

# Adventures with the “Plastic Man”: Sex Toys, Compulsory Heterosexuality, and the Politics of Women’s Sexual Pleasure

Breanne Fahs · Eric Swank

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**Abstract** While previous studies have addressed symbolic implications of lesbian dildo usage and quantitative findings about women’s vibrator use, little research has assessed women’s subjective feelings about using sex toys. This study draws upon qualitative interviews with twenty women from diverse ages and backgrounds to illuminate six themes in women’s narratives about sex toys: (1) emphasis on non-penetrative use of phallic sex toys; (2) embarrassment about disclosing use to partner(s); (3) personifying vibrators and dildos as male; (4) coercion and lack of power when using sex toys; (5) embracing sex toys as campy, fun, and subversive; and (6) resistance to sex toys as impersonal or artificial. Emerging patterns revealed that queer women more often constructed sex toys as subversive, fun, and free of shame while heterosexual women more often believed most women self-penetrate with sex toys, that sex toys threatened male partners, and they described more coercion involving sex toys. This article explores implications for sexual identity and sex toys, along with women’s negotiation of the “masculine” presence of sex toys in their narratives about using sex toys.

**Keywords** Sex toys · Dildos · Vibrators · Women’s sexuality · Gender norms · Heterosexuality · Queer sexualities · Sexual subjectivities · Qualitative research

## Introduction

For the last several decades, women in the United States have successfully advocated for the recognition of their right to sexual pleasure, with access to sex

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B. Fahs (✉)  
Arizona State University, Glendale, AZ, USA  
e-mail: breanne.fahs@asu.edu

E. Swank  
Morehead State University, Morehead, KY, USA  
e-mail: e.swank@morehead-st.edu

toys representing one possible avenue to women’s self-pleasure. As the call to “take pleasure into your own hands” has grown—in part due to recognizing the role of clitoral stimulation and the importance of sexual self-reliance—sex toys have entered more women’s sexual lives in both private and partnered sexual experiences. Building upon this momentum, much scholarly debate has ensued about whether phallic-shaped sex toys utilized in sex play between women represent literal phalluses or symbolic subversions of patriarchal power (Findlay 1992; O’Keefe et al. 2009). While those in classical semiotics have argued that lesbians utilize sex toys as a means to compensate for the relative lack of “phallus” in sex (Bolsø 2007), most postmodern and feminist scholars have theorized that lesbians’ use of phallic sex toys subverts the masculinized power of the phallus and plays with the idea that men are the sole wielders of the penetrative penis (Bolsø 2007; Hamming 2001; Minge and Zimmerman 2009; Lamos 1994; Reich 1999). Curiously, though quantitative research has shown that heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian women all use vibrators (Herbenick et al. 2010) and women generally use them to enhance sexual responsiveness and sexual pleasure (Herbenick et al. 2009a; Davis et al. 1996; Richters et al. 2006), qualitative sex researchers have largely ignored women’s own *narratives* about their sex toy usage, particularly across sexual identity boundaries. In other words, the empirical literature on sex toys has mostly ignored the storylines and common interpretive schemas women use when discussing and thinking about sex toys. In particular, heterosexual women’s use of (phallic) sex toys has rarely received the same conceptual interrogations and empirical analysis that has been directed toward lesbian women’s dildo usage. As such, this study examines women’s subjective narratives about their sex toy usage (including vibrators *and* dildos<sup>1</sup>) across sexual identity boundaries, as heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian women discuss their complex relationship with, and meanings ascribed to, using (or not using) sex toys and the meaning of sex toys in their sexual experiences, masturbation behaviors, and sexual partnerships. By framing women’s sex toy narratives within larger frameworks of feminist theory, queer theory, and the problems of compulsory heterosexuality, this study addresses many of the contemporary blind spots present in the study of women’s sexual pleasure.

## Literature Review

### A Brief History

Historical studies show that people have used dildos (from the Italian *diletto*, for “to delight”) since at least 3<sup>rd</sup> century Greece, and that modern rubber dildos first appeared in the nineteenth century (Deka 2005). Most notably, the history of vibrators suggests notable links between sex toys and the *regulation and control* of women, as doctors may, in some small circles, have used vibrators in the nineteenth century to “cure” hysteria

<sup>1</sup> While vibrators and dildos sometimes overlap (e.g., vibrating dildos), some sex toys involve vibrations without the phallic shape, while some phallic-shaped dildos do not vibrate. In this study, though we recognize far more categories within the term “sex toys,” we use “sex toys” to mean all three previously mentioned categories of objects.

and other ailments, often with women's husbands' approval (Chazan 2009; Maines 2001). Because vibrators had a distinctly *medical* purpose in the nineteenth century, it took several decades—well into the 1920s—to “see” vibrators as mechanisms that induce sexual pleasure. In the 1930s, women's magazines advertised “massagers” in non-sexual terms instead of “vibrators,” and vibrators did not reappear in advertisements until after the sexual revolution (Lindemann 2006). Globally, dildos and vibrators currently have a tangible presence in the developed world and have started to appear in the developing world (India, in particular) (Deka 2005).

### Benefits of Using Sex Toys

While there have been only a handful of explanatory studies about how women use sex toys, or what potential benefits they offer to partnered sexual dynamics (Herbenick et al. 2009a, 2010; Richters et al. 2006), research has found masturbation (with or without sex toys) to be positive and sexually affirming, noting that masturbation can improve women's self-awareness, body image, self-esteem, and overall sexual pleasure (Coleman 2002; Herbenick et al. 2009a; Hurlbert and Whittaker 1991; McFadden 2011; Shulman and Horne 2003). In the most widespread study of women's vibrator use to date (Herbenick et al. 2009a), researchers found that 52.5 % of women used vibrators, with more women stimulating the clitoris (83.8 %) than penetrating their vaginas (64 %). Further, those who used them described greater likelihood of engaging in other health behaviors like getting regular gynecological exams and performing genital self-examinations during the previous month and described little negative side effects associated with using vibrators. Also, women's vibrator positively linked with many other aspects of women's sexual lives, including increased sexual desire, arousal, lubrication, orgasm, absence of sexual pain, and overall sexual functioning (Herbenick et al. 2009a, 2011; Richters et al. 2006). Women used vibrators primarily to stimulate the clitoris and to enhance sexual pleasure (Davis et al. 1996). As nearly 2/3 of women used vibrators in partnered sexual activities and masturbation, women described vibrators as contributing to intense orgasms and high levels of sexual satisfaction whether alone or with partners (Davis et al. 1996).

Sex toys have also often enhanced women's sexual lives by serving as a mechanism for women to “spice up” their sometimes-monotonous partnered sex (Zamboni and Crawford 2002), though many women also masturbate with sex toys as a complementary practice to an active, fulfilling, partnered sex life (Das 2007). Women use sex toys as part of an active masturbatory life, whether partnered or not (Tiefer 1998). With options available like vibrators, dildos, butt plugs, cock rings, and sex dolls (among others), sex toys represent a viable option for women to take pleasure into their own hands (Herbenick et al. 2009b). Across sexual identity lines, heterosexual, bisexual (see Schick et al. 2012 and Schick et al. 2011), and queer women all report relatively frequent use of vibrators and sex toys (Herbenick et al. 2009b). They may also help women to achieve stereotypical definitions of “empowered” femininity (that is, successful, “hip,” non-traditional, and career-driven) outlined in fashion-oriented magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, *Essence* (Buchanan 2010), and shows like *Sex and the City* (Comella 2003). Popular

women’s magazines and television shows frequently advocate that women orgasm to empower their sexualities through buying sex toys (Buchanan 2010; Comella 2003; Wright 2009), as cultural norms about sexual pleasure reveal themselves both through the toys themselves and through marketing strategies directed at women (Rye and Meaney 2007).

### Sex Toys as Therapeutic?

Sex therapy literatures often advocate sex toys and other sexual enhancement devices to promote “orgasm positive interventions” (Striar and Bartlik 1999) implicitly targeting heterosexual women’s orgasmic functioning as something sex toys can assist with (Billups et al. 2001). While some sex therapies have successfully deconstructed the centrality of orgasm and penetrative intercourse (Tiefer 2004), the underlying premise of these “progress through technology” interventions assumes that orgasm (via sex toys) correlates with a better overall sex life (Garland 2004; Zamboni and Crawford 2002), and that women’s discovery of sex toys would allow them greater happiness and fulfillment (Billups et al. 2001). Sex toy advocates within the sex therapy community argue that sex toys can add diversity to a monogamous relationship, trigger sexual desire for patients with low libido, inspire arousal and ease performance anxiety, help couples with incompatible sexual fantasies, model new ways to communicate or achieve orgasm, and assist with older patients, those with chronic pain, or those struggling with sexual aversion disorders, sexual abuse, and poor body image (Striar and Bartlik 1999; Warkentin et al. 2006). Dildos and butt plugs may also allow *men* to experience penetration from a partner (e.g., “Bend Over Boyfriend” or gay “bottoms”) and thus provide new experiences for sexual pleasure that transcend traditional gender and heteronormative scripts (Hollows 2007; Rye and Meaney 2007). Still, feminist sex therapists caution that masturbation and partnered sex, with or without sex toys, are beholden to patriarchal cultural scripts that derive from historical, biological, and cultural influences (Tiefer 1998, 2004), including racist, heterosexist, and sexist ideologies (Fahs 2011).

Within the medical world, the medicalization of women’s sexuality has led to a host of “interventions” that seek to improve women’s orgasmic functioning via medical “toys.” Devices like vacuum pumps for women’s clitorises (Billups et al. 2001) and “clitoral therapy devices” (Schroder et al. 2005) suggest that sex therapy discourses equate physiological arousal with efficient orgasm and sexual activity for women, even though other studies have found that women’s physiological arousal does not always correlate with sexual *desire* (Fahs 2011; Harris 2004; O’Connor 2004). That is, medical interventions may induce women’s physiological arousal (e.g., lubrication and swelling) but women still report little desire for sex with their partners (O’Connor 2004). Nevertheless, sex therapy interventions that ignore systemic sexism often equate the use of sex toys with women’s “freedom” to enjoy sexuality, and too often do not adequately account for women’s fluctuations in sexual desire that occur because of everyday life responsibilities and stressors (e.g., domestic responsibilities, child care, health status, full-time careers, and inequities with division of labor in most households) (Tiefer 2004).

## Revisiting the “Lesbian Dildo Debates”

While theoretical debates exist about whether phallic sex toys represent the literal, symbolic, or differently-imagined participation of the “symbolic man” (O’Keefe et al. 2009; Findlay 1992), most feminist theory suggests that dildos subvert the meaning of the phallus and undermine men’s ultimate power to “please” women via penetration. If women can penetrate each other, or if the phallus functions as a symbolically castrated or dismembered man, this undermines men’s monopoly on patriarchal and sexual power (Findlay 1992; Hamming 2001; Lamos 1994; Minge and Zimmerman 2009; Reich 1999). The dildo in lesbian sex may serve as a technological extension that mutates lesbians into “post-gender” beings; this transformation disrupts the sense that dildos represent literal penises or lesbians’ repressed desire for a male partner (Hamming 2001; Preciado 2011). Lesbian dildo play may also “resignify” the dildo, reimagine violent sexual narratives, and reshape heteronormative assumptions about the relationship between the body and penetration (Minge and Zimmerman 2009).

Nevertheless, many feminist theorists have expressed concern that the phallus’s role in *delivering* pleasure to women is rarely challenged in debates about the phallus’s symbolic role, as penetrative pleasure still reigns. Some theorists suggest that dildos represent, for lesbians, “phallic imperialism,” as dildos keep women subjugated while ensuring the maintenance of male dominance (Mondschein 2004). Rather than using dildos at all, some wonder, why not completely bar the phallus from entering the lesbian bedroom (Findlay 1992)? Why not embrace *non-penetration*? This rhetoric of the *penetration imperative* fits well with historical trends that viewed masturbation (and all non-reproductive sexuality) as trivial, deviant, and causing mental illness (Kay 1992; Laqueur 2004). Theologians, therapists, and medical doctors have historically warned that women who practiced “excessive” masturbation were “crazy” (Laqueur 2004). This characterization translates into recent medical scholarship as well, as one study in *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* portrayed women who used vibrators for clitoral stimulation as having “anxious attachment” and as fundamentally insecure (Costa and Brody 2011), suggesting, as much of their work does, that secure and mature women should primarily rely upon penises and penetration for sexual satisfaction and should avoid all clitoral stimulation. Further, heterosexual women’s sexual *satisfaction* correlated most highly with their *partner’s knowledge and perceived liking of vibrator use* (Herbenick et al. 2010), suggesting that partner evaluations and relationship scripts informed women’s feelings about their vibrators (just as women evaluate many aspects of their bodies and sexuality based on the evaluation of others, particularly men).

Implicitly, then, there is a sharp divide between the decades-long queer theory work around lesbians using phallic sex toys compared with the relatively recent emergence of social science work that examines heterosexual women’s (and *all* men’s) motives for using sex toys. When women’s sex toy use appears in the social science literature, it is usually framed empirically as (healthy, body-affirming) “vibrator use” (Herbenick et al. 2009a; Davis et al. 1996; Richters et al. 2006) while studies specifically on lesbians’ sex toy use is framed more theoretically and focuses

on (power-heavy, deviant) “dildo use” (Findlay 1992; Hamming 2001) or vibrator use and psychological impairment (Costa and Brody 2011), perhaps suggesting a discursive split between queer women and others. With regard to gender differences, existing studies of men’s sex toy usage point out that men (across sexual identities) who used vibrators more often performed testicular self-exams (Reece et al. 2009), and generally report higher satisfaction (Reece et al. 2009; Satinsky et al. 2011), and higher erectile functioning, orgasmic functioning, and sexual desire (Reece et al. 2009), though debate about the symbolic meaning of sex toys for men has not appeared nearly as often as it has for women. And, to demonstrate women’s “deviance” in comparison to men, women who penetrated themselves during masturbation before age 18 were found to desire vaginal and anal penetration later on, implying that those who *did not* self-penetrate developed paraphilias or other sexual dysfunctions (O’Keefe et al. 2009). No such studies of men’s early masturbation experiences and correlates with paraphilic behavior exist.

### Sex Toys, Capitalism, and Social Identities

Some scholars have started to question capitalistic implications of sex toys, including the dangerous and financially exploitative conditions in which sex toys are produced. For example, equating sex toy usage with sexual liberation suggests that buying things leads to sexual freedom and that sexual agents are also *sexual consumers* (Curtis 2004; Smith 2007). The sex toy industry and its targeted audiences rarely question the equation of shopping and sexual liberation, often drawing upon discourses of pleasure, fashion, consumerism, and sexuality to market “new” female sexualities (Attwood 2005). Further still, the sex toy market may indeed *produce* sexual desires and therefore *produce* sexual subjects so that women construct their sexualities around the desires that best sell sex toys (e.g., the “double dildo”) (Curtis 2004) even while promoting feminist values and consciousness (Comella 2012). Progressives have only recently begun to question the labor conditions, quality of materials (particularly plastics), and eco-friendly implications of sex toys, as demand has grown for such information (Thomas 2006). These political economy critiques from progressives offer particular complexity because they arrive in tandem with conservative attacks on the morality of the sex toy industry (Glover 2009) as many states like Alabama still outlaw the purchase of sex toys (Hayes 2009; Rawls 2007).

As another way to critique the hierarchical implications of sex toys, they often replicate racist and sexist themes, particularly the racist stereotype of the gigantic (notably dismembered) black penis as a “signifier of racial terror and desire” (Findlay 1992, p.572), and sexist imagery about women as passive sex objects (Fisher 2010; Loe 1998). As Alavi (2004) wrote, while interracial sexual relationships create moral panics in the United States, large black dildos are “constructed to reinforce the stereotype of the ‘big black cock,’ which supports the idea that black men are sexually aggressive” (p.89). Additionally, sex toys advocate heterosexist ideals, as sex toys for women are phallic shaped even though women most often employ clitoral stimulation while masturbating (Davis et al. 1996). Only in the last decade have sex toy companies released sex toys shaped like tongues or

amorphous shapes (e.g., JimmyJane's tongue-shaped Form 3, see <http://www.jimmyjane.com/form3/>). Though feminist-owned and woman-focused sex toy shops often differ in packaging sex toys, the typical advertising and packaging of sex toys in male-targeted sex toy shops depicts women in stereotypically objectified poses, referencing themes found in mainstream pornography; though sex toys are clearly meant to stimulate women, the packaging in traditional sex toy shops portrays men as the primary purchasers and disseminators of sex toys to "their" women. Even for feminist sex toy stores that explicitly fight against these trends, they often admit to struggling between ideological feminist beliefs and the ultimate need to generate profits (Loe 1999).

The assumption that sex toys represent an inherently feminist agenda (particularly when sold in more gender-friendly packaging) also undermines the reality that, theoretically, sex toys may teach women *not* to touch their vaginas and vulvas with their own fingers and hands. In other words, sex toys may encourage women to use devices, rather than fingers, to give themselves pleasure. Women who use sex toys may learn to masturbate only with technology as an aid, thereby foregoing the potentially more intimate experience of touching their actual genitals (Fahs and Frank in press). Further, sex toys may serve a role in infantilizing women, as sex toys in Japan were originally developed as actual *toys* (with children's toys' designs) in order to get around the country's obscenity laws that banned penis-shaped objects. Consequently, toys like the "Rabbit," and Hello Kitty vibrators that clearly mimic children's toys came onto the market (Taormino 2009). This association between sex toys, sexual pleasure, and treating women like children has largely been ignored, even though it mimics larger trends of treating women as (passive, immature, hairless) girls (Kilbourne 2007; Toerien and Wilkinson 2003).

These theoretical and empirical findings suggest that, while sex toys have received theoretical and quantitative scholarly attention, *qualitative* work has not yet explored women's narratives about using sex toys, particularly related to the ways sexual scripts (and compulsory heterosexuality) frame women's private sexual experiences. Consequently, this study asks several questions: First, what kinds of themes emerge when women talk about their experiences with using sex toys? Second, what differences, if any, appear between lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women, and what do these differences suggest about the relationship between sexual identity and sex toy usage? Third, how do women's narratives about sex toys reflect broader constructions of patriarchy, power, and the potential for subversive resistance?

## Method

This study utilized qualitative data from a sample of twenty adult women recruited in, 2011 in a large metropolitan Southwestern U.S. city. Participants were recruited through local entertainment and arts listings distributed free to the community as well as the volunteers section of the local online section of Craigslist (both widely used to recruit research subjects in this city). The study invited women ages 18–59 to participate in a 2-h interview about their sexual histories, sexual practices, and



feelings and attitudes about sexuality. Participants were screened only for their gender, racial/ethnic background, sexual identity, and age; no other pre-screening questions were asked. A purposive sample was selected to encourage greater demographic diversity in the sample: sexual minority women and racial/ethnic minority women were intentionally oversampled and a diverse range of ages was represented (55 % or 11 of, 20 ages 18–31; 25 or 5 of, 20 % ages 32–45; and, 20 % or 4 of, 20 ages 46–59). The sample included 55 % (11 of, 20) white women and 45 % (9 of, 20) women of color, including three African-American women, four Mexican-American women, and two Asian-American women. For self-reported sexual identity, the sample included 12 heterosexual women (60 %), six bisexual women (30 %), and two lesbian women (10 %). While these labels are informative, women’s reported sexual *behavior* often indicated far more same-sex eroticism than these self-categorized labels suggest. As advertised in the recruitment materials (and approved by the institutional review board), participants were compensated \$20.00 for participating. All participants consented to have their interviews audiotaped and fully transcribed. Identifying data was removed and each participant received a pseudonym (chosen by the researchers as appropriate parallels to the person’s actual name) to ensure anonymity. Participants directly reported a range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, employment histories, and parental and relationship statuses.

Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol that lasted for approximately 1.5–2 h, where participants responded to 36 questions that included aspects of their best and worst sexual experiences, feelings about contemporary sexual culture and media, personal experiences with orgasm and other sexual events, negotiations of power with partner(s), and reflections on their bodies. Several of the prompts addressed issues relevant to this study; these questions were asked as a part of a larger study on women’s sexuality. For example, women were asked, “What kind of relationship do you have with sex toys or ‘props’ during masturbation or during partnered sex?” These 36 questions were scripted, but served to open up other conversations and dialogue about related topics, as follow up questions were free-flowing and conversational. As the questions were broad and open-ended, participants could set the terms of how they would discuss sex toys and what information they wanted to share. The original questions served as “sensitizing concepts” that allowed previous research to lay the groundwork for topics and themes to look for (Charmaz 2006).

Responses were analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis. This type of analysis was considered the most effective and useful because it allowed for groupings of responses based on women’s attitudes and feelings (e.g., embarrassment about sex toy usage; constructing sex toys as playful and fun). This method of analysis also supported an examination of the intersection between sex toy usage and other components of women’s sexual lives (e.g., partnered sexual pleasure). To conduct the analysis, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading all of the transcripts thoroughly, and we then identified patterns for common interpretations posed by participants. In doing so, we reviewed lines, sentences, and paragraphs of the transcripts, looking for patterns in their ways of discussing their sex toy usage (Braun and Clarke 2006). We selected and generated themes through the process of



identifying logical links and overlaps between participants. After creating these themes, we compared them to previous themes expressed by other participants in order to identify similarities, differences, and general patterns. This type of thematic analysis relied upon a data-driven inductive approach in which themes were generated prior to the interpretation of those themes (Boyatzis 1998). As such, initial themes were identified, codes were applied and then connected back to the themes, and these themes were then corroborated and legitimized using inductive thematic analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). We generally did not delve into covert, implicit, or subtextual meanings in the transcripts. Instead, women's stories about sex toys were grouped thematically without undermining their explicit narratives. While this analysis highlighted the content women expressed, we also showed how their narratives skipped or avoided different aspects of sex toy usage.

## Results

Overall, 90 % (18 of 20) women described using sex toys either during masturbation or partnered sex (or both), while 10 % (2 women, both heterosexual identified) said that they had never used sex toys. This number is higher than earlier studies assessing women's vibrator use. Because all women reported that they had masturbated at least once, and all had much to say about sex toys, all twenty women were included in this study. Although we did not ask about frequency of sex toy use, all participants offered this information on their own. From these responses, six main themes were generated. As noted in the descriptions below, some participants' responses overlapped between themes in that one woman's interview often addressed more than one theme. The six themes included: (1) emphasis on non-penetrative use of phallic sex toys (8 out of 20); (2) embarrassment about disclosing sex toy usage to partner(s) (6 out of 20); (3) personifying vibrators and dildos (5 out of 20); (4) coercion and lack of power (4 out of 20); (5) embracing sex toys as campy, fun, and subversive (4 out of 20); and (6) resistance to sex toys as impersonal or artificial (5 out of 20). Heterosexual women far more often described experiences that fit into the first four themes, while queer women (lesbian and bisexual women) far more often described experiences that fit into the latter two themes.

### Theme 1: Emphasis on Non-Penetrative Use of Phallic Sex Toys

Whether as a mode of resistance to traditional scripts about how women should derive sexual pleasure, or as an indicator of the imperfect design of sex toys, women overwhelmingly described *non-penetrative* uses for (mostly phallic) sex toys. Of the 18 women who reported sex toy use, only three women penetrated themselves with sex toys yet most used phallic-shaped sex toys. Nevertheless, women used the sex toys to stimulate their clitorises rather than to penetrate their vaginas; several women described this behavior as deviant or shameful, as they believed "normal" masturbation meant self-penetration. Keisha, a 34-year-old African-American bisexual woman, described her lack of penetration as something she believed

characterized her as “weird”: “I use a vibrator and to tell you the truth I don’t penetrate while masturbating. I just use it on—just go around it, and it’s really actually little. I just go around the clitoris and that’s it. I don’t even penetrate when I use a vibrator.” Her perception that non-penetration was surprising or non-normative suggests that Keisha believed most women penetrated themselves with sex toys. This assumption implies that equating penetration with sexual normality has entered women’s internal masturbation scripts. Keisha’s response also suggests that women do not typically discuss masturbation with each other and that socializing forces found in schools, media, and within women’s networks do not relay accurate information about how women masturbate.

Similarly, Sylvia, a 23-year-old white heterosexual woman, also described her masturbation behavior as not *normal* because she did not insert it: “I like my vibrator. It’s this little thing and I have to have that on my clit or it just will not work. I don’t ever like even insert it. It doesn’t do anything if I do.” Describing her sex toy as abnormally small, Sylvia believed that most women use larger (and more phallic) toys. By deriving pleasure from her “small” vibrator, she subverts the “bigger is better” assumptions about penis size and what pleases women while also showing that “normal” size equals “normal” (male) penis.

A few women, however, felt less uneasiness about their disinterest in penetration and chose devices not intended to resemble (penetrative) penises. Inga, a 24-year-old white bisexual, said that she frankly preferred non-phallic toys: “Anything that’s inserted I just don’t like. I have a sex toy with two prongs. It looks weird, like a tooth, not like most vibrators. I absolutely love it! It’s waterproof so I can take it in the shower with me if I want.” Together, these responses indicate that women conceptualize differences between their own (use of) sex toys and how others use them.

## Theme 2: Embarrassment about Disclosing Sex Toy Usage to Partner(s)

Although women often derived pleasure from sex toys, they generally felt uncomfortable expressing these sentiments to others. As a second theme, heterosexual women felt particularly embarrassed about their sex toy usage, often constructing sex toys as a threat to their boyfriends’ or husbands’ sense of sexual prowess. As such, several women did not disclose their sex toy use to others (including mothers, sisters, friends, coworkers, and partners) and often *purposefully hid* sex toys from male partners. Tania, a 25-year-old white heterosexual woman, described her experiences with past boyfriends and their jealousy about her vibrator use: “Some of the men I’ve chatted with about (my vibrator) become jealous that they can’t perform the same act as the vibrator does, so I try to shy away from speaking to them about it. When I can’t have an orgasm during sex with them, they become, you know, kind of self-conscious because I tell them that I can with a vibrator. Now I just don’t talk about it at all with them.” This description of shying away from disclosure starkly contrasted with her overwhelming sense of pleasure when using her vibrator: “I didn’t know what I was doing at first and I just kind of played around with it and I finally had my first orgasm with it and it was incredible! I couldn’t stop from there on! So now it’s definitely become a regular kind of thing.

I've got the Rabbit, and I can have multiple orgasms. Once I had ten orgasms in an hour and I was very, very excited!" Tania felt she could not share with her partner the sexual joy she experienced during masturbation, suggesting that lack of disclosure may correspond with uneasiness about challenging men's sexual power (or "territory"). In other words, women worried that their partners would not automatically feel superior to a machine and that disclosure of sex toy use would undermine hegemonic masculinity notions of men's (inherent) sexual mastery.

As another example of women's fear of disclosure, some worried that others would find their sex toys or discover their own personal "deviance." Several women described hiding their sex toys in special places in their houses, buying them discreetly, and worrying about their partners hearing a buzzing vibrator from the next room. Other women worried about *other men's* (non-partners) judgments, such as Patricia, a 28-year-old African-American heterosexual woman, reported her imagined shame when telling a doctor about her (misused) sex toy: "At first I was really all for using sex toys, but once your vagina starts getting wet and your muscles start contracting, I was scared because, well, what if it sucks it up in there? And then what? I gotta go to the doctor and tell him to pull out a toy?! So, that kind of discouraged me right there." Patricia's fear that a doctor would evaluate her negatively suggests a link between sex toys and implied deviance, as "good girls" would not encounter such trouble. This narrative also reveals how, even though women did not disclose sex toy use to other *women*, they felt far more distressed imagining other *men* finding their "secret" sex toys.

### Theme 3: Personifying Sex Toys

As a common theme, several women admitted that they anthropomorphized and personified their sex toys by naming them, referring to them as a "substitute" for a real person, or imagining a relationship with their (male) sex toys. This personification of sex toys challenged men's assumed dominance and sexual abilities. For example, Zhang, a 36-year-old Asian-American bisexual woman, referred to her vibrator as a "him" and described interactions with "him": "I had a dildo before, Mr. Cool Guy, but I got too emotionally attached to him. I really liked him and enjoyed my plastic man but my boyfriend didn't like it. Eventually I just threw him away so he and I couldn't have our sexual rendezvous anymore." In this example, Zhang feared disclosure of using "Mr. Cool Guy" while she also constructed him as a substitute man. Her dildo assumed a gender, an identity, and, most importantly, challenged the phallic power of her boyfriend and must therefore be discarded immediately.

As a more subtle example of personifying sex toys, Jane, a 59-year-old white heterosexual woman, described playing with a sex toy with her husband, using the "he" pronoun for the toy: "Generally we do the missionary style position but sometimes I would be on top. When I would be on top—generally I don't have an orgasm during intercourse—I have to have my vibrator on hand so that *he* can do what my husband can't ... My partner is very accommodating. He allows me to have an orgasm and it's important for him that I have one." Jane described her husband both as unable to help her orgasm but as *allowing* her to orgasm with the

(masculinized) object, as she turned to “another man” (in this case, her vibrator) for assistance. Jane’s vibrator imposed the presence of a *different* man rather than serving as something else altogether (e.g., female, a toy, a genderless object, etc.). The vibrator, it seems, is gendered male in heterosexual sex.

#### Theme 4: Coercion and Lack of Power in Using Sex Toys

Though only a few women described negative experiences with sex toys, these negative experiences often followed a similar coercive pattern. The worst cases generally happened when women said that their male partners either forced them to use sex toys to accommodate pornographic fantasies, or that sex toys symbolized their relative lack of power during sex. As the most clearly coercive example, Sylvia, a 23-year-old white heterosexual woman, recalled that her male partner coerced her into using anal sex toys to fulfill his fantasies: “He watched a lot of porn so he wanted to try every single little thing out there that had to do with anything that he had seen. He wanted to have anal sex so he used anal toys and stuff to loosen me up. It didn’t do anything for me. It hurt a lot but I went along with it anyway. As long as he was happy, then I would try whatever he wanted. He also wanted to use ropes, gags, and meet up with people on Craigslist to meet other couples.” For Sylvia, using anal sex toys accommodated her partner’s desires even if using them caused her physical pain. In this scenario, the toys functioned as an extension of his (misogynistic) power, as she became the physical manifestation of a pornographic scene.

As a more subtle example of sex toys enabling power imbalances, Angelica, a 32-year-old Mexican–American heterosexual woman, used sex toys to please her male partner even when she did not orgasm: “I’ve used masturbating toys while we’re having sex. He liked it quite a bit and thought it was hot. He was fine with it, ‘cause I still fake it and he gets what he wants out of it anyway.” For Angelica, sex toys titillated her boyfriend rather than helping her orgasm, again representing the ways women often prioritize male pleasure above their own (e.g., faking orgasms).

#### Theme 5: Embracing Sex Toys as Campy, Fun, and Subversive

While heterosexual women more often relayed a tone of seriousness about power-imbalances with sex toys, lesbian and bisexual women far more often described sex toys as a fun or campy, often with a subversive and playful twist. In these examples, women embraced sex toys without as much shame and expressed more openness about enjoying them with partners. Cris, a 22-year-old white lesbian woman, described visiting an adult store and using the toy as a fun partnered interaction: “The dildo was kind of small. We got it in a kit from the adult store, so it doesn’t really *do* anything. Neither of us (I guess you would say) wants it to be replicated like a penis, but it’s just something different to do. It’s kind of silly. Honestly, sometimes we’ll be laughing because it’s so funny. It’s tiny and laughable and not meant to be taken seriously.” Cris considered the relationship between the fake and real phallus and used humor and fun to undercut the absurdity of sex toys. She

clearly did not see the dildo as a means to assert dominance or power over her partner and instead described it as a playful diversion.

Sex toys also allow same-sex couples to rethink the presence and absence of the phallus in their sex lives (often in a humorous and subversive way). Hannah, a 57-year-old white bisexual woman, used a dildo with her female partner to consciously undermine its phallic qualities: “My partner and I love to mess around with our dildo. It’s kind of floppy so sometimes I’ll wear it into the bedroom and she’ll laugh really hard. We have this game where she’ll ask me to take off the penis so she can get to my clit. When I do that, it’s really sexy.” Hannah constructed the dildo here as a humorous foreplay device rather than the centerpiece of quintessentially phallic intercourse, thus stripping the dildo of its (masculinized) power to *deliver* pleasure.

#### Theme 6: Resistance to Sex Toys as Impersonal or Artificial

As a final theme, several women saw no positive or therapeutic aspects of sex toys and described them instead as too impersonal or artificial. Often as a conscious rebellion against technological and corporate means to women’s sexual pleasure, these women typically preferred to masturbate with their fingers and have partnered sex without accessories. For example, April, a 27-year-old Mexican–American lesbian woman, felt that sex toys alienated her from her body: “I don’t like the ways the toys feel. I mean, it’s plastic and you can tell that it’s different from what a person feels like. It’s not as natural. I like to feel connected more than that, not like I just went shopping for a toy.” Rather than admonishing sex toys as bad or immoral, April described them as not meeting her needs for bodily and emotional connection. In doing so, she expected masturbation to meet multiple needs rather than merely delivering sensations.

As another example of sex toys not fully satisfying women, Mei, a 22-year-old Asian-American heterosexual woman, described giving up on using her vibrating cock ring and vibrator when they did not fully satisfy her: “We tried to use it together because it’s one of those couple vibrators, like the U-shaped one. I don’t know if it’s the strength or the continuous buzzing, but it eventually makes you numb. We tried it a few times and we were like, ‘This doesn’t really add much.’ Since then, I’ve used it once or twice alone but I don’t like it that much. I prefer my fingers.” Again, Mei expected sex toys to enhance partnered sex or masturbation, and when they failed in this regard, she discarded them. This description of “failing” (or impotent?) sex toys presents a striking contrast to imagining the sex toys as having *power* or *authority* over her pleasure, or as having a persona or a masculinized identity (as previous narratives showed).

## Discussion

While sex toy use is relatively widespread, honest and frank discussions about the meanings women assign to sex toys remains rare. These six themes—non-penetrative use of phallic sex toys, embarrassment about disclosure, personifying

sex toys, coercion and lack of power, embracing sex toys as campy and fun, and resistance to sex toys as impersonal or artificial—point to vastly different experiences in women’s interactions with, thoughts about, and emotional experiences of sex toys. There are clear advantages to *asking* women about sex toys rather than assuming universally positive or uncomplicated relationships between women, sex toys, and sexual pleasure. While this study used a small qualitative sample, these narratives did reveal several important (though exploratory) trends regarding sexual identity and sex toy narratives: first, a pattern (though somewhat imperfect) emerged between lesbian/bisexual women and heterosexual women’s construction of sex toys, as queer women far more often resisted thinking about sex toys as threatening to men, representative of phallic power, or coercive. Queer women more often constructed sex toys as fun, campy, and subversive and reported less shame about not using sex toys for penetration. On the other hand, heterosexual women more often described shame and secrecy about their sex toys, and far more often personified their sex toys as *men* or imagined that they were *supposed to* penetrate themselves with their sex toys. The narratives that women *should* treat sex toys as either replacements for penises, or as imagined penises, appeared far more often in heterosexual women’s narratives.

This divide suggests that queer women more often constructed sex toys as non-literal in comparison to heterosexual women, and more importantly, queer women seemed less apt to treat sex toys as *masculine* in nature. With no clear patterns of sex education or educational background found among participants that could help to explain these differences, heterosexual women, on the whole, reported a greater tendency to treat sex toys as an inherent *threat* to their partners’ masculinity, sometimes discussing sex toys as actually *male* gendered. Thus, men’s expectations about “proper sex” affect women’s relationship to sex even when men are absent. Interestingly, even though nearly all women masturbated with clitoral stimulation rather than vaginal stimulation, heterosexual women expressed the most reluctance and shame when disclosing these patterns to male partners. Queer women described masturbating without penetration as a normal and routine part of their lives while heterosexual women described this as something weird or abnormal.

Because of the relatively small sample, we do not contend that these sexual identity findings are conclusive and warn against overgeneralizing from this study. Future research (both qualitative and quantitative) should determine whether sexual identity differences exist on a larger scale or within different intersections between women (e.g., age, race, and class). Moreover, it is possible that our recruitment technique or interview questions led to conclusions that differ from earlier research. The fact that more women used sex toys in this sample compared to national samples could reflect biases in self-selection, differences in qualitative work that involves face-to-face discussions compared to quantitative pen/paper or online surveys, or more progressive populations in urban centers with more access to sex toys than those in rural areas.

Notably, some themes found in previous research—particularly the theme of women fearing addiction to, or desensitization from, sex toys (Loe 1998)—did not appear in our study, leading to additional questions about how age, media consumption, education, and cohort may affect the themes found in qualitative work

on sex toys. Nevertheless, our findings add to the literature on women's sex toy usage by suggesting that, because queer women in this sample did not typically construct sex toys as "competition" for men, they could more easily use sex toys for fun, silliness, exploration, play, and subversion of normative scripts (e.g., deconstructing the phallus as all-powerful). Many of these queer women easily upended the (hetero)scripts and thereby changed the symbolic and literal meaning of the sex toys. Just as "butch" and "femme" distinctions within lesbian communities lead to different interpretations of dildos (Wilson 2009), our study suggests that differences between queer, bisexual, and heterosexual women may be worth studying. For example, heterosexual women overwhelmingly retained the patriarchal and phallic qualities of sex toys by envisioning them as literal penises or even as full-on *men*. Their worries about hiding sex toys or justifying any "competition" to their partners indicates that they perceived tension between real and fake penises rather than imagining sex toys as altogether symbolic. The naming of sex toys ("Mr. Cool Guy") or the assertion that a sex toy used in partnered sex has the pronoun *him* both suggest this as well. Nevertheless, subversive potential exists in the literal and symbolic displacement of the phallus, as both queer and heterosexual women enacted agency by *choosing* to have sexual pleasure regardless of the normative scripts that dictate their allegiance to patriarchy. Both groups complicate the "penetrative imperative." For heterosexual women, they still masturbate (often in secret) with their sex toys and, in doing so, may subvert the literal power of their (male partners') phallus by using the "plastic man." For queer women, they play with the metaphorical dimensions of the dildo and vibrator while also, at times, assuming the role of having a "penetrative cock," thereby *taking* that power from men. Neither group lack agency, though the *expression* of that agency differs and is worthy of close consideration.

These narratives also suggest that, perhaps because of the pervasive qualities of compulsory heterosexuality, women as a whole largely do not discuss their masturbation habits with others, particularly other women, and that even between partners, masturbation remains a relatively taboo subject. This points to the importance of feminist sex toy stores and sex toy parties as sites of women's personal sexual conversations (Comella 2012; McCaughey and French 2001) and openness between partners during couples and individual psychotherapy (Tiefer 1998). At its most basic level, this study suggests that women still believe that sexual pleasure during masturbation is not something they can readily discuss. Beyond this broad reading of the data, this research highlights the ways that heterosexism may enter women's private masturbatory experiences. Perhaps women believe masturbation serves as a substitute for "real" (that is, penetrative intercourse with a male partner) sex, or it may suggest that women lack a cultural lexicon for conversing about masturbation. (Consider, for example, the number of popular slang terms for men's masturbation compared to women's masturbation). Women may not discuss masturbation because self-pleasure represents a direct challenge to the notion that *men alone* have the power to "please" women (with their penises); as such, sex toys, or other women, both threaten the power of hegemonic masculinity and sexual machismo. Just as women feel increasing pressure to kiss and fondle other women *in front of men* (Fahs 2011), perhaps



“acceptable” masturbation for women involves masturbating *in front of men* for their pleasure. The silences surrounding women’s sexual pleasure—particularly masturbatory pleasure—represent a pivotal avenue for the transmission of patriarchal power and control of women.

As a more broad critique, several of these themes suggest that (heterosexual) women generally assume they should orgasm from penetrative intercourse even though they often do not find this pleasurable. By relying upon clitoral stimulation in both masturbation and partnered sex (and then feeling shame about this), women reveal the tensions that exist in the mandate they feel about penetrative intercourse. Similar to the “sexual compliance” literature that suggests that women often engage in unsatisfying sexual intercourse to get or maintain approval of their male partners (Katz and Tirone 2009; Sanchez et al. 2005), cultural prescriptions that maintain men’s power and dominance over women (and keep men *present* in solitary sex) take priority over women’s orgasmic pleasure. Women’s overwhelming sense that they *should* find penetration pleasurable (but they secretly do not) implies that sex toys propagate discourses of heteronormativity *even during women’s private experiences with masturbation*. In other words, women have internalized the message that penetrative intercourse is *superior* even while masturbating alone. The masculine presence of sex toys only further entrenches the idea that *all aspects of women’s sexualities* are subject to patriarchal control, even during supposedly empowering and private experiences (Weinberg and Williams 2010). The literal descriptions of coercion with sex toys only further cements this pattern, as women mold their desires around men’s fantasies and desires even when this occurs at women’s expense (Fahs 2011).

Though sex toys mostly seem to replicate gender imbalances both by reinforcing patriarchy and emphasizing stringent adherence to traditional gender roles, these findings also suggest several important resistances women could enact when using, buying, talking about, or thinking about sex toys. First, as some women expressed in this study, women do question, critique, and challenge the divide between the *natural* and the *artificial*, between *phallic* and *non-phallic*, and between *serious* and *fun*. Whether via sex education, consciousness-raising experiences, women and gender studies courses, or informal networks, women can learn, as individuals and as a collective, to inject both a critical consciousness *and* a sense of fun into sexuality, as both of these elements receive far too little attention and consideration in contemporary discourses of women’s sexuality (for a great example of how to do this, see Dodson 1996). Any time women take pleasure into their own hands, they subvert cultural scripts about “normal” sexuality. This does not suggest that if women merely “have fun” with dildos, they will fully negate the power-imbalanced implications of these toys. Still, women’s narratives of shame about masturbation and sex toy use could change if women more often questioned the (phallic, patriarchal) implications of sex toys. To further complicate matters, subversive potential exists in a huge range of behaviors with sex toys, as women (queer or heterosexual) using sex toys as a literal “penetrative cock” as well as those playfully deconstructing the “realness” of the phallus *both* subvert norms of gender and power.

As a second mode of resistance, women can better address some of the racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist implications of sex toys by refusing to buy certain sex toys, demanding better quality material in their sex toys, ensuring that sex toys are produced with better working conditions, and by refusing to purchase and use sex toys that replicate tired racist and heterosexist assumptions about gender and bodies. Further still, women may want to experiment with using their fingers to masturbate rather than relying upon sex toys exclusively, as they may discover new avenues to pleasure in this way. By collectively abstaining altogether from being sexual consumers, women can use boycotts to shape the industry that (falsely?) assumes women will continue to buy and use objects that perpetuate tired stereotypes, keep women connected to phallic pleasure, and define (in *highly* simplistic terms) what should please them.

As a third and final mode of resistance, women can decouple sex toys and liberation, instead looking closely at how sex toys simultaneously benefit and fail women, how they both empower and disempower women, and how sex toys represent a microcosm of broader contradictory and insidious cultural assumptions about women, gender, and bodies. Though this study serves as an early exploratory study about women's narratives of sex toy use, future research can delve further into questions about gender, power, and sexual accessories. In doing so, the discussion surrounding sex toys could expand to include questions like: How can we reimagine women's relationship to *buying* sexual liberation (however conceived), and what might it mean to *buy* liberation in the absence of a feminist education? In what other ways do women imagine men as *present* or *in control* when they could invest this power in themselves? How do the assumptions of popular culture (or sex therapy) construct women's relationship to orgasm, sexual play, and sexual pleasure? Ultimately, sex toys can serve a dual role: they reflect both the worst and most insidious aspects of patriarchy—namely that the invisibility of power allows it to infect women's private sexual experiences—and the more subversive possibilities of sexuality—that sex can *undo*, *redo*, *remake*, and *upend* much of the oppression, control, and restraint we face both individually and collectively.

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