy sales reps really teach women how to do things themselves. Here, masturbation until orgasm is the ultimate DIY (do it yourself) project. At sex-toy parties, the sales-representatives literally teach women how to feel good, masturbate, and love themselves.

Women in society, bring with them into the sex-toy party space, an ideology that is anti-self love. Women sex-toy party attendees go through several hoops to be able to attend a party. Some women attendees have to round up the energy, time, baby sitter, and the permission to attend a sexy party where men (and children) are not allowed. Women in society, attend sex-toy parties to escape the drudgery of their everyday lives. It’s a time to relax, have some cocktails, and buy some sex-toys. Many women attend parties with intentions of buying a new sex-toy, or a new tube of arousal gel. The sales-representative is there to sell her whatever she needs to have more sexual satisfaction in bed. The sales-

representative is there to remind her to love herself and to prioritize her sexual needs and pleasures because she deserves it.

Then in the private sales room, after sales-presentation is over, the sales-representative is there for her customer's confessions and questions about wanting to try double penetration sex acts. There in the private sales room, the sales-representative is the ultimate Feminist, as she must convince a woman that she deserves to do whatever she desires in bed. She is most feminist in the moments when her customers confide in her and complain about their partners pressuring them into certain sex acts against their will. The sex-toy party sales-representative Feminist will then become a saleswoman, and turn that sale from a bondage kit complete with blind folds, whips, and cuffs, into a sensual spa kit complete with massage oils, bath salts, and pheromone infused candles. The Feminist sales-representative will remind her customers to still purchase vibrators and dildos in addition to the sensual spa kit. The Feminist sales-representative will inadvertently sell a clitoral vibrator that will assure authentic orgasms. The Feminist sex-toy party sales-representative is committed to putting the well-being of her female customer at the forefront, as well as turning a profit and paying the bills.



Figure 21 Sex-Toy Party Sales-Representatives

Chapter 4: Cosmopolitans & Triple-Action Vibrators: The Sex-Toy Party

It's Saturday night at Christine's sex-toy party. The sales presentation has just ended and Angela is the first attendee to order merchandise in the private sales room. Angela is drunk and battling to mentally estimate just how much she's spent in the designated private sales room. "Your total is \$215.55" Jennifer announces to Angela. Angela then drunkenly struggles to find her credit card. When she finally locates the credit card, she slaps it down loudly on the table, as if she were playing some high-stakes card game in Vegas. Jennifer then proceeds to diligently and correctly record her credit card information. All the same while, other party attendees are anxiously waiting outside the sales room, and are lined up outside the closed door. Jennifer thinks to herself "There's an "Angela" at every party." Angela then realizes that she is drunk and riled up. She, like many women at the party, is ultra-horny and wants to call her sexual partner for suggestions on and approval of purchases, before she signs the sales receipt, and maxes out her credit card with the \$215.55 charge. Jennifer is a little tipsy herself and is struggling to maintain her professionalism. After Angela hangs up with her lover, she asks Jennifer questions about the chemical compound of the anal sex gel, "Booty-Ease". Jennifer says "It's a water base gel, which is infused with aloe-vera, lidocaine, and benzocaine." Angel then agrees to order a tube of the gel and proceeds to ask Jennifer about other anal products. Angela confides in Jennifer and confesses her latest sexual endeavors. She tells Jennifer that she's recently gotten into anal sex and light bondage. Though Jennifer is a little tipsy, she battles not to laugh in Angela's face. She thinks to herself, "TMI...too much information" and then proceeds to recommend that Angela purchase the newer version sex-swing. The new sex-swing not only attaches to the ceiling, but has Velcro wrist and ankle cuffs. The newer sex swing is \$175 and Angela wants it. Then Angela draws the conversation back to anal sex. She asks Jennifer about dual-penetration vibrators. Jennifer tells her that she can use any dual-action vibrator as a dual-penetration vibrator. The new total is \$390.55 and Angela is ultra-horny, intoxicated, and overwrought. She asks Jennifer if she should really spend all that money on sex-toys, and Jennifer replies, like a therapist, "You should buy the stuff because you want it, not because your lover wants it." Then the saleswoman role kicks back in, and Jennifer suggests Angela purchase it all, but have her lover split the cost. Jennifer then reminds Angela that Christine will have a higher amount to spend with the hostess discount voucher, the more money the attendees spend. She says, "Do it for Christine. She really spent a lot of time and money on the food and drinks for tonight."

Angela is a universal character at sex-toy parties. *Angela* is the woman who is initially socially uncomfortable at the party. But after a few glasses of champagne, for *Angela*, the party becomes an opportunity for social outlet. For *Angela* it's not so much about the sex-toys at the parties, as it is about the socializing. A highly sexual woman, *Angela* is well experienced in sex-toys, and she has been to a few of these kinds of parties. The *Angelas* at sex-toy parties knows her way around the sales presentations and overall party agenda. *Angela* is proud of her ferocious sex appetite. The sex-toy party is a space where *Angela* can call herself a 'try-sexual', try anything sexual orientation. She's 'into' sex toys and masturbation, and likes sharing that fact with the other women at the party. The *Angelas* at sex-toy parties are the women who are loud and proud about their sexual behaviors and liberations.

The *Angelas* at sex-toy parties are always the first to start up a round of shots. Even before the sales presentation begins, *Angela* drinks for sport, or drinks to get drunk. She plays bartender and makes sure everyone has cocktails & shots throughout the duration of the party. *Angela* is the conductor of the sex-toy party alcohol symphony-like experience. At parties, the symphony of alcoholic consumption is a beer at first, and then a lemon-lime margarita. Next, a pineapple-banana margarita, with a tequila shot on the side. Then a strawberry-banana margarita, as a chaser for a coconut rum shot. Then for the sales presentation *Angela* makes a pitcher of sangria and another of mimosas. *Angela* holds court and drunkenly commands everyone's attention. Other women at the party admire *Angela's* sexual confidence and vibrato. *Angela* has bought and tried most of the items in the sales presentation. Through personal testimony during the sales presentation, like a sex-toy party sales angel, *Angela* sells 15 "Mechanical Lover" dual-action vibrators

for the sales representative. Everyone buys a “Mechanical Lover” because *Angela* loves hers so much.

Sex Toy Party Overview

The typical sex-toy party is usually held in a larger nicer home. The party hostess usually takes the party occasion as an opportunity to drive her family out of the house.

No males or children are allowed, as per the rules of most in-home businesses.

Additionally, the party serves as an opportunity to use the good wine and margarita glasses. At sex-toy parties, alcohol consumption is standard, or universal. For many women, the sex-toy party is an opportunity to get away from the husband and kids, and to escape the abyss and grind of everyday life. These parties are customarily held at moments when women can “get way.” Weekend afternoons and evenings, and Thursday evenings were most popular times choices. The party experience starts the moment the party hostess sends out invitations. The party invitations are “top secret” and will usually say something like, “surprise party”, “fiesta de amor”, or simply, “for you” on the front cover. Anxious invitees flip open the invitations and instantly learn what the party is about...sex toys, not candles, not a baby shower.

The invitation does not prepare partygoers for what they will visualize (and touch) once they arrive at the party home. The typical space is a large open room, like a living and/or dinning room, with comfortable couches, chairs, and pillows for the ladies to sit and participate in the sales presentation. The actual party usually gets started one hour before the sales presentation begins. The sales representative often takes that one hour to “get to know” the ladies, as *everyone* enjoys a glass of sparkling wine, a bloody mary, or margarita. The alcoholic beverages are always “girlie” drinks such as, mimosas,

daiquiris, and cosmopolitans. Also, there is a selection or two of shots such as, gelatin shots, purple hooters, sex on the beach, lemon drops, and sour apple shots. Many women take the party as an opportunity to contribute their latest and greatest party appetizer. Usually, the women spend about an hour simply socializing, drinking, and eating. Then the sales representative calls the sales presentation to order. An average of fifteen women pour out of the kitchen and into living room, as the show is about to begin.

First the sales representative begins the introductions in the room. After everyone has introduced herself, the sales representative gives all attendees a catalogue, clipboard, and a pencil. The pencils are golf pencils and have no erasers. Luckily, the sales representative pulls out a large clear bag of penis shaped erasers. Now the attendees must decide what color (or race) their sexual practices are. The erasers are simply pink and brown. Around the room women giggle and grab an eraser from the bag. Now the sales representative assures the women that she can accept all forms of payment and that the women are *free* to order anything that she does not showcase in the presentation from the sales catalogue.

The first round of merchandise showcased is appropriately edible. The partygoers proceed to taste cotton candy flavored body power, hot cinnamon heat activated massage oil, and chocolate body paint, just to name a few. A few women discuss the various tastes and make note on their clipboards. After a while the attendees are covered in sticky waxy lotions and sugary powders. Many women opt to stop the presentation and go wash their arms, hands, and fingers. Many also decided to drop by the bar and grab a fresh round of cocktails and shots. Next the ladies are introduced to the company's lingerie line. At this point in the party, the women start to warm up and some even model

the slinky lingerie for everyone to see. The lingerie is *tres* slinky and highly appeals to the women's desire to be a "devil in the bedroom." After thirty minutes of re-tasting edible lotions and shopping for crotchless panties, nipple covers, and garter belts... ultra-sexy lingerie, the ladies are ready to graduate to more risqué merchandise such as massagers and handcuffs.

At this phase of the sex-toy party sales presentation, begins the parade (or procession) of the "heavier" merchandise. The sales representative explains how 10 massagers are operated and then passes them one by one around the circle, for the ladies to touch and handle. One by one the ladies giggle and feel uncomfortable touching, handling, and shopping over such overtly sexual merchandise. Not surprisingly, these women are more comfortable with and accustomed to handling vacuum cleaner parts and shopping for produce, such as cucumbers or zucchinis. A few women take a pass on touching the larger massagers because they claimed they are "grossed out."

As the sales presentation progresses, the women are then introduced to bondage blind folds, hand cuffs, and spanking merchandise. By this point, the party attendees have all had at least 3 rounds of cocktails and shots, and almost everyone loosens up. As the fuzzy red, white, and black handcuffs make their way around the circle, some of the women are bored. Many women are familiar with and accustomed to "adding a pair of handcuffs in bed to spice things up." Handcuffs are somehow commonplace and acceptable in the bedroom, as many women claimed to have received them as casual sexy gifts at bachelorette parties, and in honeymoon baskets. Shortly, the ladies take a break to retrieve more cocktails. Everyone now *needs* a cocktail to brace her soul (and mind) for the remainder of the presentation. As the women break for a second trip to the

restroom, some women are visibly concerned with where the presentation is leading. By this point, everyone is blushing and giggling, as the whole experience has thus far been rather “tongue in cheek.”

Once everyone reassembles with fresh cocktails and some cigarettes, the sales representative brings out the “hard-core” sex-toy merchandise. She now removes a large hot pink veil and unveils a table that was covered during the whole first half of the presentation. In shock (and awe) the partygoers are exposed to 20 more hardcore self-pleasuring sex-toys. These sex toys are more than mere massagers; they are full-blown dildos, vibrators, and the ever so popular “rabbit” style that skillfully works as both a dildo and a vibrator. Featured on *Sex in City* (2001), many of partygoers were predisposed to the mythical sex powers of the “rabbit” style dual-action dildo-vibrator. This dual-action vibrator (dual-stimulation gadget), starts at \$40, and comes in a large variety of shapes, sizes, and colors. Some are sky blue with pearls, while others are neon green, pink, and red. Some are shaped like butterflies, and some like mermaids. Some are designed to replicate anything from King Tut’s sarcophagus, to a large banana with a chimpanzee sitting on top. Some are less thematic, and are more abstract. They appear to be similar to cutting edge neck rollers or massagers found in stores such as *Sharper Image* and *Whole Foods*.

Each shopper is encouraged to order in whatever model, shape, or color she desires. As the sales representative continues the presentation, across the room, women are bending, twisting, and fondling the latex and plastic penises. One woman pretends that she is performing oral sex on the “King Tut” model, and all the women laugh hysterically. It is at this point of a sex-toy party that chaos erupts. The party grows

unruly as women are SWI...shopping while intoxicated. The sounds in the room are as symphony of sinister drunken giggles blending with the mechanical noises of sex toys, about 10 operating at once. The intoxicated women shop and weigh the pros and cons of each vibrator, edible cream, and sex game. “Everything is made in Japan,” says the sale representative, as she assures the ladies their purchases would last, because according to her, the best sex-toys are made in Japan. Ultimately her company would guarantee the purchases as well.



Figure 22 Dual-Action Vibrators in Catalog

Then, the sales-representative leaves the room and sets up a makeshift sex-shop in a private space (bedroom) of the house. There the ladies can conduct more intensive research with the sales-representative in private. In the private sales room, women have a moment to catch their breath, sober up, and gather themselves after the drunken raucous during the sales presentation. By consuming sex toys, participants are creating new consumptive scripts for themselves. These woman are in fact buying goods that in turn changes the way they think about themselves, as well as alter there sexual practices (Curtis, 2004: 106).

The Five Phases of a Sex-Toy Party

The next section is designed to describe the party experience in phases. Here, I have identified five phases that sex-toy party attendees pass through in the overall party experience. This is a crucial part of the ethnographic space and experience of a sex-toy party. My intentions are to present the sex-toy party experience ethnographically, and culturally. The phases are: 1) Pre-Party to Pre-Sales Presentation, 2) Soft-Core Sales Presentation, 3) Hard-Core Sales Presentation, 4) Private Sale Room, and 5) After Party.



Figure 23 Sex-Toy Party Sales Catalog

Phase One: Pre-Party to Pre-Sales Presentation

The sex-toy party experience begins the very moment a woman schedule a party in her home. The party hostess is electrified to pull out all the stops and host a successful party. A successful sex-toy party is one that assures the party attendees the time of their lives. Even if that just means a 3-5 hours sex-toy party experience. The upcoming party hostesses normally schedule their party at a sex-toy party she's attended recently. In the

private sales room, in the back, she's purchased \$215.55 worth of sex-toy party merchandise, and then signed up to host her own party. This is especially the case as the sales representative told her she could "save" money on her future purchases if she throws a party, a financially successful party. Like other in-home party incentives, the party hostess is given a discount on her purchase, which is dependant on how much the overall party attendees spend.

Additional, the party hostess instantly begins to plan the party space. She is counting the space in her home and exactly how many women she can invite. She is also making a mental list of the women she'll invite. She wants to be certain to invite women who at the very least have credit cards in which to purchase sex-toys. She also wants to be certain to invite women who are at the very least open-minded enough to attend this type of party.

Next the party hostess becomes obsessed with the food and drinks she'll serve at the party. She wants to make to sure to, at the very least, have a spread that is as good as or even better than the party she last attended. At sex-toy parties, women really get into to providing a decent spread of party food. It was rare to attend a party that just had vegetable crudités. There was at the very least: 2 hot dips (chili-cheese, Rueben, or buffalo wing), 2 cold dips (taco, cheese plate, seafood), and always something chocolate.



Figure 24 Party Spread

Something chocolate was universal simply because the sex-toy parties are female-only. Some party hostess even did the research to serve foods that were essentially aphrodisiacs. The overall goal was to have enough food for women to sober up if they drank too much and to have enough arousing food to make women purchase more at the party.



Figure 25 Aphrodisiac Party Foods

Some sex-toy parties are more bachelorette themed. There, hostesses take sex-toy party theme and blend it with the bachelorette themed party. Some bought and decorated their homes with genital themed items. Some hostesses even made desserts that were genital

themed. For bachelorette celebrations, sex-toys and/or genital themed items were part and parcel to having a good time and a wild naughty party.



Figure 26 Genital Themed Items at Sex-Toy Parties

As for the alcoholic refreshments at sex-toy parties, the party hostess' primary goal is to get party attendees drunk enough to relax, get into the party, and buy a lot of merchandise. To that goal, the hostess will be sure to, at the very least, serve feminine drinks and shots. Feminine cocktails like: mimosas (champagne and orange juice), bloody marys (spiced tomato juice and vodka), fruity margaritas, pina coladas, fruity daiquiris, and so on. As for the shots, there were usually feminine shots like: sex on the beach, purple hooters, lemon-drops, and Jell-O shots, which sometimes even matched the color scheme of the party. Some hostesses went as far as to offer a full bar at parties. Furthermore, the very moment the attendee enters the home, she's offered a cocktail. The goal is to get the attendees tipsy enough to relax, but remain sober enough to make it through the sales presentation in one piece.

Slowly, after everyone has had some dips and a couple of cocktails, everyone filters into the space where the sales presentation will occur. The women are starting to relax and they have even already begun social bonding. The seats for the presentation are

usually arranged in a circle. This is so that the attendees can pass the items around, woman by woman. The sex-toy party merchandise sales table was set by the sales representative in the hour before the attendees arrived. When they first arrive, after the attendees secure a cocktail, the sales table will be the first images of sex-toys they witness. In essence, the shopping begins at this moment.



Figure 27 Merchandise Sales Tables

As the women filter around the circle of seats, they are given a catalog and an order form for the sale presentation. The savvy sales representative is keen enough to sense the stress and nervousness in the space and opts to do a couple of introduction games to get the attendees to loosen up. She has the women go around the circle and introduce themselves. Then she makes them all stand and play a “pass the penis” game in which the attendees must pass a dildo around the room using only their knees. They struggle and giggle and pass the penis...with their knees.



Figure 28 Pass the Penis Game

It's common to have music playing in the background at sex-toy parties. Hostesses will often choose music or artists that women find empowering. Songs like, "I Will Survive" by Gloria Gaynor, "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" by Cyndi Lauper, and just about any songs by Madonna, Abba, Mary J. Blige, Alanis Morissette, and Donna Summer. With a combination of alcoholic beverages, sexy physical activity, and laughter, the women settle into their seats and the sales presentation begins. The women, with their pencil, a penis pencil eraser, catalog, and order form in hand, buckle their sexual seatbelts and begin a fantastic sexy voyage.

Phase Two: Soft-Core Sales Presentation

The sales representative begins the sales presentation by showcasing less abrasive sex-toy party merchandise like sexual card games, educational books, bedroom rose petals, and candles. Woman by woman, each of the items are passed around the circle. A few of the women make notes on their order forms to remember to order items. A few of the women still want to play with the merchandise longer. Some of the women opt to demonstrative (for the sales representative) how to sex card game actually works. Some of the women continue thumbing through the sex books. The sales representative has to

wait for all the merchandise to be 75% around the circle, before she can progress to the next item for show and tell.



Figure 29 Merchandise Featured in Phase 2

Next the sales representative describes and sells the sexy perfumes and body sprays. These perfumes and sprays are more the stuff of women beauty products that a woman could feel comfortable to purchase out in public at a CVS or Wal-Mart. However, in the sales presentation, all the products have sexy and enticing names like, “Body Dew”, “Basic Instinct”, and “Between Sheets”. The sales representative sprays the fragrances into the air for the group to smell, and then sends the individual products around the circle. Still, in this phase, the sales representative has not introduced merchandise that could be described as an actual sex-toy. She is preoccupied with selling the non-sex-toy items that usually don’t offend women...yet. Within the hour, she’ll have them passing around merchandise that certainly can be classified as sex-toys.

Next she showcases the sexy (and edible) tingly nipple and lip balm. The sales representative explains to the attendees that the waxy balm is designed to induce arousal, and that it comes in 5 delicious and sexy flavors. Unfortunately, she only has two of the

five for the women to sample. She then passes samples of the balm, on cotton swabs, to each of the women, and invites them to rub the tingly balm on their lips and nipples. By then most of the attendees are just tipsy enough to actually apply the tingly balm to their lips and nipples out in the open, in front of the circle. Later in the presentation some women will complain that they have applied too much of the tingly balm to their nipples.



Figure 30 Sales Representative Sampling Creams

As the tingly balm take effect, women around the circle begin to get sexually aroused. The sales representative opts to move ahead in the presentation.

Next are the various massage oils. Some are edible, and some are not. The sales representative begins the massage oils portion of the sales presentation, by educating the women about the different types of massage oils that her company carries. She sends around a basic collection of massage oils with hyper-bedroom massage names like “Sexy Time”, “Swedish Essential”, and “Afternoon Delight”. As the various oils make their around the room, the sales representative runs to kitchen to microwave and freeze the next set of massage oils. She wants to be sure to sell the attendees on their useful temperature variation options.



Figure 31 Sampling the Edible Massage Oils

She wants to remember to tell the attendees that the microwavable oils hold their heat for up to one hour in the bedroom. She doesn't want to forget to include the fact that the cold massage oils have menthol in them. As she runs back to the circle of aroused and intoxicated women, she remembers that there's a sales contest for the edible massage oil line "Crème Sex". The "Crème-Sex" edible massage oils are creamier, and they are available in delectable flavors like bananas-foster, cinnamon apple pie, and cherry cheesecake. The sales representative then demonstrates how the edible massage oils that are heat sensitive operates. She then goes around the circle of women, inner-wrist by inner-wrist, dabbing samples on the attendees.

The sales representative, once she's finished passing out the round of samples, then opts to demonstrate and sell the luxurious the bath and massage set. She asks, "Who wants a massage" and wrangles up a volunteer. Using the featured massage glove and cream set, the sales representative proceeds to really *sell* the merchandise. The lucky volunteer exclaims, "That feels great!" and marks her order form to remember to buy the massage set.



Figure 32 Massage Set Demonstration

The sale representative then returns to the kitchen for her cold and hot massage oils, and then demonstrates those oils as well. The women throw themselves into the massage oils and everyone is busy rubbing, tasting, and smelling the extensive collection of products. At this point, though slight aroused, the attendees still have not handle actual sex-toys. The attendees, who have attended sex-toy parties in the past, understand just where things are going next. The sales rep then announces that everyone needs to take a break to wash off all the many oils, and other sticky substances they've sampled. The smokers then head outside to smoke. Almost everyone stocks up on cocktails and shots for the next portion of the sales presentation.



Figure 33 During Sales-Presentation

Phase Three: Hard-Core Sales Presentation

From the rather safe place of sampling creams and oils, the sales presentation shifts into the showcasing of real sex-toys. At this phase of the sex-toy party, everyone, including the sales representative is excited to be at the point in the party. This phase of the party is when the magic happens. Most attendees are more than just tipsy by this phase as well. As the sales presentation reconvenes, the women brace themselves to envision, handle, and shop actual sex-toys. The sales rep starts of this portion of the presentation with a question about the attendees and their orgasms. She asks the intoxicated women, “Who in this house, has ever faked an orgasm?” Hysterically, most of the women raise their hands, laughing raucously. The savvy sales rep ask this sort of questions to excite the women, and get them onboard the journey to their authentic orgasms in the near future, after the party ends.



Figure 34 Merchandise in the 3rd Phase

For about an hour, the attendees have sampling and tried a large variety of sexy items. At this point they are ready to get their hands on some bonafide dildos and vibrators. After all, it's the purpose of the whole event. After all, they're all horny and riled up from sampling all the tingly creams and oils. They're all horny and riled up because they've been thinking about buying a vibrator and/or dildo since the moment they received their sex-toy party invitation. The sales representative starts off slowly and shows the women the everyday garden variety "pocket-rocket" vibrators that are easily concealable and disguisable. She then demonstrates how each of about 12 "pocket-rocket" variety vibrators operates. She then sends them all around the circle of women. At first some of the attendees are nervous to hold the tiny vibrators. They cup them in their hands and pass them along quickly.



Figure 35 Sex-Toys Disguised

Clearly, it is way too early to be uncomfortable about handle sex-toys at this phase of the sales presentation. Next, the sales representative asks the party attendees if anyone knows the difference between vibrators and dildos. Once again, a few off the more sex-toy party experienced women raise their hands and take a stab at the answer. A woman who had been quiet and reserve up until this moment, drunkenly offers, “A vibrator vibrates, and a dildo is like a real dick.” All the attendees erupt into laughter, and the sales rep then goes on to educate the women about all the different types of dildos and vibrators she has to sell to them.

Eventually, all the “pocket-rockets” are passed around the circle. The sales rep then introduces the party to the “bullet” style vibrators. She begins with the classic “bullet” that is silver and like a small vibrating egg and then showcases “bullet” vibrators that are encased silicone animal characters. They have names like, “humming bird”, “this lil’ piggy”, and “pearl butterfly”.



Figure 36 Vibrator & Dildo Passed Around Circle

“Pocket-rocket” by “pocket-rocket” and “bullet” by “bullet”, the women pass the gadgets around the circle. By this point everyone is playing with (shopping) the many sexy gadgets and the sounds reverberate against one another. Buzzzzzzzzzz... Buzzzzzzzzzz- Whip-Whip, Buzz-Whip-Buzz-Whip, Buzz-Buzz-Buzzzzzzzz... all the vibrators hum. The attendees are intoxicated and some even hold the vibrators up to their nose tips to gage the intensity of the vibration. As per the sales representative, a woman’s nose-tip is the second most sensitive organ that is comparable to the clitoris.



Figure 37 Nose Sensitivity Gage

The sales representative only has 3 formal dildos to showcase at the party. Those three all come in three sizes (small, medium, and large) and are the standard silicone dildo. The small dildo is called “Booty-Call” and doubles as an anal toy. The medium dildo is called, “Mr. Reliable” and attaches to hard surfaces like a chair seat, tub floor, or shower wall. The sales representative then opts to actually demonstrate how the dildo is

attachable and stick it to a nearby door. The women giggle and some even make note on the order forms to get a “Mr. Reliable”. The large dildo is named, “Who’s Your Daddy” and is a 10 inch dong that has a 2.5 inch girth. Some of circle of intoxicated women are daunted or disturbed by the sheer size of the large dildo. The sales rep then goes over the prices and color options for each of the dildos and one of the women yells out, “I’ll take one of those, “Who’s Ya’ Daddys!” Then the women sitting next to her, her sister, looks at her and says, “You wish you could take a “Who’s Ya’ Daddy.” All the women, including the sales representative, erupt in raunchy laughter.



Figure 38 Rabbit-Style Dual-Action Vibrator

Next, the sales representative introduces the larger and more intense dual-action vibrators. These are the most expensive of all the toys, but the attendees don’t care about prices at this point in the party. At this point in the party, they attendees are fixated on refilling their cocktails and getting their hands on the gigantic “Battery Operated Boyfriend” dual-action vibrator that requires four AA batteries for operation. These larger dual-action vibrators are much louder than the “pocket rocket” and “bullet” model vibrators that went around the circle earlier. Though the sales rep has 12 more dual-action vibrators to showcase, some attendees are still struggling and clinging on to the idea of acting ladylike. These women typically struggle the most with this part of the sales presentation and overall sex-toy party experience. Some attendees act “grossed out” by

the gigantic dual-action “Battery Operated Boyfriend” vibrator. They literally pass on handling or playing with it (vibrator) in the circle pass around ritual of a sex-toy party. For every attendee who still acts uncomfortable (prudish) at this phase of the party, there are ramifications. To still be uncomfortable, is rather deviant behavior in sex-toy party culture. She is labeled by other party attendees, the hostess, and the sales representative, as a prude. Fellow party attendees feel like she thinks she is above them and/or this party. The circle is broken so to speak. All the same while, the hostess and sales representative will label her as “cheap”, and not spending a dime in the private sales room. At sex-toy parties the ideology is be free about sexuality. It’s a place to be free and open to trying new things.



Figure 39 Passing Dual-Action Toys in Circle

The sales presentation is almost finished. The sales rep still has 10 different dual-action vibrators to showcase. She’s not worried about the now unruly party, as much as she is concerned about making money at the party. Some of the attendees are too drunk to know which way is up. Some of the attendees have left the presentation and are in the kitchen area doing more Jell-O shots. The sale rep begins to beg the women to remain in

the seats and to participate in the rest of the presentation. The women who are well experienced in the sex-toy parties have left the presentation area. They already know what they're buying in the back room. For the women who are still sitting in the circle, it is time to broach the subject of anal sex.

After demonstrating the first 5 dual-action vibrators and sending them around the circle, the sales rep takes the "King Tut" dual-action vibrator and bends it to the side. She then turns it on and the women erupt in cheers and laughter. The sales rep then bends and twists three more dual-action vibrators, turns them on, and stands them upright on the table. The sounds of all the 3 to 4 AA battery vibrators are loud. The party has come to fevered pitch and the sales rep just wants to complete the remainder of sales presentation. That said, she also needs to spike the sales tactics to assure the party is successful for her financially. She opts to tell the women that any of the dual-action vibrators can double as double penetration toys. One of the women asks, "What do you mean by double penetration?" The sales rep then patiently explains, "Double penetration is when you have sex vaginally and anally." She then decides to break out all the anal sex play merchandise and showcases it to the circle of intoxicated women. She wanted to wait until she was in the middle of the heavier toys before she threw anal at them. She then tells the women about the anal sex gel that has to sell as well as the anal beads in various sizes and colors. More than half the women still seated in the circle passed on handling (shopping) the anal beads. The women who did handle (touch) the anal merchandise, held it out away from them as they passed it around. Out in the party sales presentation, the attendees are extremely illusive about their anal sex practices. However some of the women make note of the anal sex gels on their order forms.



Figure 40 Sales Rep Showcasing Triple-Action Vibrator

The sex-toy party is a space of women bonding through their sexual practices. Women really get to know each other at sex-toy parties, as the party sales presentation alone, is a moment that tests the social character of attendees. By the end of this third phase, and the sale presentation, the attendees are told to fill out their orders and wait in line to actually go into a private room to purchase their sexy merchandise. Many of the attendees are in the DWI zone and just need to drink water and eat to sober up. These women are the ones who drank heavily at the beginning of the party. These are the women who drink for sport, and these are usually the women that sex-toy party regulars. They been to a party or two, caught up in circle of friends' sex-toy parties. They are just there to get drunk, and buy a new (better) vibrator. They volunteer to go last in line to the private shopping room. They then have time to return to kitchen, eat some dips, and sober up. None of the attendees are sober enough to remember the names and other details of the items they've been introduced to. It's all big blur, a memory tornado of creams, gels, dildos, and vibrators.



Figure 41 After Sales-Presentation Ends

Phase Four: Private Sales Room & Shopping

The sales room is a required space where the party attendees go to purchase the merchandise at a sex-toy party. The hostess is informed that she needs to have a private sales room that is separate from the party sales presentation space when she books her party. In this room, the sales representative wears many hats. However, she is primarily a sales woman. In this room, she has to make the magic happen. She has to “add-on” and “up-sell” to assure a decent profit from the party. On average sex-toy party sales representatives walk away from a party with a 20% profit. So, if the party is a \$1000 party, after the cost for the hostess gifts and game and door prizes, she’ll clear \$200 from the party. With all the attendees intoxicated, she has her work cut for her. Secondly, the sales representative plays the role of the sex therapist and gynecologist. She has to be adept in handling drunken women psychologically and physically. Mostly, the sales representative has to remain engaged in her work. There is a point, in sex-toy sales, that the “sex-toys” become mere merchandise. Mere merchandise that is inherently void of any excitement, embarrassment, or even arousal. The sales representative grows bored (or numb) by the business dimensions of sex-toy sales.



Figure 42 Sex-Toys as Inventory

In the private sales room, the sales representative is bombarded with questions about everything from items she showcased in the sales presentation, to how to improve attendee's oral sex skills. She is bombarded with very personal and private questions about things like double-penetration intercourse, bondage, and spanking. She has to know everything about the merchandise. She even has to know chemical compounds, and all the intricacies of water vs. oil based personal lubricants. Mostly, she can't judge women and she just wants to make a decent profit off the party. After a loud, drunken, and raunchy sex-toy party, the sales representative is intoxicated. However, she must straiten up and operate the calculator and credit card machines correctly. Her math and accountancy skills must be sharp. If there is a mistake, it comes out of her profit. She is at once, a little too tipsy, and yet excited to make some money. She needs readies the private sales room as to re-merchandise the products and toys she had previously showcased in the sales presentation.



Figure 43 Male Masturbator (add-on sale)

She must add-on sell to assure a greater profit. While some sales representatives are wealthy (and blessed) enough to charge her husband's credit card with her sex-toy business expenditures, most sales representatives were living party to party. They have to pay for everything: opaque merchandise bags, door & hostess prizes, showcase merchandise, shipping & handling on all merchandise, cotton swabs, moist hand wipes, a credit card machine, slips, and authorizations, gas (mileage) to parties, and tubs, boxes, and trunks in which to tug, lug, and schlep around to parties, or "work." She has to up-sell items just to cover the investment of the new merchandise she bought for the party: a new dual-action vibrator, and 3 new silicone jelly-like squishy male masturbators. The male masturbators are great to take home to male husbands, boyfriends, and lovers. What's more, the masturbators are on a seller's discount at \$10 a piece. The party attendees read that they are \$25 in the sales catalog.

Finally, the sales room is ready and every thing is in place. One by one the party attendees are lined up outside the private sales room. They have everything they need to go into the back room and buy some new sex-toys. The sales representative has the first

woman, sit down and complete her order form with whatever credit card information needed. The attendee is intoxicated and can't remember half the stuff that was showcased during the sales presentation. The sales representative (consultant) needs a minute or two as well. Both women grab a catalog and began the ordering process. Some of the merchandise in the catalog, the sales rep has in the room. Some of the merchandise needs to be ordered from the national distribution center, or "corporate" The sales rep tells the attendee that she has: the watermelon nipple balm, the pear & clove scented body spray, the pomegranate- vanilla powdery bed sheet spray in ocean scent, one "last" bottle of the pheromone infused perfume, and a "Mr. Reliable".

The sales representative tell her she needs to wait one week for her other items to come in. She would have to wait for the "Battery Operated Boyfriend" and for the battery operated "Sugar Pie" c-ring (cock-ring) she ordered. The sales representative then offers to mail her "back ordered" items to her home address. The attendee does not want the remaining items mailed to her home address. She then confides in the sales representative that she's embarrassed to receive the items at home with her kids and husband. She plans to retrieve her "back order" from the party hostess' address. The sales representative, by this point, is just happy that she sold nearly \$250 worth of sex-toys.

Phase Five: After the Party

After sex-toy parties, attendees must first sober up and then leave the party home. Many of the attendees have formed friendship and exchanged phone numbers. Three of the women attendees had scheduled their individual parties in coming weekends and they invited each other to their prospective parties. Women bond and form friendships over the course of sex-toy party because women are put on trial, so to speak, through the party

experience. A kind of “you’re from my tribe” friendship is formed at the very least. After the shopping experience is the private room, women leave the party without even knowing what each other have bought. The sales representative packages everything in opaque bags. Somehow the women attendees bond through and during the sales presentation. Thus the party becomes a rite of passage or *communitas* (Turner, 1976).

At the very least, after the party ends, in Phase Five, women construct new modes of behavior. They alter their constructions of sexuality. Women experience authentic self-love, they either begins using sex-toys for the first time in their lives, or they use the new toys they bought at the party and masturbate more often. Some women reported, having to buy batteries like one buys sugar, eggs, and bread. At sex-toy parties, whether married or single, women experience sexual liberations. They are empowered by the sex-toy party experience because just talking openly about sex can be very liberating. Women make lasting relationships with other women as well. Women’s partners, lover, boyfriends, and husband all enjoy knowing that their woman has spent the evening attending a sex-toy party. Women return from sex-toy parties with all kinds of new ideas, practices, and gadgets to enhance their sex lives. However, like children with new toys for Christmas, by Valentine’s Day, women grow bored with their new toys. They want new ones and are looking forward to next sex-toy party as an opportunity to acquire them.

Notes from the Field: Participant-Observations

I attended my first sex-toy party at the age of 27. A friend mailed me an invitation, and I attended. I went into that first party experience just attending because I was invited, and it was a very close friend who had invited me. At that time, even in the private sales room, I was not keen on the idea of masturbation. I bought a dildo, some sexy dice game, and a bottle of bath oil. I bought the dildo because purchasing sex-toys was the *modus operandi* at the party. I never intended on using it because I thought masturbation was only for lonely desperate women. Also, at that time, I was involved in a sexual relationship, and really didn't *need* to masturbate. It wasn't until I was 33 that I was invited to another sex-toy party. A lot changed in 5 years that past since my first sex-toy party. The second sex-toy party experience is what this project was inspired by.

For two years I conducted Participant Observation at in-home female-only sex-toy parties. Initially, I intended to observe parties just in the city, but eventually wound up all over the metropolitan area of St. Louis. I attended parties as a sales representative, and of all the female types in sex-toy party culture, I am most comfortable with the culture from this perspective. There are some noteworthy and interesting features in the interviews (next chapter) however what I participated in and observed during the parties is most noteworthy. From the start, it is paramount to mention that I was most inspired by the many sales representative that I crossed paths with in the field. These women are courageous, vivacious, and lovely human beings who are real feminist. They mean what they say, and say what they meant.

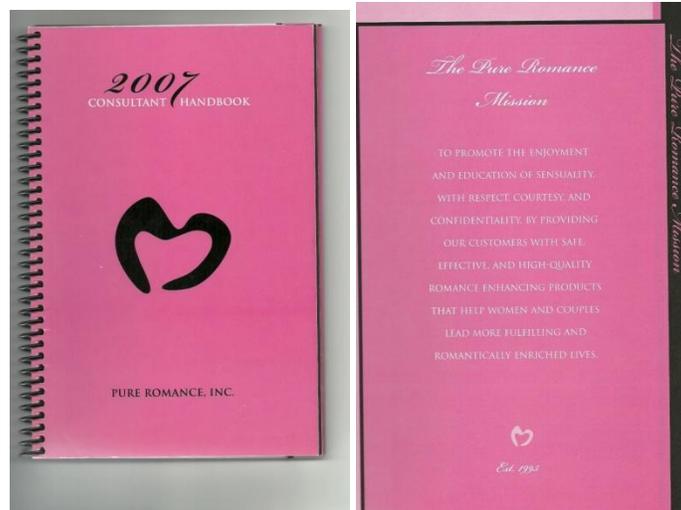


Figure 44 Pure Romance Handbook & Mission Statement

When I first began consulting at the parties, I was overwhelmed with the business dimensions of being a sales representative. There is a lot that goes into it. There is the legal stuff like obtaining sale permits from the City and State, and then the financially scraping up \$400 for the starter kit, and then there was the having to learn everything about the merchandise. I am a woman who is adept in communicating ideas to people. Having a professional background in sales, I can sell eyeglasses to a blind man. Having worked in restaurants for 10 years, I also know how to throw a party. However, the sex-toy party sales business wore me out, in many ways. It was really hard work, even though all the sales companies claim that you can “party while you work”.

Well, I started off partying while I worked, but after I miss calculated shipping and handling costs, and had to pay for them out of my profit, I immediately stopped partying while I worked. Additionally, having the physical space to store a decent sized inventory was difficult. Additionally, the shipping of merchandise (vibrators) was overwhelming (embarrassing), as the UPS delivery men would always be “tongue and cheek” when I signed for the many packages at the door. They knew what was in all the

medium sized boxes and they knew exactly where it came from. Sometimes I had UPS deliveries 3 times a week. Another business responsibility that I found extremely overwhelming was the ordering of merchandise the morning after the parties. It was very stressful to have another email account to stay on top of. It was stressful to have all the paper materials of running a business also. I didn't like having the customer's credit card information in my house. Furthermore, it was very difficult to get women to schedule parties in St. Louis. People were financially broke, as the economy has suffered over the past few years. Women didn't have the money to host a party, but some of them still wanted to spend money on sex-toys. Like the alcohol, cigarette, gambling businesses, the sex-toy business has not suffered as much as others in the tormented economy. As for the profit from the parties, my profits paid for the overall research project. Luckily, I was able to maintain my sex-toy party business for two years.

While I hated physically schlepping about St. Louis with my trunk full of sex-toy party stuff, I did love attending the parties. They became a form of socialization, as I formed friendships with some of the women that I met at the parties, in the field. Overall, I attended over 20 parties over the 2 years. I had the fortune of attending an African-American Lesbian party and a European-American Bisexual party. However, the majority of the parties were blended in terms of ethnicity and class. That said, I attended parties of all social classes. Some parties I attended were in homes that were so filthy and dusty, that I had an allergic reaction. These homes usually didn't serve more than a store-bought veggie dip and cans of beer. At the same time, some parties were so extravagant, that I felt dirty merely trying to pedal things like fuzzy hand cuffs and anal plugs. Some hostesses went nowhere for their parties, while others went overboard. I was amazed at

how much the hostesses went through to really make the experience a party. A party where women can let loose about and be loud about taboo things like their ménage a trios and bondage fantasies.

From the perspective of a sale-representative, I was shocked at how much women drank at the parties I attended. They were out to get ‘wasted’ and many women wanted to prove their sexual liberation by acting like men. These masculine drunken and disorderly women often became party regulars. For these women, the sex-toy party was a space to be aggressive and loud about what they like to do in bed. The sex-toy parties were a space for women to claim their right to an authentic orgasm. There were times when I had to become aggressive, and act like a man myself, just to complete the sales presentation. During those parties, it was nearly impossible to keep order in a living room full of intoxicated and horny women. All the same while, some women at the parties sat quietly during the sales presentation, and then let loose in the private sales room. Some of the most amazing conversations at sex-toy parties happened in the private sales room, where customers bombarded me with a wide array of sexual questions. I never thought I would become a sex therapist, a gynecologist, and psychologist in the field. Some of these conversations were the most haunting in retrospect. Sometime I was in the TMI zone...too much information, about women’s sexual lives.



Figure 45 Seasonal Sales Newsletter/Magazine

Admitting to being a sex-toy sales-representative to men, when I was single in the field, was very interesting as well. Suddenly that fact (that I sold sex-toys) made me more attractive somehow. Men I dated always expected me to be as gregarious, charming, and adventurous in bed, as I was in my diatribe at the parties, about the significance and urgency of women masturbating and self-loving. I've even had a few of the women from parties set me up on blind dates with their brothers and cousins. They would call me to order products, and then let me know they had, "someone who'd like to meet you." As for my own sex life, after a while I grew bored or 'turned off' of sex-toys... and all that that implies.

Overtime, the sex-toys became mere inventory, product, or merchandise. The sales presentations became corny and insincere after a while as well. Where other sales representatives welcomed having a party to do every weekend, I began to cringe over my party calendar. Not only was I bored and frustrated with the business dimensions of the sex-toy party sales, I was also frustrated with how expensive all the items were. I felt guilty about having to charge poor women the \$5 shipping fee when they just ordered a

candle for \$7. The rules of the company I worked with were that everyone, regardless of the total amount of purchase, had to pay shipping fees. I also questioned my role in perpetuating a heteronormative upper-class version of sexuality. The merchandise that I sold to women was rather costly. Sometimes, the merchandise was more expensive than if they were to buy the items in a public store. I often felt guilty about being aggressive, especially in the private room sale. I'm sure most of the women I sold merchandise to, woke up in the morning with a hangover, and a bad case of price tag shock.



Figure 46 Holiday Card for Consultants

However, in the field, I was most struck by how much women trusted me, as the sales representative. At times it was rather heavy to have women tell me things about their sexual practices. Sexual practices that they wouldn't even tell their husbands, boyfriends, lovers, sisters, or friends. There's a particular confidentiality in the relationship between a sex-toy sales representative and her customer. All I can say is that women in St. Louis are many things...in bed. There were many women who sat quietly detached through out the entire sales presentation, and then get into the private sales

room, and let it all hang out. I regularly struggled with remaining objective (and professional) when some quiet woman ordered 3 tubes of “anal ease” and an enormous anal sex plug. I regularly struggled with not reacting to (and laughing at) size-20 women who wanted to order size-12 sheer lingerie sets. I did however enjoy teaching women about their rights to authentic sexual pleasure and orgasms. I also enjoyed when my return customers would call and re-order a vibrator on which they had worn out the motors, and needed replacements. Many of my customers discovered and became enthusiasts of masturbation with sex-toys, just as I had at my second sex-toy party. I am proud to be a part of this newer Sex-Positive Feminism. At the parties, women became more aware of their bodies, their sex organs, and they learned exactly where their clitoris and g-spot zones are located. Moreover, women really got into self-pleasuring and self-loving. From my view, that’s what Feminism is all about. It starts with a woman claiming her sexual rights and claiming her sexual citizenship. It starts with a woman really learning to love herself.

Chapter 5: Cadillac Margaritas & Crotchless Panties: The Interviews

It's Sunday morning, the morning after a rowdy Saturday night sex-toy party at Carol's house. Monica, a sex-toy party sales representative, awakens to realize that she may be more than just a little hungover from last night's brouhaha. As she attempts to combat an ensuing headache, she realizes that she needs to submit the party order and authorize the credit card purchases from last night's party. Both tasks need to be completed before 12pm; it is now 11:00am. Monica takes a quick shower and makes a pot of strong coffee. She then heads out to the car to retrieve the plastic crates and boxes that are her personal sales and display kit. The plastics crates and boxes are heavy to schlep around, and they are chalk full of sex-toy party stuff. Monica pulls it together, and is most motivated to tally up the sales to realize the profits from the party last night. As Monica goes through her inventory of party stuff, she notices that only one woman chose a chocolate brown colored penis eraser pencil topper. There weren't any African-American women at Carol's party last night. Who chose a chocolate colored penis eraser? She then enters the required information into the business website and orders all the merchandise from the party sales. Battling beyond the hangover, popping a couple of ibuprofens, and clutching her cup of strong coffee, she tallies up all the merchandise sold. She will need to order, 15 Mechanical Lovers, 7 Slap Its, 5 glass dildos, 3 medium sized silicone hard surface-attachable butt plugs, 7 neon- pink Booty Calls, and 12 'Mr. Reliable', a clear transparent dual-action vibrator that is strategically filled with silver beads in sections. Monica's excited that she sold a lot of lingerie as well. She had to order 2 nurses costumes, 2 maid inspired costumes, 3 schoolgirls inspired costumes, and one classic baby doll style set. That makes 8 ultra-sexy and ultra-sheer lingerie sets. Monica has done well to sell a large amount of higher priced items. Next Monica tallies the lower priced items and hopes for equally profitable sales totals. She tallies up the creams, oils, and other lighter items like the bedroom rose petals and sexy games. Many of the women ordered sexy massage oils and sexy pheromone infused bubble baths and candles. Many of the women ordered the eatable items for both oral sex and body massage. Monica needs to order 18 cotton-candy flavored pouches of eatable 'Pop Rocks' like candy, 12 sets of sugary tropical fruit flavored 'Pixi-Stix' like sweet powdery candy, and 4 lavender-vanilla beginners' bondage sets. Jennifer figures that the average sales were \$50 per attendee. If the ladies didn't buy full-blown vibrators, they bought creams and candles. Monica is overjoyed to learn that she profited \$500 dollars from last night's party, and decides to order merchandise for the party she has scheduled at Angela's next weekend. Monica needs to order some door prizes for the attendees, then there are the hostess gifts, and she will need to order a couple of new items, just to spruce up the sales presentation at Angela's party. She'll need to order some more opaque small product bags, and she'll need to order some more peach colored penis erasers...not the chocolate brown ones. Though the party at Carol's profited \$500, Monica ponders why she didn't make more money...

The majority of the research data in this project was collected through participant observations at sex-toy parties in the greater St. Louis area. For a portion of the field research, I worked as a sex-toy party sales-representative. Then for the other half of the fieldwork experience, I attended sex-toy parties as a guest. In both research roles, I was forthcoming with my true agenda in attending the parties. Some of the women at the parties were proud of their sexuality, and literally volunteer to be interviewed. I think my own gender and sexuality performances had much to do with how well I was received in the field. A lot of the women at the parties were impressed with the overall creativity of this ethnographical project. Many of the women agreed that there was something magical and noteworthy that happens at sex-toy parties. As women became more and more intoxicated at the parties, they became more and more open to being dramatic, and at times almost too expressive, as they seemed to ‘ham it up’ in front of me. Some women even tried to fight for my attention, and did rather lewd things like imitating a ‘blow job’ on the vibrators, and actually erecting (and demonstrating) the portable stripper pole I had as part of my sales presentation display kit.

While in the field, sometimes I brought my camera and took photos at parties, and sometimes I didn’t. The presence of the camera and the mere idea of being recorded in photos altered the behavior of the party attendees. Having attended a fair share of sex-toy parties in the pre-dissertation phase, and in my personal life, I knew the presence of cameras and other intrusive data collection equipment, such as video cameras, would disrupt the overall flow and magic that happens in these sexy female moments and spaces. Mostly, I didn’t want party attendees to ‘freak out’ or notice I was recording any of their drunken and outlandish sexual behaviors. This is especially the case as women in

St. Louis are not the most open and expressive about their sexualities. Some women in St. Louis struggle with even attending a sex-toy party. Of the courageous sisters, cousins, neighbors, friends, nieces, wives, girlfriends, and co-workers that actually attended the parties, they are the ones who made the magic happen.

The field experience was empowering in a multitude of ways. Simply understood, the women I met in the field were interesting, powerful, and lovely. I was personally inspired by many of the women: party attendees, hostesses, and sales representatives, through the entire research experience. These interesting, powerful, and lovely women even taught me a thing or two about my own sexual practices and ideologies. In the field, at sex-toy parties, while I actively worked to incite spiritual, intellectual, and sexual liberations in these women, they passively incited spiritual, intellectual, sexual liberations in me. All the women mentioned in this project, *Jennifer, Lexi, Christine, Monica, Carol, Suzanne, and Angela*, were all given pseudonym names. However, these women represent every woman who attends a sex-toy party. These women are all characters (or personalities) in sex-toy party culture: the sales representatives, the party hostesses, and the party attendees.

By submersing myself in the sex-toy party cultural space, I gained a better sense of the atmosphere of the parties, the discourse among party attendees, sales techniques used by representatives, and overall dynamics of the popular culture event. Participant observation enabled me to get a deeper sense of women's sex-toy parties, and then use this knowledge to address Feminist questions about sexual liberations, consumption, and identity. As for the data collected through interviews, I had far more informal conversations with women, than formal structured interviews. Some of the informal

conversation happened as women were waiting to go into the private sales room and buy their products. Some of the informal interviews happened while we were waiting in line for the bathroom after the sales presentation ended. Some of the interviews were over the phone as well. This was especially the case with phone conversations that I wanted to better understand and pinpoint how women’s lives were profoundly impacted by the experience of a sex-toy party. In short, I wanted to understand what they had been ‘up to’ since the party. I wanted to know if they became self-diagnosed masturbation addicts.

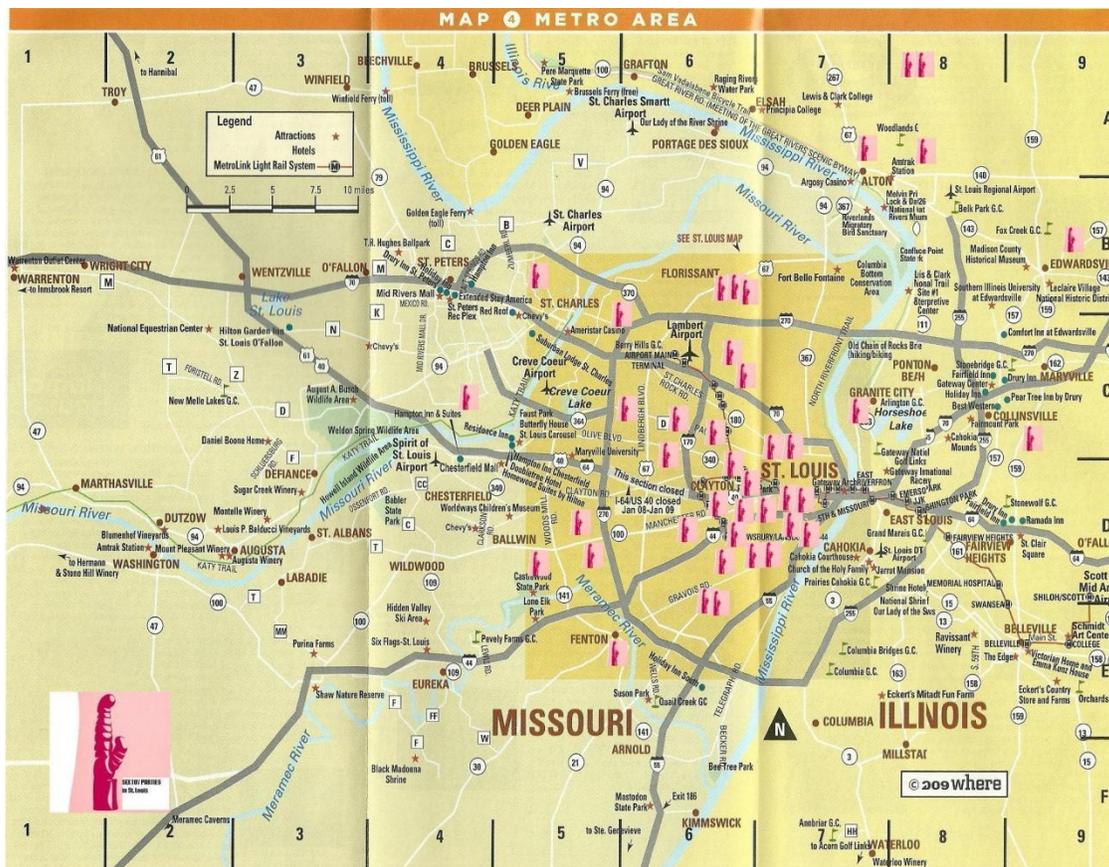


Figure 47 Map of Parties in St. Louis Area

Twice, I had the fortune of conducting a focus group interview with women at the end of party sales presentations. These two groups were about 15 women each. Since women at parties are completely ‘wasted’ by the end of the sales presentation,

many of the women in these groups were more invested in eating food to sober up, using the restroom, and simply leaving the party. However their group dynamic was extremely interesting and noteworthy. Intoxicated women at the end of a sex-toy party have been aggressively performing (expressing) sexuality for at least 2 hours. By the end of a party, they are accustomed to being raucous, aggressive, and kinky about their sexualities. However, when I finally got all the women to sit and listen to the interview questions, usually at least one woman took the lead. Somehow, they sobered up, and instantly became an expert on sex-toy parties. Women in groups are empowered by each other's presence. The proverbial "power in numbers" fits appropriately here. Women at parties are surrounded by other women.

For many women the event of a sex-toy party is the first time they learn about all kinds of sexual material. A women's first sex-toy party experience is similar to a woman losing her virginity, or "popping her cherry", according to "Jill" a sex-toy party enthusiast, focus group interviewee. Women at sex-toy parties learn exactly where their clitorises and g-spots are located. Women at parties also learn how to have an authentic orgasm, and how to "stop faking it." Women in the 2 focus group interviews spoke to how the parties changed their sex lives. Women in both interviews spoke about becoming "hooked" on the parties, just because the parties are so fun and are female-only. Many of the women in both group interviews, described the 4 hours of a sex-toy party as a vacation or getaway where women "can be themselves."

Another interesting group dynamic was how the women wanted to showcase (brag about) what they bought in the private sales room. The women were competitive about who spent the most money. They were competitive about the types of merchandise

they bought as well. In the first focus group interview, one woman bought a sex swing and bragged about it when she exited the private sales room. She wanted to share so much, that she pulled it out of the box, and proceeded to demonstrate how it worked. She wanted everyone at the party to know that she and her husband had money, and that they had rather creative and robust sex lives. Another woman, during the interview, appeared to be bragging about (or showing off) the sheer size of the dual-action vibrator she had just bought. Other intriguing statements made during the 2 group interview were about how much the women masturbate after attending a party. A few of the women claimed to have become “addicted to masturbation”, according to “Carla”, a woman who had been to 3 previous sex-toy parties. The women at the party laughed about “going at it” for 2 hours at times and having multiple and dual orgasms.

As for the formal interviews conducted in the field, I conducted sexual oral history interviews, in which I asked women about their first authentic orgasms and their overall masturbatory histories. In both informal and formal interview formats, I asked umbrella questions pertaining to the following sets of ideas:

1. *Sex-Toy Parties as social taboo in St. Louis? Why is the attendance at the parties always half of the actual women invited?*
2. *Sex-Toy Party as a positive experience for women? Why?*
3. *Masturbation & Orgasms (Sexual Oral Histories) When and why do women masturbate? Why is there a social stigma to masturbation for women? Why do some women fake orgasms? Do women have authentic orgasms?*
4. *Sex-Toy Party as liberating for women? Why?*
5. *Consumption: How much are women spending at the party? What are they buying at sex-toy parties? Why are they buying what they buy at the parties? Do these women identify as sexually liberated? Do they actually use all the merchandise they buy at the parties?*

Sex-Toy Parties as taboo...

At sex-toy parties in St. Louis, it was common to attend a party in which the hostess is disappointed in the turn-out, or number of attendees. As a sales representative, I wondered why women would go through the trouble to RSVP, but then not show up at a sex-toy party.

Sometimes women were even supposed to bring a dip or plastic cups for the party, and they wouldn't show up. When someone pulls a

no-show at a sex-toy party, the party hostess is only frustrated and embarrassed. She's frustrated because she spent the entire week before preparing for party, spent too much on food and drinks for the party, and understands that she won't have as much on her hostess discount because not enough attended the event. Mostly she's embarrassed because the sales representative is disappointed as well. She's also embarrassed because whoever didn't show-up and bring the buffalo-chicken dip ruined her party food spread. Some women don't attend a sex-toy party because they are simply uncomfortable with the idea of sitting around with a bunch of women playing with and trying on new sex behaviors and beliefs. Nowadays everyone blames everything on the bad economy. Party hostess were always first to blame the economy for the low attendance parties. I however though it had to with women in St. Louis not being open to being open about their sexualities.



Voices...

"I think people are afraid of what happens at the parties." - "Lori"

"People don't like talking about sex out in public." - "Chrissy"

"People are broke with the bad economy." - "Nicole"



To be sexually aggressive, and attend party dedicated to vibrators (and alcohol) is not decent ladylike behavior in provincial conservative St. Louis. In the field, it was common to have party hostesses complain about party attendance. Many claimed they invited the likes of 40 women, and by time the sales presentation began, there were just 20 (or less) attendees. Simply understood, women in St. Louis were more comfortable with going to *Pampered Chef* or *Tupperware* parties. It seemed that exactly half the women invited, actually attended the parties. The women who actually attended the parties were the women who were of the most significant. One party attendee, “Beth” claimed that, “some women don’t want to admit that they are horny and lonely enough to masturbate with vibrator.” In St. Louis, for some women, being aggressive, excited, and loud about one’s sexual practices is not only inappropriate, but also indecent. In St. Louis, decent women simply don’t speak about sex. These are the decent women who make it taboo to attend a sex-toy party. The mere idea of women sitting around, getting drunk, and shopping sex-toys is “slutty” and “skanky”.

Why and how are sex-toy parties significant?

The sex-toy party experience is significant to women for many reasons. Primarily, the parties are spaces where women can be who they are. Candor and audacity are essential features of the cultural space and social event of a sex-toy party. Candor and audacity are only encouraged. That understood, at sex-toy parties, women get really drunk, and are really loud about what they favor (and do) in bed. Clearly, the social space of a sex-toy party is a space where a woman can take a stand for and claim her sexual citizenship. As female-only spaces, these parties are perhaps the most comfortable space for a woman to explore her sexuality in the company of her sisters.

The sex-toy party is a space where a woman can admit to and discuss her sexual dysfunctions.

The sex-toy party is a social space where women can ask questions about subjects like anal sex, vaginal revitalization, and other taboo subjects

like Bondage Discipline Sadism Masochism or BDSM. Many of the attendees I spoke with

named the camaraderie shared by women as the most positive aspect of the party. There's a

sisterhood that emerges in the social space of a sex-toy party. Even after the parties ended, many women formed friendships. Some of the women

got so enmeshed in their social circles after a

party, they found themselves mired in cycle of parties that occurred almost every weekend.

Many women claimed to be going to another attendee's party in hopes of "partying together" again. In the field, being mired in a cycle of

parties was a good thing. One party always led

to another. I formed friendships and did my share of "partying together." Not for

nothing, there's something magical about getting a group of women together to eat, drink, and be sexy.



Voices...

"Once you go to one, you can't stop going to them. I have quite a collection of sex-toys now!" - "Andrea"

"I think women bond because it's just us...a bunch of drunk women." - "Julie"

"It's a place where women can just relax and have good time." - "Gloria"

"It's nicer to buy a vibrator here, than at a sex toy shop. Plus, only you and the rep know what you bought. There's no one to judge you." - "Lisa"

"This is my 4th party with this circle of girlfriends. We've all hosted our own parties. You find yourself going to somebody's party almost every other weekend." - Charla"



Almost all the women I spoke with said that the sex-toy party is a safer space in which to shop for and purchase sex-toy and sex merchandise. They claimed the sensual experience of actually touching, smelling, tasting, feeling, and hearing the merchandise enhances the shopping experience for women. One attendee “Lexi” said, “The format of the sales presentation part is great because you get to try all the stuff.” Other women also complained about not having the same sensual shopping experience in public sex shops. “Christine” an attendee said, “You can’t open the packing up at adult toy stores and play with the toys like you can at the parties.” She goes on to exclaim, “Who wants to drop \$60 bucks on a vibrator that you can’t touch.” The sales format of an in-home sex-toy party is more comfortable for women attendees also because they’re in the company of other women when they shop the merchandise. Women bond just because they’re sitting in a circle, and literally shopping. Then, in the private sales room, women bond with the sales representative, shop, and purchase. As stated earlier, the sales representative’s least prioritized role is that of the saleswoman. With the in-home party shopping (and purchasing) experience, women attendees not only obtain new sex-toys, but they also gain a friend/personal sex consultant.



Figure 48 Public Sex-Toy Spaces

While in the field, I visited adult toy stores that were public spaces in hopes of *feeling* the space as compared to an in-home sex-toy party shopping space. Several

women I spoke with claim to have similar experiences in public shops. Some of which claimed the public stores are more gear towards men. One woman complained that the store clerk watched her on the security camera, as if she were going to steal something. She didn't like "being watched" while she shopped for a new vibrator. Another woman who I asked about the public sex shop experience said she felt like the store clerk was trying to "come on to her" when she asked a question about a vibrator she wanted to purchase. The in-home parties offer women a space exclusively for asking questions and make intentional statements about sexuality. Not only do women go through the sales presentation experience, but they also have the one-on-one experience of shopping in the private room with the sales representative. Even after the party is over, the sales representative is available to her customers for "cold orders" over the phone. "Cold orders" are purchases or business transactions that happen without a party, over the phone. Like other important consultants a woman needs, legal, medical, nowadays women have sex-toy consultants available to them 24/7 on the internet, via the sales rep's website, or on speed dial, via cell phone.



Voices...

"I had my first real orgasm at age 16 using the Water Pick (shower head). I saw it in an R-rated movie and decided to try it. If my parents only knew how many hours I wasted "taking a shower." - "Charla"

"I never knew what a real orgasm was like. I just never had one before I got married and then now with my husband, sometimes, I have to fake it just to get him to cum and get off of me." - "Allie"

"We were out of town in Chicago and we all bought a vibrator in a store there. We had a group of 5 of us women and we just decided to all go in together so that we wouldn't be embarrassed. After that I started masturbating." - "Becky"



Consumption...

Here I wanted to understand the motivations behind what, why, and when women purchase sex-toy merchandise at the parties. As stated earlier, even though the economy was dismal, women still spent a noteworthy amount of money on sex-toy merchandise at the parties. The majority of women charged their purchases. It was common to have women customers spend over \$100 at the parties in which I was the sales representative. While it was customary to purchase at least one item at the parties, there were women who took full advantage of the private shopping experience of an in-home sex-toy party. At times it seemed like women bought more at the parties because it was simply more convenient to shop and purchase at the parties.

Many women attended the parties because they knew they could buy sex-toy merchandise there.

Almost like a grocery store where women understand

and can count on purchasing fresh produce, at sex-toy parties, the attendees understood and could count on purchasing dildos and vibrators. Almost all attendees appreciated the party sales format in which they could shop and try the merchandise. I believe the option



Voices...

"I just feel more comfortable about buying sex-toys at the parties rather than in a sex-shop."
- "Christa"

"I like being able to try them out before I drop some serious cash on them. That is a main reason why I buy my toys at the party."
- Whitney"

"I like not having my husband there to interfere with what I want to buy. We have gone together to buy sex-toys at shops, but he's always there trying to make a point." - "Tory"

"I like having the sales-rep there to explain how everything works. It's like having you own sex-counselor to ask questions about the toys." - "Kara"

"I was so horny after the last party that I just wanted to go home and use my new vibrator that I bought at the party." - "Missy"

of trying the merchandise (seeing and touching items) with their hands (tactile) more sensual. The taste, sound, feel, vision, touch aspects...

When women purchased sex-toys at the parties, they were not only consuming sexy merchandise, but also they made statements about their sexual ideologies and liberations. Women at the parties want to appear to be “liberated” and in charge of their sex lives. Many women purchased replacement devices at the parties, as they had worn out the motors on their previously purchased merchandise. These women were not shy about their demands for a replacement device. It times it seemed as if they were bragging about how much they used there toys as to wear out a motor on them. Some women, especially the repeat attendees, claimed to not have used everything thing they had purchased at their previous party. The reasons why ran the gamut of anything from their partners not liking the merchandise to not having time to play with the toys. Some women even claimed to have a sex-toy drawer in their bedrooms chock-full of unused vibrators, dildos, and even handcuffs they had previously bought at parties.

The last and possibly most significant research questions were based on consumption and identity. I wanted to better understand the actions and behaviors of women at sex-toy parties from the perspective of what they actually purchase in the private sales room. What happens during the sales presentation offers no preview or foreshadow of how women behave and consume in the private space of a sales room. Additionally, I wanted to understand if women who purchase sex-toys are more open minded about sex in general. Furthermore, I wanted a way to gage if they were really liberated and standing for their own sexual rights. However, for every positive, or light at the end of the tunnel, there were negatives. These negatives caused me to question things

like: my role as the sexual oppressor (sales representative), and take issue with how expensive it was to run a sex-toy party business.

Sexual Oral Histories

As a method of collecting qualitative research data, the oral history interview technique is used to glean historical information from interviewees about a specific moment in history. This interview method is most useful in that researchers are capable of collecting a more individualized memory about a particular historical event.

Traditionally oral historian researchers ask interviewees questions about major historical events like earthquakes, terrorist attacks, serial crimes, and other more traumatic historical events. For the women in this project, I took on a more positive (lighter) tone in designing my research/interview questions. I argue that the historical events I questioned in interviews are most useful for understanding how women who attended sex-toy parties, historically and socially constructed their notions of gender and sexuality.

During the many chaotic moments of conducting oral history interviews, I battled to not react in a way that would challenge the openness of the interviewee. I battled to only focus on listening to (collecting) what the women had said to me. I had to just sit there and let it (data) all flow out of their mouths. Once I got home from the interviews it became clear that women learn their sexuality (roles and behaviors) through social interaction. It also became clear that for women, social constructions of gender and sexuality start from the moment they are old enough to understand that they are different from their fathers, uncles, and brothers. I then considered my own social sexual history and it dawned on me that I too was a sexual product of my environment, or culture. The difficulty of conducting oral history interviews lies in just letting the interviewee speak.

For the sexual oral history interviews I was most interested in learning about women's experiences in sexuality and how the act of attending a sex-toy party changed their sex-lives. Besides better understanding women's experiences at parties, I want to better understand just how they socially construct their social sexual identities as well. The sexual oral history questions were as follows:

1. How did you learn about sex/sexuality? Loss of virginity?
2. Do masturbate? When did you begin masturbating?
3. Sex Toy Parties? How many attended? What do you think about sex-toy parties?
4. How has attending a sex toy party altered your sexual practices?
5. Do you use everything you purchase at sex toy parties? For how long? Did you buy more?

In opting to conduct oral history interviews in this project, I wanted to have a better understand and compare different women's social construction of sexuality. I thought my own sexual oral history, and wondered how my experience compared to other women's at the sex toy parties. Possibly narcissistic, I wanted to understand my own social construction of sexuality, compared to other women's. The sexual oral history interviews yielded the most intriguing data about women in St. Louis, and how they construct their gender and sexuality roles. In conducting sexual oral histories, I my goal was to better understand how women's sexual behaviors were altered by the sex-toy party experience. I also wanted to learn about their sexual liberations. I needed to understand how and why they felt and believed the way they did about masturbation and faking orgasms.

Masturbation and faking orgasms were central points of contingency at sex-toy parties in St. Louis. Though the sales representative uses the ideas of masturbation and authentic orgasms interchangeably during a sex-toy party sales presentations. “Beverly” explained, “Women aren’t supposed to masturbate.” She then explained how she became “into masturbating”. “I grew up believing that decent women didn’t masturbate. It was some that perverts or sick people did. Then when to my first sex-toy party at the age of 34, I bought a vibrator and started masturbating with it. It’s a totally different experience than with a man.” I was interested in the irony of women’s ideologies around masturbation and how they reconcile (spiritually and psychologically) faking orgasms with their lovers. The sales representative preaches to and teaches women attendees to masturbate (with vibrator) before engaging in sex intercourse with their partners. There’s much to be said about a woman bringing *herself* to a full blown screaming (out loud) orgasm. According to them, women won’t have to fake orgasm with their sexual partners if they take the time to pleasure themselves first. Rhetorically, the sales representatives clearly likened having an authentic (self-induced) orgasm to being free from sexual prison. Somehow, through masturbating to orgasm, women are liberated from the shackles of having to “fake it.”

In the sexual oral history interviews, I was struck by how many women admitted to masturbating (regularly) by the age of 16. Several women claim they masturbated when they were younger, under age 18, just using their hands. Some of the women said that they masturbated when they were younger just to “figure out how it all works down there.” Some women claimed they first started masturbating by using some sort of waterwork (faucet) in their childhood homes. These women claimed they masturbated to

orgasm, at a young age, using a movable (adjustable) shower head apparatus. Some even claim to have masturbated at a young age by just laying on their back, with their legs opened, under the water faucet, in the tub. However, there were a few women, who like me, never thought about masturbation until they attending their first sex-toy party. I, like many women in St. Louis, never classified myself as “desperate” or “lonely” enough to masturbate. Furthermore, as a woman, my sexual pleasure was never a priority. In the way that the act of masturbation is a self-absorbed act which forms a closed circle between the individual and her own body, the field experience can function in similar fashion. When the anthropologist works with an open heart and mind, allowing the senses to operate freely, and erotic place is created between the anthropologist and the space she studies (Kulick & Wilson, 131: 1995).

At sex-toy parties, most women admitted to faking orgasms. For a gamut of reasons, women perform as if they are sexually gratified just to please their partners. I wanted to understand why women feel they have to fake orgasm. I wanted to better understand how women arrived at a sense of self entitlement in regards to their sexual pleasure and orgasm. According to Rachel Maines (1998), the female orgasm does not have direct bearing on male pleasure or reproduction. Therefore, since the female body’s presence, and not her orgasm’s presence, is all that is necessary for procreation, and the man’s recreation, women have not enjoyed, until recently in our history, even a proper claim to orgasmic experience (Maines, 1998:117). Two of the women I interviewed, claimed they only faked orgasms when the sex was so awful, they want it to end. One woman spoke about how she faked orgasm during a couple situations with one-night stands. “Claire” said, “I was just really wasted and wanted to go home and sleep in my

own bed. I just wanted it over.” Then “Tammy” who is married, claimed, “Sometimes I’m just so tired, I just want him to get it over so I can go to sleep.” A couple of the women who “fake it” admitted to “faking it” to make themselves seem more sexually attractive while in the act. For these women, it was if they “faked it” to turn their partners on even more.

Another interesting aspect that emerged from the sexual oral histories was how women constructed their sexual personalities or sexuality generally speaking. In other words, how they learn about sex, sexual behavior, or sexuality. Quite a few women talked about how they learned what sex is through playing “doctor” with little boys when they were young. One party attendee claimed to have learned about sexual intercourse by overhearing her father watching pornographic videos when she was a child. Some of the women talked about learning about “making love”, “doin’ it”, or “having sex” by reading Judy Blume books like *Are You There God, It’s Me Margret* and *Forever*. Most of the women however admitted to “on the job learning”, as to how they learned and constructed their sexualities. In other words, they learned how to “do it” by “makin’ out” with boys in high school,” according to “Angela”. Many women confessed to sneaking and watching R-rated movies on cable television channels like *Cinemax* that televised late-night *Emmanuel* movie marathons, when they were younger.

During the sexual oral history interviews, sometimes the conversations ran away, and it felt like two women just chit-chatting about our sex lives. I never intended to veer too far away from the sex-toy party during our conversations, but sometimes we did. Mostly, I just wanted to understand if the social event of the in-home female-only sex-toy party had impacted their lives as much as it had impacted mine. Women learn their sex

roles through childhood games like “girlfriend/boyfriend” and “playing house.” One of the women I conducted an interview with mentioned that when she played with Barbie dolls as a child, with Ken and Barbie, there was never foreplay. Somehow she just put Ken and Barbie in the same bed but never imagined anything sexual about it.

1. How did you learn about sex/sexuality? Loss of virginity?

Rachel, White, 25, 2 parties: My parents sat us down and told us about ‘the birds and the bees’. I was 12 when I got my period. My mother taught me about my period, but the ‘actual birds and bees’ talk happened when I became more social. My parents sat me down when I was 13 and wanted to go to the mall with my friends. What they didn’t know was that kids were making out at the roller-skating rink when I was 11. I used to see girls sitting in their boyfriend’s laps and kissing on them. I knew what making out was by age 9 really. My babysitter used to sneak her boyfriend over to our house and I saw them making out all the time.

Destiny, Black, 28, 7 parties: I used to hear my parents banging the headboard against the wall all the time as a child. Then when I was 7, I walked in on them doing it in the bathroom one night. My mom was on all fours; over the tub...I thought it was a dream. I just needed to pee. When I was 17, I lost my virginity and figured out exactly what my parents were up to in the bathroom that night. I was the last one of my friends to lose their virginity. I basically did it out of curiosity/peer pressure. I wanted to join the club of my friends who were going crazy over sex. My best friend lost her virginity when she was 13. I just wanted to know what all the hype was about. It wasn’t until fifth time having sex that I actually enjoyed it and got into it.

April, White 30, 2 parties: I was the only girl growing up. I had all brothers. I used to hang out and play with the little girl who was our next-door neighbor. We hung out hardcore from age 9 to about 13. We used to play *sewer tag* and *hide & go seek* with the neighborhood boys. She was always flirting with the neighborhood boys who were older and more sexually advanced. I learned a lot of things about sexuality from her. I used to see her kissing boys when we played *hide & go seek*. The older we got, the less we hung out over the years. Eventually when I was a sophomore in high school, I ran into her while I was waiting for the school bus. She pulled up in a shiny hot sports car. Got out, and said “another day, another dollar”. She clearly wanted us to know that she was a prostitute.

Liz, White, 36, 3 parties: Sex was not a subject we talked about growing up. My mother left it all up to the special classes we had in sixth grade health class. My mother was very subservient to my father growing up. I never saw my parents kiss or show any sexual expression in our home. I never thought of my mother in sexual terms. She was more like our housekeeper than our mom. Then when I got to 7th grade, I started to notice boys more. Boys went from being icky to being hot. In the hallways of my junior high school I remember living for the cool bad ass guys to say hello to me. I remember living for Jason Johnson to say hello to me. I used to get all nervous when he past me in the hall.

With Sexual Oral History question 1, I wanted to better understand the myriad of ways in which women social construct their ideologies around sexuality. I thought about how I learned about sex (sexuality) and it became obvious that every woman has a unique experience in “coming into themselves” or “growing up” sexually speaking. Then I postulated about the correlation between a woman’s social construction of sexuality and their behavior at the parties. I needed to know why there were the *Angelas* at parties, and why there were so many party attendees who were closed sexually during the sales-presentation in public, but then spent over \$150 on sex-toys in the sales room in private. At the very least the responses to this question map the moments in life in which women socially construct their sexuality. By sexuality, I mean a woman’s sexual behaviors, ideologies, and identities. Sexuality for these women was all about sexual encounters, both private and public.

With Sexual Oral History question 2, in the field during the parties, I found it very interesting that some women were regular masturbators, while some had never really masturbated to full-blown orgasm. At parties it was if the women who were regular masturbators were proud about it. They were the women who could sell the merchandise for the party sale consultants. These women were the most boastful and loudest about the dual and triple-action vibrators when they were passed around the sale presentation circle. These were the women who were self-diagnosed masturbation addicts. Once again, I thought about my own sexual liberation with masturbation. I too was one of the women who thought masturbation was only for desperate women. Additionally, I had managed to keep a real human penis (boyfriends) in my life. I never had to *resort* to masturbation (with toys) until I moved for graduate school. As stated earlier, I had

attended some sex-toy parties back in the 1990s, but didn't really purchase proper dildo & vibrators. I just went because I was invited, and a dear friend was the hostess. I even got caught up in a party network and attend two more parties within that group of friends. Well I had a different experience at the sex-toy I attended during graduate school. That party impacted my life so much, that I change my research agenda from ethnicity in Spain, to sex-toy parties in St. Louis.

2. Do masturbate? When did you begin masturbating?

Rachel, White, 25, 2 parties: I am addicted to masturbating! I almost prefer it to sex with a man. I usually masturbate 2 to 3 times a week. I am single now and really done with dating for a while. I started masturbating when I was in college. My sorority sisters taught everything there is to know about it. We used to go into the local sex toy shop in a group because we were too ashamed to go in alone. Nowadays you don't even have to go into a sex-shop. You can buy vibrators at parties. I feel like my vibrator is the best boyfriend ever. Masturbating is like going to a spa treatment. I always have a better outlook on things afterwards.

Destiny, Black, 28, 7 parties: I don't masturbate really. I use sex toys for my husband. He likes it when I act like a porno star. We've bought a little bit of everything at the sex-toy parties. He even made me order some of the lingerie that they have in the catalog. I don't really use my toys alone ever. I do think the sex-toys can add a little spice in the bedroom though. God knows we need it.

April, White 30, 2 parties: I just started masturbating at the age of 28. I never thought about masturbating because I've always had someone to have sex with. My ex-boyfriend liked to masturbate to porno movies. I was freaked-out at first but eventually I go into watching pornos with him. It's amazing that I have better orgasms when I masturbate alone, than with sex with a man.

Liz, White, 36, 3 parties: I masturbate with my boyfriend. I can't imagine doing it alone. Only lonely single women go at it alone. My boyfriend likes to watch me do it before we have sex. I never do it alone...its like why bother. I like the orgasms more that I have when we use the vibrator too. They are more intense for sure.

Courtney, Biracial, 34, 5 parties: I masturbate. I started masturbating when I was 14. I learned about masturbating from my older sisters. They did it in the shower with the shower head. And then my oldest sister bought a little pocket-rocket vibrator and I used to hear it going off through the wall between our bedrooms. I love masturbating. I love it because I know my own body the most. I know myself the best. I like exploding by myself when I masturbate. It's like fireworks and it turns me on even more to think about the fact that I'm doing it to myself.

Early on in field experience, I was shocked by how women at the parties were so pro-masturbation. Clearly the ideology at the parties was all about women and masturbation, with sex-toys. As the sales consultant, I felt like women were almost hypnotized into masturbation with sex-toy. There was absolutely no language (discourse) in the sales training or literature around masturbating without sex-toys. I wanted to know how women really learned about and engaged in with regards to masturbation. What is really noteworthy in the data is how some of the women stated that they masturbate with (or for) their partners. So though they purchase sex-toys at the parties, under the auspices of inducing their own self-pleasure, they only used their toys for masturbatory purposed with their sex partners; or for their sex partners pleasure. Equally provocative were the women who claimed to have better orgasms when they masturbate alone, than with their partners. These women almost preferred authentic self-induced orgasms over sex with their partners that would yield a less intense orgasm.

3. Sex Toy Parties? How many attended? What do you think about sex toy parties?

Rachel, White, 25, 2 parties: This was my first party with this group of women. I've been to another kind of sex-toy party for a bachelorette party. I think women like the in-home parties because they can relax and really shop for a new vibrator. You can't do that alone in a sex-toy shop. It's like a Tupperware party for sex-toys. Plus women get really wasted at the parties. Where else can women be women and be wild and crazy?

Destiny, Black, 28, 7 parties: This is probably my seventh party? My cousin is a sales consultant for Pure Romance so I've managed to get invited to all the parties in our family. Everybody has tried to help her get her business stronger by throwing a party for her. I also got caught up in a party cycle with one of my coworkers too. I think women like the parties because of all the food, drinks, and sex-toys!

April, White 30, 2 parties: That was my second party. The sales rep at this one was better than one I had last time. She really knew a lot about everything and she knew how to sell the products. Women love sex-toy parties because it's the one place where women can act like men sexually. At the first party I attended, the women weren't as loud as they were at this last party. We all got a little too drunk at this party...

Liz, White, 36, 3 parties: That was my third sex-toy party. I was invited by my neighbor. I think sex-toy parties are fun because it's only women. Women can relax together and it's like a slumber party but for adult women. I went to my first one about 2 years ago. It was at a co-workers house. The first time I was shocked by how raunchy it was. I mean you don't see so many dildos laying around in your life everyday. At the first party, I only bought a small dildo, a little butterfly shape one, and a bottle of massage oil. At my second party, I bought the "Ice-Ice Baby"...the one with both parts stimulation. At the last party I bought a clitoral massager suction thingy, and a pair of anal beads. We have already used the old toys with the new toys. I'm not too keen on the anal beads, but I love the clit massager.

Courtney, Biracial, 34, 5 parties: I've attended about 5 sex toy parties. I love going to sex-toy parties. I started going to them back in the late 90s. Now they are totally different from back then. Plus there are always good drinks and appetizers. If you're into to sex-toys, you're into sex-toy parties. I've been to those little shops to buy a vibrator once or twice, but I never felt comfortable there. I like the privacy of buying sex-toys at the parties. I went to my first party at my sister's coworker's house. Back then they just had a basic collection of sex-toys that you could by. Now, you can buy everything at a party that you can buy at a shop. And...its only women at the parties. Its just more private to buy stuff at the parties. Plus there's still a

With Sexual Oral History question 3, I was interested in how the party experience changes over time amongst women who attend sex-toy parties on a regular basis, and those who attended only a couple. I wanted to better examine the overall sex-toy party experience. I knew early on that some magical happened at parties, but here I wanted compare my experiences with those of other women. As the data indicates, some women get mired in party networks, in which they are socially sanctioned to attend additional parties. The women who attended multiple parties on regular basis felt pressured to not only attend, but to also purchase at least one item. Additionally, the responses indicated that after a while, the newness of the party experience wears off. All the women spoke to getting intoxicated at the parties as well. Some of the women even claimed to have preferred the private setting of a party to purchase sex-toys, over the public space of a sex-toy shop.

It was also curious how the all the women seemed to be pro-sex-toy parties. Clearly these women preferred the space of a private party to the space of a public store to purchase sex-toy merchandise. These women all purchased sex-toys at their most recent party attended as well. This speaks volumes about the motivation to purchase at the parties. Consumption was inevitable at the parties. These women almost seemed to attend the parties just to buy new sex-toy merchandise. One woman spoke to the ways in which party attendees get mired in party circuits. She almost implied that she was strong-armed into attending multiple parties because she had to in order to help her relative who was a sales-representative. This is very common in sex-toy party culture as sales-representatives are encouraged to ‘snowball’ and schedule future parties at their current

party. This tactic was also used to obtain sales-representatives who would sell (consult) under the representative, like a sales pyramid scheme.

4. How has attending a sex toy party altered your sexual practices?

Rachel, White, 25, 2 parties: I definitely masturbate more now. But I think that's because we buy vibrators at the parties. The parties are definitely sex-toys for sure. But then again I like masturbating. The orgasms are very intense. I've bought stuff at both parties I went to. Of course I would prefer to find a real man, but my vibrators are always there if a guy is not. Sometimes I worry that I'm becoming addicted to them. Like, when I do meet a man, will I be satisfied enough?

Destiny, Black, 28, 7 parties: Well because I've been to so many parties, I think I'm buying sex-toys more often than I did before. I spend way more money than I used to, too. Now that I'm married, I use my toys more often. That makes no sense because you would think that I would use them more often when I was still single. My husband always wants to use the toys when we have sex now. I like that tingly cream, but I don't always need to have a big fat dildo inside me when I have sex.

April, White 30, 2 parties: Well before, when I was with my ex-boyfriend, I never really needed to masturbate alone. And remember, he was really into porn. We used to watch it together when we had sex. I started using sex-toys to masturbate for myself because I went to a party. At the first party I bought a small little vibrator, the pocket-rocker style. I am too cheap to not use what I paid for. I went home, started using that vibrator, and fell in love with it. At the second party, I bought a larger rabbit-style vibrator. I haven't used it yet, but I'm excited to figure it out.

Liz, White, 36, 3 parties: We use the stuff I get at the parties all the time now. My boyfriend wants us to try anal toys. I'm not so sure about all of that. I'm happy with having sex in my vagina for a while. I would be open to trying some of that bondage stuff though. At the party she had some cute fuzzy handcuffs...and that whip with the features. I think we just include sex-toys more in our sex life because I had been going to the parties.

Courtney, Biracial, 34, 5 parties: I spend lots of money on my sex toys. More than I did before. I used to go to the little shops, but over the past couple of years, I just wait until I go to a sex-toy party. I've been caught up in a circle of parties from my sister's friends. I've been to 3 parties over the last 2 months. I've bought a lot. I've spent a lot. But it makes me feel better. Women already have a lot of stuff to pay for. I don't mind paying for my sex-toys. At some point, I'll have to make some time to use all the new ones.

With Sexual Oral History question Four, I wanted to explore if and how the sex-toy party experience changed sexual ideologies and behaviors. Most women clearly altered their sexual behaviors after the parties. These alterations in their sexual ideologies and behaviors occurred through many paths. There were some women who started masturbating simply because the party culture (experience) was so pro-masturbation. If not densely pro-masturbation, the culture was certainly pro-sex-toys. There were some women who altered their sexual ideologies and behaviors by simply using a new type of sex-toy merchandise. The women interviewed also spoke to the idea of ‘getting into’ different (new) sex acts the more parties they attended. One woman talked about buying anal beads to use with her sex partner. She still had not used them by the time of this interview.

Some of the women spoke to the sexually liberating aspects of a sex-toy party. It was as if all the women felt empowered by the overall party experience. They all claimed to have had an impactful experience at their first party. A couple of the women spoke about they always spent too much money on sex-toys at the parties, and how this act alone was an alteration in their usual pre-party lives. At parties there was a “you deserve it” or “take care of your sex-live” rhetoric that sold the majority of the merchandise. Clearly women had more things to pay for than just their sex-toys. Sex-toys were possibly the absolute last thing a woman could justify spending \$150 on in the economic climate of the day.

With Sexual Oral History question 5, when I participant-observed as a sales representative in the field, I was literally shocked at how much or how many items women bought at the parties. This was especially the case for women who were mired in

a sex-toy party circuit, in which it was customary to purchase at least one item at the parties. I questioned if women were capable of using all the sex-toy party merchandise they purchased at the parties. Two of the women interview really liked the ‘beauty products’, not full blown vibrators, but the shaving and anal sex creams. Some of the Party Companies featured a full line of spa products and as stated earlier, merchandise a woman could purchase at her local *Walgreen’s* or *CVS*. Most noteworthy was the woman who had broken, or worn the motors out on her vibrator. She clearly understood that with vibrators, you get what you pay for. This wearing out of the motor also signifies a woman who has used her vibrator so much that maybe she has become addicted to playing with her sex-toys.

5. Do you use everything you purchase at sex toy parties? For how long? Did you buy more?

Rachel, White, 25, 2 parties: Yes and no. I’ve used the new vibrator, but not the new massage oil that I bought. I’m waiting for an actual man to use that on. I’m planning on buying another type of vibrator next time. I like having multiple sizes and speeds...

Destiny, Black, 28, 7 parties: Well there’s no way I could’ve used all the stuff I’ve bought at all the parties I’ve had to sit through. We are using some of the stuff, but not everything. We have used the new vibrator, the anal beads, and that \$16 anal cream. That cream works! That’s probably the only thing I’ll buy at the next party.

April, White, 30, 2 parties: I’ve only used my smaller vibrator from the first party. I haven’t used the new one from the second party. Who knows what all I’ll buy at the next party?

Liz, White, 36, 3 parties: Yes we used all the actual toys that I’ve bought. I haven’t used my bath products yet. I bought that pear-vanilla body oil and shaving cream. Everybody swore by that shaving cream at the parties. No razor bumps! I’m excited to try it!

Courtney, Biracial, 34, 5 parties: I’ve broken 3 of those “King-Tut” vibrators. I think I wore the motors down with my muscles. Maybe they’re not meant for the hours I put on them. I need to buy a new one at my next party. Maybe I’ll have to spend a little bit more money to get one that is a higher grade...stronger.

Chapter 6: Pineapple Bellinis & Frozen Glass Anal Beads: Analysis

It's Sunday afternoon and Suzanne is at a bridal/bachelorette shower/party for a younger niece. On her third glass of champagne, Suzanne remembers she is turning 36 next week. Suzanna is a married mother of 2 boys. Overtime she has grown bored with her marriage in a number of ways. Mostly she has been underwhelmed by the sex she's had with her husband lately. This bridal/bachelorette shower/party is her second sex toy party experience. At the last party, she bought a "rabbit-style" vibrator. Having never really masturbated when she was younger, Suzanne has just recently 'taken up' masturbation. This is especially the case after she got her hands on her "Mr. Tongue" vibrator. Unbeknownst to the other women at the party, Suzanne blushes as she realizes she'd worn the motor out on the last vibrator she bought, at the last party. Suzanne thinks about the fact that she spent \$47 on that vibrator, and broke it within the first three weeks she had it. She does not want to order the same type of "rabbit-style" vibrator. They take 4 batteries, and hers still wore out in the end. As the remainder of the dual-action vibrators makes their way around the circle, during the sales presentation, Suzanne contemplates buying one of the less expensive "pocket rocket" vibrators, that were passed around before, and checks the box on the order form laying atop her lap. In one hand, she has the catalog, and is visibly flustered as she battles to remember exactly which page has all the small vibrators. On her third glass of champagne, Suzanne realizes she's not only a little tipsy, but it also a little aroused by the whole experience of handling devices that bring such pleasure. Even the other women at the party begin to cackle, howl, and react to the sex toys. Just when the party roar reaches a fevered pitch, Monica, the sales representative, quiets the women down to proceed with the sales presentation. Suzanne and the women sitting next to her continue to flip mercilessly through the catalog to make note of the items they want to remember to buy in the sales room. Meanwhile the sales presentation marches on. By this point in the pass-around sex toy party ritual, the women are about to begin handling things like triple action vibrators and vibrating anal plugs. Suzanne is drawn towards a smaller vibrating butt plus that is about to be passed to her. In her mind, she contemplates the idea of anal play, and wonders if it's something that would electrify her lackluster married sex life. Her husband, being a typical male, fantasizes about anal sex. Monica, the sales representative, then sends around an anal sex cream that supposes to ease the pain of anal sex. Suzanne is not completely sold on any of it. Being more traditional in her upbringing, she believes there are certain types of women who have anal sex. Then when the anal beads made their way around the circle, Suzanne was utterly shocked when her niece gave a rowdy testimonial to the usefulness of anal beads (and the anal sex cream) in getting a woman into enjoying anal sex...

The Conundrum of Race/Ethnicity at Sex-Toy Parties

Since its inception as an academic discipline, Anthropology has shared a long and enduring relationship with the study of race/ethnicity in both biological and social perspectives. As a discipline, Anthropology preaches and teaches that “race doesn’t exist”, “race is a biological myth”, and “race is a social construction”. Though brilliant, these theoretical assumptions do not explain exactly how “race” is socially constructed. Initially, I set out to explore how race was socio-culturally constructed at sex-toy parties. I argued that mapping race socially in St. Louis was significant because people in St. Louis (in the 2000s) live race as if it were 1973. Like sexuality, in St. Louis, race was what it was. Initially, in the pre-dissertation phase of this project, I set out to read and map out cultural makers of race making in the space of the sex-toy party. I wanted to explore and better understand the possible consumptive practices that were symbolic of race and identity performances. Additionally, I had hope for more racially segregated parties to attend where possible; there would be strong distinct race behavior or performances to observe. After all, I entered graduate school to study race and make fascinating needed statements about just how race is socially constructed.

At sex-toys parties in St. Louis it was not so much about race as it is about money, or social class. However, there were still some rather intriguing and noteworthy statements made about just how race is socially constructed in the social geography (space) of St. Louis. This race making (construction) is what is most noteworthy because the women who attended sex-toy parties live in the public social space that is an extremely racist St. Louis, Missouri. From outdoors in St. Louis society, they entered the sex-toy parties and brought their racial ideologies, performances, and identities with

them. In the pre-dissertation phase of this ethnography, I initially set out to explore the consumptive practices of women at sex-toy parties as related to their ethnicities. I imagined that in St. Louis' highly racialized culture, women at sex-toy parties would purchase products based on their culturally constructed ideologies around ethnicity and sexuality. I wanted to understand if Black women were more prone to order particular flavors, sizes, and colors of sex-toy party merchandise. Or if Latinas were more open to purchasing particular toys more than Asian-American women. In retrospect, I created rather essentialist (rigid) research questions at the intellectual intersections of ethnicity and sexuality. Simply understood, I wanted to map out just how "race" was socially constructed in the social space of a sex-toy party. After all, studying "race" (and dismantling racism) was my primary impetus for attending graduate school.

However, once I officially began participating in and observing the social spaces and events of female-only sex-toy parties, it became clear that there wasn't as much that happened around ethnicity and sexuality as with how women expressed their social status, or class at parties. Ironically, once in the field, things didn't happen like I thought they would, hypothetically speaking. Out of all the parties I attended, only 3 were racially segregated. While 3 of the parties were solely African-American, the majority of the parties were European-American. Of the European-American parties, only 6 parties had attendees that were of another ethnicity. Though I really intended to better understand the social construct of "race" at the parties, there were far more noteworthy cultural things happening in the realms of social class and *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1982).

In terms ethnicity and space (geography), I had planned to conduct my research in an urban neighborhood that is authentically racially and sexually diverse. St. Louis is a city of many neighborhoods that boast about their racial diversity. However, being native to St. Louis, I knew that the *Tower Grove* neighborhood was hyper-diverse. There were all types of women in the *Tower Grove* neighborhood. In just one neighborhood, there are the rich & poor, White & Black, Latino & Vietnamese, Gay & Straight, yuppie & ghetto, and Muslim & Catholic women. That explained, in *Tower Grove*, as the economy worsened, women there hosted fewer parties. As my research field timeframe expired, I eventually participated and observed at parties all over the metropolitan St. Louis area. While 8 parties did commence in the *Tower Grove* area, the majority of the parties happened in the suburbs of St. Louis.

This trend and modification to my research agenda is understandable. In St. Louis women with the money and homes that are nice (big) enough to host a sex-toy party, threw (hosted) sex-toy parties. Simply put, there were the women with enough money and an open enough mind to host such a party. Also there was a popular culture trend of in-home sales parties in the suburbs. As stated earlier, women were being invited to all sorts of in-home sales parties geared towards female consumption. These were parties that featured things like cookware, candles, and even handbags. Once the sex-toy parties caught on in the suburbs of St. Louis, it was on. What's more, there were 4 major sex-toy party sales Companies working in tandem with other types of party sales formats.

In St. Louis, regardless of ethnicity, wealthy women live in the suburbs. These were the women who could afford to host a party. These were the women who wanted to

appear open-minded and cutting edge enough to host a sex-toy party. As stated earlier, sometimes the party hostesses ‘went all out’ and made penis-cupcakes and Jell-O shots. Then sometimes the party hostesses just served canned beer and didn’t even bother to clean for the party. At these parties, I was apprehensive about even setting up the sales presentation display. I would just have a feeling that nothing would sell. There was no rhyme or reason for which to predict how sales-representatives profited from the parties. As a sales-rep I couldn’t predict (hope) to have an economically successful party. It became obvious over time that parties that happened in wealthy homes were more profitable in sales. These were the parties that I grew weary of attending, but somehow made some great friends, of which I’m still in contact with to this day. These were the parties that I schlepped to with crates chalked full of x-rated merchandise, while “driving dirty.”

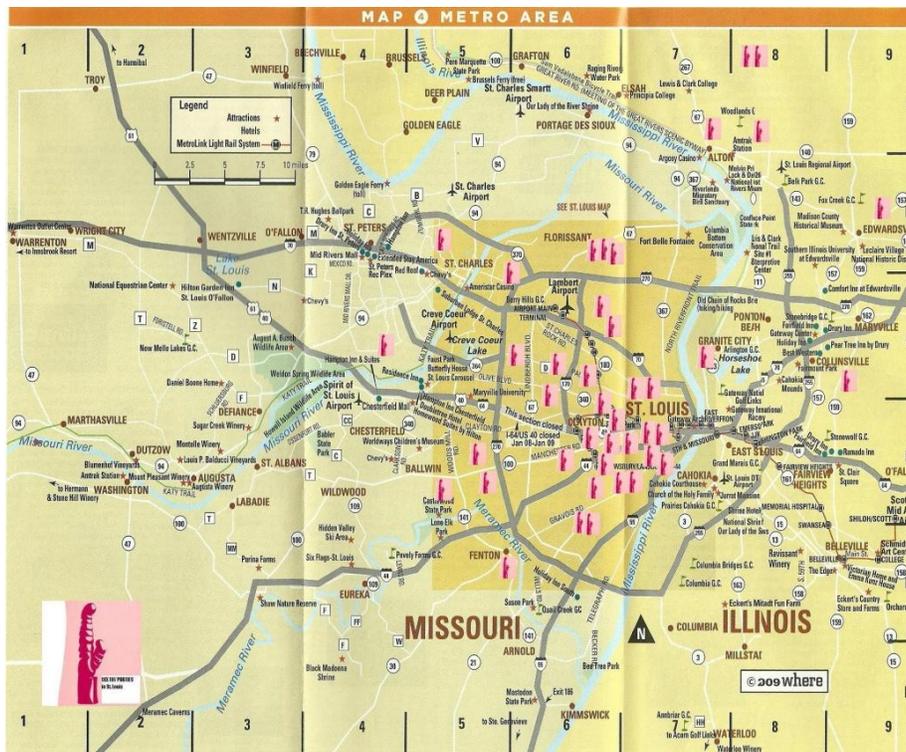


Figure 49 Map of Parties in St. Louis Metro Area

As stated earlier, women at sex-toy parties didn't consume merchandise based on their ethnicities. At sex-parties in St. Louis, women consumed merchandised based of their financial and social posturing. At sex-toy parties in St. Louis, it was all about how much money women spent, their social class, more than their skin tones. It was all about women's morals and values as well. Mostly, it was about a woman's decency. Was she a whore who purchased a triple-action vibrator & a school-girl sex fantasy costume at parties? Or was she a decent Christian woman who just bought a sensual smelling candle and a book of lover's coupons? Consumptive practices were also about how women wanted to appear, identify, and be categorized (sanctioned) by her peers, or sex-toy party counterparts. At sex-toy parties in St. Louis, 'empty wagons made a lot of noise.' It seemed the women who were the most raucous during the sales-presentation phase of the party, spent less money in the back shopping room. During the sales-presentation some women roared about their sexual liberation and their great sex-life. Then back in the sales room they spent very little compared to what they claimed they would buy during the sales presentation. This was the case at parties regardless of ethnicity. Some of these loud empty wagon women almost needed to appear more sex-positive or sexually liberated, even if their wallets didn't allow for it.

In terms of ethnicity and sexuality, from a more linguistic perspective, the conversations at the sex-toy parties were far more demonstrative of women's ideologies around ethnicity and sexuality, than were the mere acts of purchasing (consuming) sex-merchandise. I was able to glean more from the language and conversations at the parties that from acts of consumption. Women at parties discoursed about racial-sexual myths such as: Black men having giant penises, Asian men having tiny penises, and what

ethnicities of women are more passive and aggressive than others. All this considered, at sex-toy parties in St. Louis decent women, regardless of skin-tone, had to be totally 'wasted' to openly discuss their sexual fantasies, taboos, and deviances. At the parties several of the upper-class White women who had never been intimate with Black men, spoke about their fantasies. The objectification of the Black male body was universal and intriguing. Many times it seemed that White women wanted to *share* and made sure that I (as a Black woman) knew that they were 'done with the swirl'. I found all of this interesting on a personal level because I am African-American and has been involved in more interracial relationships, than intraracial relationships. So I wasn't too sure about the penis sizes of African-American men, empirically speaking. At times it was almost as if some of the White women party attendees wanted me to certify the racial-sexual stereotypes around men's penis size. All of this is even more interesting on an Anthropological level as we know that "race" is not biological. In layman terms, Black men don't have a gene for a giant penis, any more than Asian men have a gene for a small penis. All the same while, Black women complained about their Black lovers not being romantic enough, like White men.

Though much of the print media (catalogs, post-cards, flyers, invitations, and advertisements) of the sex-toy party business appeals to a multiethnic audience, the sex-toy party merchandise, like the larger dildos and vibrators, were given more "Black" inspired names. Names that I argue are stereotypical. Names that I argue, will sell the merchandise to women who desire a larger dildo or vibrator. The larger merchandise infers Blackness with names like "Midnight Train to Georgia", "Who's Ya' Daddy" and "Mandingo Love". These types of names perpetuate the racial-sexual stereotypes that

plague all people of color. The idea of having and enjoying “chocolate” (Black) sex permeated the party experience. This idea of Black “chocolate” further objectified Black male sexuality turning it into food. Lastly, this type of merchandise not only perpetuates stereotypes, but also lends itself to the fulfillment of women’s sexual fantasies involving Black men. In this way, by being motivated to purchase “Black” inspired merchandise, women don’t have to suffer the social ridicule in the public sphere of having an interracial sex partner in the private sphere.



Figure 50 Multicultural Media

As stated earlier, many of the catalogs, postcards, and invitations, the print media usually show images of multiracial parties. This is to appeal to women of all ethnicities. On paper, the Companies advertise and promote the idea of racial diversity. They also

promote the party event as something that happens in an upper-class home chock-full of upper-class women. It is simply assumed that the *average* woman will spend \$150 on sex-toy party merchandise. At parties I attended, Black women never spent \$150 on sex-toys. Most purchased at least one item, but never dropped \$150 on sex-toys. A sex card-game from one of the Companies, portrayed multi-ethnic images of couples engaged in sexual positions. Here, the images of interracial sexuality are inspirational and positive, I found most all other dimensions of the sex-toy party print media language not only classist, but also heteronormative.



As stated earlier, though I set out to explore how women social constructed “race” at sex-toy parties, things didn’t happen in the field as I had thought they initially would. Regardless of skin tone, at sex-toy parties, women purchased sex-toy merchandise based on their cultural capital (*ala* Bourdieu), and their economic status, or class. At sex-toy parties it was not so much about essentialist sexual-racial stereotypes, as it was about women’s sexual ideologies and identities. At sex-toy parties, in the private sales room, ethnicity was never at the fore of women’s desires, purchases, or consumption. Those women shoppers purchased what they purchased because they wanted to have a wide variety of sexual gratifications and liberations. What was most curious was how some women seemed to have spent money like men spend money. Women at the parties

seemed engaged in a virtual ‘big dick contest.’ Women threw money, usually credit-cards, around with gusto. Then when they left the private salesroom, they showed everyone what they purchased. Even though all purchases are packaged in opaque bags, most women just tore the bags open and bragged about (show-off) what they bought. Simply understood, women cared more about social class and sexual practices (anal & oral sex, BDSM) than they cared about skin color, or ethnicity.

Many women experience stress and anxiety due to the pressures of not being able to reach orgasm. The problem with this is that stress and anxiety can make it even more difficult to climax, creating a vicious cycle of no orgasm. Because of this, try to focus less on enjoying the experience. Focusing on the pleasurable sensations that you feel with a partner can help rid your mind and body of stress, and may help you reach orgasm. Clear your mind first, before engaging in sexual activity. When you become intimate with your partner, pay close attention to how he touches you and how it makes you feel. Try not to let any stray thoughts about orgasm creep into your mind. Being completely in the moment and really enjoying what you and your partner are doing with each other may help you reach orgasm.

Many women find that they are able to reach orgasm through clitoral stimulation, which may be a good place to start to try to give your wife multiple orgasms. Your fingers or a clitoral vibrator are both great ways to experiment with multiple orgasms. Lifestroke 7th Heaven is a very powerful clitoral vibrator with different speeds and functions. You may also like the Micro Bullet or Waterproof Power Bullet. Some women are also able to experience multiple orgasms through g-spot stimulation. Love Doctor is great because it is slender and allows for firm pressure on the g-spot. G-Money is another popular g-spot toy. It is waterproof so you and your partner can experiment in the shower as well.

Some women also find it helpful to experiment with different types of stimulation, which may lead to multiple orgasms. For example, trying vaginal, clitoral, g-spot, and even anal (doing these either alone or in some sort of variation) may help to increase arousal and the possibility of experiencing multiple orgasms. Engaging in a variety of different types of activities keeps the body and mind stimulated and helps with orgasm.

I would like to give my wife multiple orgasms, but can't seem to figure out how to do this. Can you help?

Multiple orgasms are orgasms that occur rapidly, in succession, usually seconds apart. Some women are able to experience multiple orgasms through continued stimulation. If a woman has one orgasm and continues stimulation, it may be possible for her to have more than one. The easiest way to do this is to keep stimulating her pleasurable areas after she reaches orgasm. For example, if a woman is engaging in clitoral stimulation and reaches orgasm, instead of stopping, she can continue clitoral stimulation (with either her fingers or a vibrator) and she may experience multiple orgasms. Some women are not interested in having multiple orgasms, though, because they may find that after having one orgasm they are too sensitive to continue stimulation. Sometimes the increased sensitivity can be uncomfortable. Because of this, first talk to your partner about your (and her) interest in multiple orgasms. Having this conversation can determine if your partner is interested in experiencing multiple orgasms. If you and your partner decide to experiment and try to give her multiple orgasms, it is important to set some ground rules beforehand. Your partner may agree to try this, but may find that after having one orgasm she is too sensitive to continue, try to focus on other areas that may be pleasurable for her that are not overly sensitive.

I am interested in having a g-spot orgasm, but can't seem to figure out how to do this. Help!

The g-spot is a zone about two or three inches inside the vagina on the front wall, closest to the clitoris or pubic bone. It feels like a very subtle bump that can vary in diameter from the size of a pea to a half-dollar. With the right technique and a bit of practice, it can yield lots and lots of pleasure for women, including orgasm, multiple orgasms and female ejaculation.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Here are some common questions regarding sexual activity. There are many other scenarios and questions besides these. You can use the following questions to help further your understanding about these topics, and can use the information to help answer your customer's questions.

Is it safe to use bedroom accessories with a sexually transmitted infection?

If infected with a chronic and incurable STI, it is possible to use a sex toy in between outbreaks, as long as caution and time is invested to protect oneself. The best recommendation is not to use a sex toy while experiencing an outbreak for symptoms of any kind. It is important to use a latex or polyurethane condom over anything that could be touching an infected area or come in contact with bodily fluids - that includes all types of toys, including those that are for external use, such as bullets or other clitoral vibrators. If a toy cannot be covered with a condom, then it should not be used.

For a curable STI, the chance of reinfection could be high if the toy is carrying the bacteria. If a person thinks they have an infection and are using a sex toy, they should discard the product and buy a new toy. It is best to wait to use the toy until the person has finished their medications, as well as get a thorough check-up from a doctor to make sure they are no longer infected. Always make sure to clean bedroom toys before and after every use to help reduce the risk of spreading bacteria, although Pure Clean's toy cleaner, although Pure Clean will not remove bacteria, viruses, or parasites caused by a STI. Come Clean was designed to remove only everyday bacteria and fungi that could potentially be present.

It is important to talk to a health care provider before engaging in any type of sexual activity if infected with a STI. This will help maintain a person's overall health and will ensure that they are being as safe as possible.

I really want to make sure that I'm pleasing my girlfriend. The truth is, I'm having a hard time finding all of her parts. Where is her clitoris?

What a great question! For most women, the clitoris is the "hot button" that provides a great deal of pleasure. It is no wonder that so many partners want to know exactly where to find it! Before pointing out the clitoris, it is necessary to first understand a little more about the area. The clitoris is a bundle of nerves (8,000-12,000). It has the most nerve endings of any area of any person's body. Many women are able to reach orgasm through clitoral stimulation, making it a very popular area to pleasure during sexual activity.

An easy way to locate the clitoris is to find the labia minora (the vaginal lips) and follow them inward, until they stop at an area of small tissue just under the pubic bone. This is where the clitoris is located.

It may be necessary to experiment with various types of touching (including different levels of pressure) to find what your partner prefers. You may also want to talk to your partner about this for more direction and information. It is also important to note that some women do not like or enjoy direct clitoral stimulation, as their clitoris may be very sensitive. In this situation, it may be helpful to use less pressure, or even cover the area with cloth to dull some of the sensation.

Figure 51 Multicultural Print Media

Another interesting feature of sex-toy party culture, that debunked some of the essentialist characteristics of my original research hypothesis on consumption, ethnicity, and sexuality, was the fact that women purchased more at parties based on *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1982). By *cultural capital* I mean one's education, sense of body and self and overall socialization of sexuality. Educated, self-accepting, self-loving women at sex-toy parties, regardless of ethnicity, not only have better party experiences, but they

also purchased more sex-toy merchandise. They also attended parties more often. At both White and Black parties I observed, women still bought whatever they wanted. Women still got drunk and had a great time. Interestingly, White women's parties always had higher sales totals. In end it was more about how well women knew themselves sexually. It was about how adventurous women were and how they believe they deserved quality sex-lives.

Sadly, at some parties, regardless of ethnicity, there were women who seemed to have become unnerved by whole party experience. There were women who had never even seen their own clitorises. There were women who felt guilty just by attending a sex-toy party. These women are the ones who got really drunk (on accident) and wound up having a darn good time. In St. Louis, these women are the ones who had to call their husbands, lovers, and girlfriends for approval of their purchases. These were the women who had never masturbated (alone) to orgasm. These women were the women, who like me in the past, never considered their sex-lives hopeless enough to masturbate. These women, regardless of ethnicity, are the women, who like me, have had sex-life altering experiences at sex-toy parties.

Lastly, in regards to ethnicity and consumption at sex-toy parties, both White and Black women purchased the anal sex product and creams with equal frequency. During the sales-presentations, both White & Black women praised the anal sex pain relieving cream, and both groups of women gave testimonials to the cream's effectiveness. In the end, it was not about ethnicity. It was about a woman's sexual citizenship, and having the chutzpah to claim her sexual rights to pleasure, self love, and control over her sex-

life. It was not about ethnicity, it was about a woman putting her sexual needs, desires, and authentic gratification at the forefront of her happiness.

The Conundrum of Sexuality at Sex-Toy Parties

The event of a female-only sex-toy party is tout as a “girl’s night out.” Sex-toy parties embody the concerns of Feminist theory and politics today. These concerns address, questions of the body, technology, capitalism, and the Feminist critiques of phallogentric sexuality (McCaughey & French, 2001). For example, the in-home parties do not feature (sell) strap-on dildos. It’s almost as if the sex-toy party companies presume all women have male partners, and that male partners don’t want to be penetrated. It’s almost as if the sex-toy companies want to keep the “clean” image of sex-toys in which women use them only with men, or when alone. In the field, I witnessed sales-representatives get flustered, and struggle to modify her sales spiel when a female attendee pointed out the possibility of using a vibrator with another woman.

Equally heteronormative are the sales tactics to push the male masturbatory devices. Female party attendees are sold the masturbators as “gifts for him.” As if “he” needs some help masturbating and/or becoming aroused during a sexual encounter. The sex-toy party is a space for women to concern themselves with and prioritize their own masturbation. Equally disgusting are the names given to the masturbators. Names like “H.O.G” which is “hand operated girlfriend” and “Super-Stretch Vagina Lips” The names are not only heteronormative, but also misogynistic. However, the female-only space created by sex-toy parties can and does allow for a critique of male-centered sexuality.



Figure 52 Male Masturbators

Lesbians at Sex-Toy Parties

As mentioned earlier, the whole culture of sex-toy parties is intended for heteronormative hyper-feminine women. However, not every woman who attends a sex-toy party is heterosexual and hyper-feminine. While conducting field research, I had the fortune (and honor) of being the sales-representative (participant observer) at two Lesbian sex-toy parties. One party was African-American, and the other was European-American with some women who identified as Bisexual. The idea of the sexual “hero” runs fluid throughout the culture of sex-toy parties. For Lesbian women, there was nothing in the overall party language and sales format that promoted the image of the sexual “shero” in terms of vibrators and other sex-toy merchandise. It was almost as if Lesbian women didn’t have sexual needs and desires. It was almost as if a homosexual woman’s sexuality had been discredited, or somehow eliminated.

Dual-action heroes to the rescue!

With rotation, vibration, and clitoral stimulation, prepare yourself for exciting bedroom adventures!

T.O.M.
Meet T.O.M., our triple organ machine! You control T.O.M.'s talents independently: the way his scabbie shaft vibrates, rotates, and thrusts; the speed and direction of his revolving row of pleasure beads; and the intensity of his hummingbird's flutter against the labia and clitoris. In the shower, T.O.M. will satisfy again and again! Requires four AA batteries. \$149
Length: 5.5", Girth: 5"

PLATINUM PETE
Who knew Peter Rabbit was such a stud? With seven mind-blowing levels of vibration, rotating pleasure beads, and a soft jelly rabbit clitoral stimulator, Platinum Pete will leave you hopping for more! Simple push-button controls allow you to adjust each function independently for perfect orgasm-achieving combinations. Requires four AA batteries. \$99.50
Length: 5", Girth: 4.5"

BLING BLING
Forget diamonds—Bling Bling is a girl's best friend! Adorned with sparkling rhinestones, it has a comfortably sized, rotating jelly shaft that vibrates at three amazing levels of intensity. Control the two-inch band of massaging, reverse-direction pleasure beads and the multi-speed rabbit stimulator. Take this waterproof toy with you anywhere that's wet! Requires three AA batteries. \$99.50
Length: 4", Girth: 4.5"

DECADENT INDULGENCE
This amazing dual-action vibrator is equipped with eight levels of accelerating vibration, three rhythmic reversible motions, nine perfectly placed rotating pleasure beads, and a well-endowed, deep penetrating head that swirls for supreme satisfaction. For even more indulgence, engage the soft, fluttering hummingbird stimulator! Requires four AA batteries. \$99.50
Length: 6.5", Girth: 4.5"

STANDING O
The name says it all! Standing O's smaller design makes it perfect for first-time toy users or anyone who wants a great performance! The perfectly placed nubbies and three-speed rotating shaft stimulate the vagina and G-spot; seven clitoral vibration intensities will keep you applying all night long! Requires four AAA batteries. \$129
Length: 5", Girth: 4"

HONEY DIPPER
Feel Honey Dipper's three speeds hit your sweet spot, then say hummer! Its adjustable vibration levels, rotating shaft, band of spinning pleasure beads, and fluttering hummingbird clitoral stimulator are sure to keep you busy as a bee. Waterproof, so it's easy to take a dip anywhere! Requires three AA batteries. \$69.50
Length: 5", Girth: 3"

B.O.B.
Meet B.O.B., your new battery-operated boyfriend! This exclusive toy was designed for explosive orgasmic ecstasy. Push the buttons to rotate the jelly shaft and reverse its direction. Engage the clitoris to tickle the clitoris; add the swirl of pleasure beads to really go back wild! Requires three AA batteries. \$69
Length: 6", Girth: 5"

COWBOY UP
Save a horse, hire Cowboy Up! This fun waterproof vibrator has an angled rotating shaft that reverses directions like a true stallion. Soft jelly bulbheads vibrate at three speeds to tickle the clitoris; add the swirl of pleasure beads to really go back wild! Requires three AA batteries. \$79.50
Length: 5.5", Girth: 3"

Figure 53 'Hero' Dual-Action Vibrators

I went into the first party thinking that these women, Lesbian women, would never opt to purchase the same type of sex-toys as heterosexual women did. I thought all Lesbian women would be anti-male phallus physically, mentally, and politically. I was shocked to learn (and note) that Lesbian women buy the same types of sex-toys as heterosexual women did at parties. Additionally, the Lesbian women at the parties I attended bought more of the 'deviant' sex-acts side of the sex-toys like: dual-ended dildos, triple-action vibrators, and vast range of anal sex toys. Lesbian women sex-toy party consumers were more clitoris-focused in their purchasing. They bought more of the genital heightener creams and oils. What's more, at Lesbian parties, fewer women complained about having to fake orgasms in bed with their partners. Simply, put heterosexual women faked achieving orgasm, in bed, with their partners (men), more than the homosexual women.

Lastly, while the party is a space for females only, I found it very curious how in a Lesbian relationship, in the cultural space of a sex-toy party, there were still some

striking behaviors around gender and consumption. Ironically, Lesbian party attendees still sought the approval and advice of their masculine counterparts before purchasing items. Equally noteworthy is that the feminine member of the couple usually came into the sales room alone to purchase. Their masculine partners sat outside the salesroom waiting for the receipt. Their masculine partners, true to form, were usually the ones who were most uptight about the costs of the merchandise, credit-card sales (money), and when (time) exactly the ‘back ordered’ merchandise would arrive. In the end, I am grateful for all the women (Lesbians) who trusted me with their sexualities. I am most grateful for the privilege of not having my sexual orientation (heterosexual), judged and made deviant in the social space of these two parties. Clearly, my sexuality was a break in the sexual norm of a Lesbian sex-toy party.

Sexual Liberations

Themes of sexual liberation and Sex-Positive Feminism run fluid throughout this ethnography. There were many Feminist and sexually liberating features of this research experience. At sex-toy parties in St. Louis, women were liberated through the party experience in a multitude of ways. First, there is the actual social event (occasion) of the sex-toy party. A space devoted to women learning about their bodies (anatomically) and then learning about new sexual practices. Additionally, sex-toy parties are spaces that are design to sell women enhanced sexual lifestyles. Secondly, sex-toy parties are all about women achieving a bonafide orgasm. Rhetorically, sales representatives suggest (insist) that women top ‘faking it’ and take a stand and demand real orgasms in their sex lives.

Thirdly, the sex-toy party certainly pushes (sells) masturbation. At sex-toy parties, it was automatically assumed that all women masturbate, or at least need to

begin. The rhetoric around women having the freedom to choose their sex-toy according to their likes and interests was striking. Many complained that they ordered gadgets that were too large, while others complained about ordering the wrong colors and speeds. Some women became so sexually liberated, that they became party regulars, became addicted to masturbating, and wore out the motors on their vibrators. Many of these sex goddesses became serial replacement customers. One woman broke 7 dual-action vibrators before she realized that she need to try another model of vibrator. Fourthly, sex-toy parties provide women with an opportunity ask questions about and thoroughly shop for sex-toy merchandise in safe feminine women-centered space. In this way, women are liberated simply because they are educated in the company of other women. This was even the case at the 2 Lesbian parties at which I participated and observed. Lastly, a sex-toy party is a sex-positive and libratory experience for women because; the sex-toy party is a *party*. The party is a space that celebrates women and their sexuality.

After a sex-toy party ends, women literally alter their sexual behaviors. The party is intended as women's sex class of sorts. As stated earlier, if women don't masturbate (using sex-toys), they are persuaded to begin masturbating with sex-toys. Very little of the sales presentation is geared towards items for men. There were things like male masturbators, cock rings, and penis stimulation gadgets, but the majority of the items showcased at sex-toy parties are vaginally focused. Mostly, the sex-toys at parties were designed to deliver authentic self-induced orgasms in women. Many of the women, who were party regulars, graduated from the simple dildo and vibrators; to things like anal sex and bondage toys and gadgets. Besides the actual sex-toys (vibrators & dildo), women often purchased creams, oils, and gels that were sexual enhancers. With trying new

things in bed, many women ordered things like personal lubricants, oral sex aids, anal sex aids, and genital heighteners. Many women, who were party regulars, took to budgeting in their sex-toys, as if they were a household utility. Some of these women also took pride in their sex-toy collections and would brag about them during the sales presentations. Overall, women swore that masturbation was a perfect way to relieve stress. “Molly”, a self-diagnosed masturbation addict, claimed that for her, masturbating was, “more relaxing than yoga.”

As a space and opportunity to socialize for women, the in-home sex-toy party is a dynamic space and event where people, normal people, get together and bond. Social bonding and camaraderie are universal features of parties. The women assemble as total strangers, and then through the process of the party, they learn the most intimate details of each other’s sexual practices, desires, and fantasies. While in the field, many women got mired in party social circles and were regularly attending the parties of their new friends. It was common that women went to each other’s parties after the first party of circle of friends. Because I scheduled the all the parties of the circles of friends, I also crossed paths with several women multiple times. I also formed some solid friendships with women attendees in the field. After all, my field spaces were the parties. After all, I want had to fit in so that the women would trust me. I commanded their respect and honest first as the sales representative, and then secondly as the ethnographer. The party attendees looked up to me as their sex educator, spiritual guide, and passion mentor. Most often, women attendees forgot I was actually an anthropologist there observing their behavior. Maybe it was my buffalo-chicken dip, or the chocolate cheesecake cupcakes, or maybe it was all the strawberry margaritas, and all the Jell-O-shots?

Whatever it was, I argue that anytime you get a bunch of women together to eat, drink, and shop sex-toys, it will be a rapacious social bonding experience.

From a Sex-Positive Feminist perspective, the sexual practice of ‘faking it’ (faking an orgasm) is very sex-negative for women. Recently, on the *Oprah Winfrey* show, a sex therapist asked women in the audience if they faked having orgasms. Approximately sixty-percent of the studio audience confessed to faking orgasm in bed with their partners. As sales representative in the field, I was always astonished by how often women claimed they fake orgasms. Even more intriguing were the multitude of reasons why women ‘fake it.’ In my view, faking orgasm is very dangerous. Faking orgasm is dangerous because women wind up not only lying to their partners, but also they lie to themselves. A Sex-Positive Feminist perspective on women faking orgasms holds that women should demand equal sex rights as well as equal rights to sexual pleasure. In my view, women should not have to ‘fake it’ in bed. In my view, a couple’s sexual communication and education about each other’s bodies is paramount. Simply understood, not having to ‘fake it’ is about a woman’s sexual self-acceptance.



Figure 54 Female Sexuality Bounded

This sexual self-acceptance is about a woman being aware of her body and what really turns her on, or what is sincerely arousing sexually. This sexual self-acceptance is also about a woman establishing and maintaining her sexual and emotional boundaries. At sex-toy parties, sales representatives are very aggressive in the message of “stop faking it.” The sales representatives instruct party attendees to play with sex-toys before they engage in sexual intercourse with their partners. From my view, masturbating (with sex-toys) is the safest sex. Masturbation is safe both emotionally and physically. That said, women claimed that the sexual experience of masturbating alone, is a completely different experience than masturbating in the company of another. When women masturbate alone they take the time needed to explore the bodies, minds, and souls. When women masturbate alone, they have a higher caliber of orgasm as well. The women who opt to ‘fake it’ have their reason and justifications for doing so. Not for nothing, at least these women actually had the courage to admit to sometimes having to ‘fake it’ in bed.

At sex-toy parties, even after the party ends, women still have to contend with a vast variety of psychological, emotional, and spiritual concerns. After they’ve come to grips with the financial realm of attending a sex-toy party, there are still other ideas to reconcile. The woman, who acknowledges her loneliness, even after she spends \$215.55 at a sex-toy party, is still lonely. Sex with sex-toys does not always suffice for women. Women also have emotional and social needs in their sexual relationship. In Japan, women can purchase the latest sex-toy creation, the “Boyfriend Arm”. With this sex-toy, women have the option of having companionship, and the physical presence of a male. The popularity of the “Boyfriend Arm” raises serious questions about what and why

women buy what they do. The “Boyfriend Arm” raises even more questions about women and what they get (and need) out of sexual relationships.



Figure 55 “Boyfriend Arms” romance companion toys

In contemporary society, women are bombarded daily by images and messages about staying younger, being sexier, and taking charge of their sex lives. It seems rather trendy nowadays to be an “independent” woman. Here, an independent woman is being one who doesn’t need a man, and one who can do it all for herself. All for her, even if that means spending a bunch of money on sex-toy merchandise. All for her, even if that means masturbating. In contemporary society women are poked and prodded to buy all kinds of products to enhance their sexualities. Nowadays, women can purchase sex-toy merchandise at in-home parties, in Feminist sex-toy shops, on television shopping channels like *HSN*, on *Oxygen Channel’s “Shop Herotica”* and on websites like, www.sextoys.com. Women have access to sex-toys like they have access to other female products like tampons and lipsticks. It is clear that sex-toys have become rather common everyday in contemporary society. As for sex-toy parties, they happen every weekend, in neighborhoods across America.



Figure 56 Advertisement Resembling Sex-Toy

At sex-toy parties, women make intriguing statements and performances that I suggest are ironically masculine. In the social space of the in-home female-only sex-toy party, some females take on stereotypically masculine roles. Sex-toy parties as social spaces, are hyper-feminine. They are usually pink, fluffy, and sensual. However, there are certain things that happened at sex-toy parties that are provocatively male-like. These masculine male performances were: being loud and rowdy throughout the entire party experience, almost like men at football games. Some women have to be the center of attention, and they have to always be right, or correct. Some women claimed they can “fuck like a man”, which means they have a male’s libido, and can just have sex without getting emotionally attached. The women who purchased a lot in the sales room, literally strutted out, with their chests held high, and their shoulders back, as if to say, “I’ve got the bigger dick.” There was certainly a lot of masculine financial posturing happening at the parties. Then there were the women who literally drank like men at the parties. They drank for sport, to get drunk, and had to play “bartender” and get everyone else wasted.

Some women constantly tried to “edge each other on” and “out do” each during the sales presentation. The most aggressive or masculine women, the “Angelas”, were attending sex-toy parties and making real statements about how women construct their senses of self and personhood. These women want everyone to know that she is “Angela” and that she means business.

One woman I spoke with claimed that the masculine posturing at the parties is like, “when we used to play *I Never*”. *I Never* is a drinking game that people in St. Louis play growing up and learning about sex. The goal of *I Never* was to drink so much that you get drunk. People sit in a circle and ask risqué questions about the sexuality of the people in the circle. Someone usually starts off with “I never had sex in a public restroom”, and then if you have had sex in a public restroom, you raise your beer and take a huge gulp. Anyone who plays *I Never* plays *I Never* to showcase their sexual prowess and get “wasted”. Anyone who plays *I Never* wants to make sexual statements (in public) about, and demonstrate that, they’ve done it all (in bed) including: having sex in public, participating in a ménage à trois, and being into oral sex. Raising a glass and taking a huge gulp says certain things about woman sexually. When women play *I Never*, they want to come across as sexy, adventurous, experienced, and drunk. The same is the case at sex-toy parties as women (especially the *Angelas*) posture and make certain statements about their sexuality. At sex-toy parties women are extremely competitive during the sales presentation. They want to appear to know everything about sex. They want to appear sexually open-minded and liberated. However, in the feminine space of a female-only sex-toy party becomes a contested space of masculinity, is the party experience really liberatory?

Economic Liberation + Sexual Liberation = Self-Love?

In further critical analysis of the whole sex-toy party experience and culture, I still question how a woman's socioeconomic status (wealth) influences how she experiences the event of a sex-toy party. Furthermore, at sex-toy parties it seemed that women needed to have the financial clout to participate (purchase) in the consumptive practices.

Rhetorically, during the sales presentation, the emphasis was on selling the idea of a woman becoming sexually liberated by purchasing sex-toys. There was very little attention on the women's sex lives after the party. In a high-pressure sales environment, in which party attendees were usually intoxicated, it was interesting observing the process of sexual liberation through the course of the parties.

The sales representatives at sex-toy parties, like other in-home party businesses, are trained to aggressively push (sell) the merchandise. It was almost as if all the party attendees were solely there at the party to purchase items. The sales representative behave and showcased her merchandise as if all the attendees were paying with credit cards. As if value of a dollar (\$1) was twice its value (\$2). This was especially the case when dollars took the form of plastic, or credit cards. At sex-toy parties, the idea of sexual liberation was like a mantra, or ideology. By the end of the parties, women were then released back into society with new sets ideologies around not only their sexuality (sexual practices), but also their sexual liberations. At sex-toy parties, there was certainly a sense of 'keeping up with the Joneses' in terms of what the attendees purchased. At sex-toy parties, not one woman wants to come off as being poor and/or sexually unliberated.

The idea of self-love has both physical (masturbation) and philosophic (belief) features, or characteristics. These characteristics are unique to every woman. At sex-toy parties, notions of self-love are seen in a multitude of ways. In St. Louis women attended sex-toy parties for a number of reasons. Primarily, they attended to attend a party that they were invited to. Expressions of self-love were observed in the private sales room when women spent over \$100 on sex-toy merchandise. From a Feminist perspective I critique the idea of spending a lot of money in order to become sexually liberated. Furthermore, I don't believe that women have to spend any money to really love themselves. The hegemonic influence of our capitalistic patriarchal society states that women have to spend money in order to activate the American dream of beauty and sexiness.

At sex-toy parties, women are sold the idea of using vibrators and dildos on the journey to sexual liberation. In the culture of in-home sex-toy parties, the idea was that women order a bunch of expensive merchandise to secure their sexual liberation. If they couldn't afford the expensive merchandise, they were made feel less sexually liberated. Women who couldn't afford the expensive merchandise were ostracized and made guilty of not self-loving. Here self-love directly correlates with how much money women spent on themselves at the parties. There was never a notion of women using their own hands to masturbate. There was never a notion of a woman not buying at least one sexy item.

Conclusion: Bloody Marys & Screaming Dual-Orgasms

It is 2 weeks since Lexi attended a sex-toy party at Christine's house. Besides the dreadful 2 day hangover she suffered, she had a great time at the party. She thinks about the great food Christine served as well. At the party, Lexi purchased a dual-action vibrator. After 2 weeks, the backordered vibrator finally arrived yesterday. It's a Saturday night, and Lexi is financially strapped. Plus, there's really no good reason to travel out in the snow, just to go to a bar. Plus, over the past couple of months, she had gone out to bars on Saturday nights, and spent way too much money. She suddenly remembers that she got her backordered vibrator in the mail the day before, and opts to stay in and make it a date night for one. Two hours later, after having a couple of cocktails, and watching some bad reality television, she decides to call it a night, and retires to her bedroom. Once inside the bedroom, she opts to light a couple of candles to really set the mood. As Lexi rips open her new dual-action vibrator, she remembers to run into the office to grab 4 small batteries for the new vibrator. As she tears open the bedroom door, and runs down the hallway naked, she is excited to play with her new sex-toy. An hour later, as Lexi lies in bed, writhing in orgasmic pleasure, she thinks about how intense her orgasm actually is. She had not experience this caliber of orgasm before. She then mentally rewinds back through her last couple of sexual partners. Just when she gets lost in reminiscing, she has another orgasm. Completely sexually overwrought, she opts to turn off the vibrator, take a break, and pull herself together. Lexi then remembers how at the sex-toy party, Monica, the sales representative told her that the vibrator she'd purchase delivered the best orgasms. At the party, during the sales presentation, Monica demonstrated just how the vibrator worked. She taught the women attendees how the gadget was designed for women to have dual-orgasms, orgasms that happen in tandem, at the G-spot and clitoris zones. As she lays there in bed alone, post-orgasmic, she thinks about why she never got into masturbating with toys before the party. Why had she never thought about self-loving? Why had she never thought about the caliber of orgasm, and the self-love that comes from pleasure herself, for a change? A few minutes later, she decides to start the vibrator up again. This time she wants to try the 5 different speeds and the 5 different angles that are possible with this model of vibrator. She battles to remember exactly what Monica had shown them at the party. Suddenly she remembers that the gadget has pearls that vibrate in the G-spot zone, and that the clitoral stimulator feature has several different patterns of vibration. She reassures herself that the vibrator certainly worked like a 4 battery vibrator should...

In this ethnography, I examined sex in the city...the city of St. Louis. This sexy narrative was based on my anthropological explorations that examined sexuality as lived and performed by women at in-home female-only sex-toy parties in St. Louis, Missouri. Even though the economy was dismal in other areas, women still invested in their sexual pleasure and gratification. While some women couldn't afford the costs associated with hosting a sex-toy party, many women still ordered (purchased) sex-toys over the phone and on the sex-toy party sales representative's websites. In the dismal economy America has suffered, somehow, sex still sold. Like the alcohol industry, sex-toy businesses not only remained steady, but thrived in a rather dismal economy.

Married and single women alike purchased and used sex-toys. At sex-toy parties married women purchased sexy toys, creams, and lingerie just to spruce up their lackluster sex-lives. Single women who could no longer justify spending their hard-earned money on bars and dance clubs on the weekends, in search of random sexual opportunities, opted to stay at home with their sex-toys. For many of these women, solitary sex (masturbation) was the safest sex. Some women bought their first sex-toys at a sex-shop. Some women bought their first sex-toys at in-home sex-toy parties. As an ethnographic space, the in-home sex-toy party was not only dynamic and chaotic, but also the stuff of *Sodom & Gomorrah*, in a very conservative and southern Bible-Belt cultured town of St. Louis.

The majority of data collected for this ethnography came from participant-observation at over 20 in-home female-only sex-toy parties. The majority of the parties took place over 3 years in the metropolitan St. Louis area. Sometimes I attended parties almost every weekend. At other times, months passed in between parties. I worked as an

in-home sex-toy party sale-representative for a portion of the field-experience (2 years) and then I attended the parties of other sales-representatives (1 year). I attended the in-home parties of 5 different sex-toy-party companies. Women not only made noteworthy statements, but also performed intriguing notions of class, gender, and sexuality featured in this sexy narrative about sex-toy parties. These statements were all about how they socially constructed their ideologies and identity around gender, sexuality, and class.

Traditionally, American cultural anthropologists have explored cultures outside of the United States. In my view, American culture is complex, multifaceted, and chock full of social conflicts. I believe that Anthropology as a discipline has over looked contemporary culture (popular culture) as well. I believe that American cultures, subculture, and microcultures are worthy of anthropological pursuits. This ethnography was based on domestic culture in the United States. This ethnography examined American popular culture. This project was also a bit of native ethnography. I am native to St. Louis. From theoretical perspectives that were Feminist and postmodern, I strived to position this ethnography on sound anthropological ground. Overall, I sought to make a contribution to the rather lackluster socio-cultural anthropological record of women, and their social constructions of gender, sexuality, race, and class in America.

The sex-toy party served as a taboo space for women in that it was female-only. Even in modern American society, the subject of sexuality is still taboo in both private and public domains. As a social geography (or space) St. Louis was a great place to examine the social construction of sexuality (and gender) because St. Louis is centrally located at America's core geographically and culturally. Simply put, St. Louis is Middle-America. St. Louis is geographically centered in the American landscape. St. Louis rests

on the social and geographical borders of what are considered *north* and *south*, and *east* and *west*. I argue that in St. Louis, women's contemporary ideologies around sexuality and gender are linked to oppressive gender and sexual histories. That made the social space of a sex-toy party extremely intriguing. In the social space of sex-toy parties, women were motivated and encouraged to become sexually liberated. At sex-toy parties, women's constructions of sexual identities were refashioned, codified, and negotiated. Examining the social taboos of masturbation, sexual indecency, sexual aggression, was useful for thinking about women's social constructions of sexuality and sexual liberations. Ultimately in Feminist spirit, I was invested in breaking the social shackles placed on a woman's sexuality, bodies, and souls. Mostly, I hoped this sexy ethnography would incite sexual confidence and self-love in women. Even at the social costs of masturbation.

Another task in this ethnography was to explore how sex-toy parties became *liminal* (ala Turner) highly contested spaces, where women expressed and performed provocative versions of sexuality, gender, and class. Much of the anthropological literature on sexuality, although ethnographically rich in its description of community building in sexual cultures, fails to attend to the complex processes by which sexual liberation occurs. In the social space of an in-home, female-only, sex-toy party, women identified and expressed their notions of sexual liberation through their consumptive and sexual practices. During sex toy parties, women assembled in a safe space, and became familiar enough to share not only the social space, but also the party experience. Simply understood, it was *their* space to behave and consume as they wished. In St. Louis, at sex-toy parties women were introduced to a large array of sexual products. Besides a

garden variety of dildos and vibrators, women were taunted and tantalized to purchase everything from; scented massage oils and candles, to anal beads, fuzzy hand cuffs, and even portable sex swings and stripper poles. I argue that the whole party experience is *communitas* (ala Turner) type of experience for party attendees.

A women's first sex-toy party is a different experience as compared to her fifth sex-toy party. Many attendees likened the first party experience, to the experience of loosing their virginity. After a sex-toy parties, women remerged as new women. They were new women with new sexual agendas in bed. At sex-toy parties, women assembled as a group of strangers, who were rather shy at first, and were uncertain of what would occur at the party. Cocktail by cocktail, they loosened up, and some even passed through their *liminal* phases before others. The *liminal* phase at a sex-toy party was the two-hour sales-presentation. Throughout the sales presentation, women were exposed to all kinds of sex gadgets, creams, and lingerie. Throughout the sales-presentation, women were also forced to confront the realities of their individual sex-lives. After sex-toy parties, the subject of authentic sexual pleasure (stop faking it...real orgasms) was at the forefront of party-attendees sex agendas.

To better understand how sexuality is constructed across time and space, in this ethnography I attempted to denaturalize sexuality by deconstructing the links between sexual practice, desire, and sexual identity. From my view, by deconstructing these links, we have critical perspective from which to think about what women's sexual practices really mean. In the case of sex-toy parties in St. Louis, sexual actions spoke louder than words. In St. Louis, women were nurtured (socialized) into ultra-traditional, conservative, southern cultural ideologies around social decency, feminine gender, and

what makes a good Christian woman. Sex-toy parties, in their essence, presented women party-attendees with an opportunity to reconnect with, and gamble against, their beliefs about sexual behavior in general. That was especially the case when women at parties deemed certain sexual behaviors as normal/abnormal, moral/immoral, and decent/indecent. Approximately half of women invited to sex-toy parties did not attend the parties. In St. Louis, *decent* women did not masturbate, and they would never get totally ‘wasted’ and be raunchy and expressive about their sexual practices in public

After a couple of cocktails, at sex-toy parties, women said (and did) some rather un-Christian (indecent) things. During conversations at sex-toy parties, women confessed their secret perversions and sexual desires. They certainly got ‘wasted’ and told “all their business.” That was “all their business” about their sexual performances, practices, and preferences. Women at sex-toy parties *wanted* to talk about sex. Women verbally shared what they actually did in bed with fellow party-attendees in public. These were the conversations that often occurred during several phases at the parties. Additionally at sex-toy parties, women literally performed (demonstrated) their authentic sexual power. Women at parties empowered themselves (and each other) as they engaged in conversations, or discursive acts.

Sex-toy parties were chock-full of rowdy, loud, and drunken women who were very engaged in and committed to appearing modern and knowledgeable on the subject of sex-toys, masturbation, and sexuality overall. At parties, women also went through identity and personality transformations as the sex-toy parties transgressed. The *modus operandi* for women at parties was to become completely disorderly, animated, and almost belligerent about their notions of gender and sexuality. This was especially the

case when there were large amounts of alcohol intermingle with the party experience. Alcoholic beverages or ‘girlie drinks’ were culturally universal at the parties in St. Louis. But then again, St. Louis is a major ‘drinking’ town. Local anecdotes are plenty about babies being raised on *Budweiser* beer in their bottles. What’s more, people still rub whisky on a teething baby’s gums.

In the southern cultured and conservative space of St. Louis, at sex-toy parties, it seemed merely purchasing sexy toys, creams, and lingerie symbolically characterized notions of sexual liberation. Additionally, I argue women at sex-toy parties consumed sex merchandise in a light that frames them as modern women (not southern belles) who were liberated enough, and had the *chutzpah* to take charge of their sexual lives. A reoccurring theme by the end of sex-toy parties was that women “didn’t need a man” to have an orgasm anymore. For single women this meant that they could stay at home on weekends and still have great sex and authentic orgasms. For married women it meant that they possessed the equipment necessary for interesting, sexy, hot, and passionate sex-lives again.

On paper, everyone who attended a sex-toy party did so in support of the party hostess. That was the external motivation to purchase sex-toys at parties. As southern etiquette would have it, it was customary for decent women party attendees to buy at least one item. That understood, almost instantly by going through the party experience, attendees were changing their modes of sexual behavior by simply purchasing items like neon green anal beads and lavender- vanilla bondage sets. Married or single, party attendees leave the party with a new bag of tricks & wares to please not only her lover, but also herself. Single women get excited about their newfound safe (safest) sex

practices, including self-love, or masturbation. As for internal motivation, at sex-toy parties, women ultimately learned to really *love* themselves and become sexually independent *via* the sex-toy party experience.

At the parties, sex-toy party merchandise was costly. On average party attendees spent more than they initially had planned to. Women with credit-cards clearly were at an advantage financially speaking. The erudite and financially driven sales-representatives convinced party attendees that they *deserve* to spend money on themselves, for a change. The sales-representatives were most savvy in how they convinced the party-attendees to purchase sexy items for their own sexual gratification, and well-being. Authentic sexual gratification for some women attendees came in no longer needing a man (in bed) to have an authentic orgasm. Women were taking charge of their sex-lives whether they were single or married. The purchasing (consumption) of sex-toys was thus a means to become a sexual diva, or a modern sex goddess, who knows how to pleasure herself with or without a man. Some women even claimed to have become addicted to masturbation with sex-toys. Most all women complained about the financial dimension of the party experience.

As consumers at sex-toy parties, women performed, affirmed, and transformed social meanings of what it means to be sexy and liberated. In terms of social class, it was very interesting to observe the social experience of poor women at sex-toy parties who could not afford the costly sex merchandise. Clearly, they had a different overall party experience. Poor women, who could not afford to drop \$150 on vibrators, dildos, and lingerie, usually cowered in the back of the party sales presentation, and they never entered the private sales room to buy items. I argue that poor women at sex-toy parties

don't experience the same sort of *communitas*. Furthermore, they did not emerge or come off as being sexually liberated to their party attendee counterparts. Though they were present for the sales-presentation, they could not purchase merchandise to take home.

At the parties, after the sales presentations ended, sexuality was expressed in what flavors, colors, and sizes women purchased in sex merchandise like dual-action vibrators and butt plugs. As such, not only did women perform sexualities, but they were also made statements about how they planned to change their sexual behaviors. For most women in St. Louis, the idea of sex for one (masturbation) is a new self-loving liberating idea. I was intrigued by the myriad of ways the parties incited changes in party-attendees' sexual practices, ideas, habits, and addictions. After sex-toy parties, some women were introduced to masturbation, but many more women simply masturbated more often. In St. Louis, masturbation is still a taboo sexual practice for women. The notion of authentic self-love was even more unfamiliar for many women party-attendees in St. Louis. Simply understood, some women in St. Louis believed that only whores and desperate women *resorted* to masturbation. Women who attend sex-toy parties seemed to somehow get their minds, bodies, and souls wrapped around the idea of masturbation, and/or self-love.

Researching the popular culture of in-home female-only sex-toy parties has profoundly impacted my life not only academically and professionally, but also personally. As stated earlier, as a sales-representative, while I actively pursued sexual liberations for women at sex-toy parties, they passively incited sexual liberations in me. Throughout this research project, I've come to really understand my own sexual performances and ideologies. From the many fabulous moments in the field, I remember

a few that were simply magical, and noteworthy. I remember things like women fighting in line for the bathroom to rub the clitoral heightener on their own clitorises in the midst of a sales-presentation. All of a sudden, half the women in sales presentation circle would jump up to run to the bathroom. Then, about thirty minutes later, when the sales presentation was almost completed, many women discovered and complained that they had put too much of the heightener cream on their clitorises. Much to my horror, some of those women apparently put the heightener cream on their urethras, not their clitorises.

This doctoral ethnography about women and sex-toy parties is not only unique, but also it is a ‘back to the basics’ approach to conducting ethnography. By ‘back to the basics’ I mean early Anthropology, simple ethnography. This ethnography is a celebration of the simple everyday lives of women in American popular culture, and their sexualities. This ethnography, in its essence, was a return to what I signed up for in graduate study; ethnography, humans, and culture. That said, this ethnography was not mired in indecipherable theory, rhetoric, and discourse. In true Black Feminist spirit, I wanted to write (create) something that the average American woman can not only understand, but also relate to. In true Sex-Positive Feminist spirit, I hope to incite socio-sexual change on the streets (and in the bedrooms) of America.

As stated earlier, the majority of the data was collected through participant-observations at over 20 sex-toy parties. Though I worked as a sales-representative for 2 years, I only scratched the surface of what the sales-representative profession is about. Though I had several years of retail store sales experience, I had never sold anything in an in-home party format. In the case of the sex-toy party sales representative, I was afforded the luxury of this ethnography being a research project, and not my only source

of income like many other sales-representatives I encountered in the field. As stated earlier, this research project paid for itself. As a sales-representative, I was capable of profiting enough to pay for the actual operation of my party business, and I was able to compensate my cultural consultants for their time. Sometimes I was even financially stable enough to compensate the party hostesses and furnish a delicious dip at some of the parties I attended. Women in St. Louis really got into party dips and we even swap party dip recipes sometimes. After attending so many sex-toy parties, I have gathered quite a collection of party dip recipes. In the end, I never mastered baking the penis-like cakes and cookies.

Another advantage I had in the field was that I was not married during my field experience. Many in-home party sales-representatives are married. Many more sales-representatives have children. Personally, I can not imagine having to leave my husband at home alone on weekend nights to go sell dildos and vibrators. Nor can I envision having children in the chaotic world of scheduling sex-toy parties, ordering sex-toy merchandise, and having enough physical space and privacy in the home to store all the stuff of a sex-toy party business. My research experiences were only glimpses into the lives of these rather courageous, gregarious, and charming saleswomen. In future ethnographic endeavors, I would like to attend some of the national (and sometimes international) sales conferences. These sales conferences are the typical conferences that are coordinated to motivate, celebrate, and congratulate sales-representatives. Some of these conferences even occur on elaborate cruises and at posh resorts.

To this day women still contact me to request catalogs in hopes of ordering and purchasing sex-toys. Some of these women were most interested in purchasing the anal

sex cream. To this day, I am still known as the sex-toy saleswoman in many social circles, including family circles. Like most doctoral students, I have ‘had it’ with my research. On a personal level, there have been times that I was completely turned off of sexuality. I had ‘had it’ with all things feminine, sexual, and sex-toys. At times I even felt like I was becoming asexual. By asexual, I mean the sexual orientation of no attraction to either sex. By asexual I also mean no attraction to sex...at all. It was like when people order a decadent dessert (i.e.: caramel-pecan chocolate cheesecake) in which they grow sick of eating half way through. I wanted nothing to do with women, sex-toys, or sex acts. This distaste for sex began in the field at the parties.

In the field, there I stood, in front of women, selling them vibrators, and selling them on the idea of masturbating their way into a sexual liberation. There were some parties where I had no problem making it through the sales-presentation with enthusiasm and gusto. Then there were those parties that were located an hour away from my house. In addition to my being completely bored and psychologically checked-out during the sales presentation, like a saleswoman robot, I just sold and pushed expensive vibrators, fuzzy handcuffs, and anal sex cream. All things considered, whether I was totally into the parties, or just being a saleswoman robot, I met some amazing women. I also know that women all over St. Louis have altered their sex lives because of our social interactions at the sex-toy parties.

Sex-Toys are available nowadays in a myriad of ways. Since I began this project, a plethora of sex-toy stores have opened across the Country. These new fangled stores have popped up in more progressive cities, like Chicago, San Francisco, and New York City. These modern sex-toy shops are Feminist in philosophy and sales agenda. These

stores are geared toward women customers who are confident enough to shop in public for their sex-toys and other sex merchandise. From a female consumer perspective, these stores are spaces that incite female sexual liberation, and even revolution in some cases. Like the in-home sex-toy party, the sex merchandise in the stores is rather expensive. Also, in the space of a public store, the woman customer must be financially sound to be capable of purchasing sex merchandise. Once again the idea of economic liberation is tantamount to the idea of sexual liberation. Once again this complicates the essence of Feminism in the overall sex-toy business be it in-home party or public sex-toy shop. Having financial clout is germane to having a sexual liberation. In other words, having financial clout is germane to the sexual oppression of poor women. In other words, poor women (women without credit cards) don't deserve equal sexual liberation.

Sex-toy parties are spaces that incite women to self-love. They are spaces where women have a hand in constructing and reinventing ways of being who they are. Sex-toy parties as cultural spaces are fraught with contestations and liberations for women. All things considered, sex-toy parties are place were women bond, learn about sex, and have a good time. After all, it is a *party*. Lastly, words can not express how I felt the day I witnessed an older female relative offering to share her *Sam's Club* sized pack of AA batteries with me. This occurred at her dinning room table one random Saturday afternoon. In a flash and with finesse, she whipped the somewhat weighty plastic package of 100 AA batteries out of her credenza drawer. This symbolically meant that she had added the batteries to her *Sam's Club* shopping list. She also claimed that she had really *enjoyed* the vibrator she had recently bought (from me) named "Mr. Tongue." I thought to myself... "*I've created a monster.*" Many women spoke about becoming

addicted to masturbating with their new sex-toys after attending sex-toy parties. Some women even claimed to “go at it” so much that they wore out the motors on their sexy machinery. At \$40 each on average, maintaining a decent collection of and becoming addicted to sex-toys can be extremely costly. In St. Louis, women still ‘made ends meet’ and found ways to purchase (replace) their very sexy machinery.

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