

The Power of Pleasure Devices: Sex Toys and Dominance in Society and Pop Culture

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Abstract:

Sexual intercourse as a source of physical and consequently also mental comfort and satisfaction nowadays is not necessarily a matter handled by the human body exclusively. As shown here, various artefacts are adapted in creative ways to either simulate interpersonal sexual acts or to enhance single or joint sexual experiences. Sex toys, as these devices are commonly labelled today, have a solid position in the sex industry, indicating not only their high popularity but also a fundamental demand for these products. By introducing such devices into one's own sexual life, sex toys become relevant for the discourse created around the distribution of power relations regarding sexuality. Nevertheless, this discourse is also shaped by the depictions and representations of sex toy use in cultural productions. The following paper argues that the role of sex toys in the construction of hierarchy and distribution of power ultimately depends on the user's subjective perception of pleasure. However, there are numerous factors that have an impact on building this subjectivity. Those are, among others, perceptions of sex toy usage shaped by the dominance of heteronormativity and further, particular attitudes towards sex toys reflected in society and text productions in popular culture.

1 Human sexuality and its significance for conventions of social relations is a recurring topic in sociology. Viewed in the context of gender studies, it can be very well considered a relevant factor for the construction of hierarchies, especially in interpersonal relationships. The aspect of pleasure, viewed from both the receiving and giving perspective, produced in single or group constellations, determines the individual's relation to the role of sexuality in building or destroying confidence and consciousness about one's own position in the social environment. Nevertheless, sexual intercourse as a source of physical and consequently also mental comfort and satisfaction is nowadays not necessarily a matter depending on the human body exclusively. As shown here, various items are adapted in creative ways to either simulate interpersonal sexual acts or to enhance single or joint sexual experiences. Sex toys, as these devices are commonly labelled today, have a solid position in the sex industry, indicating not only their high popularity but also a fundamental demand for these products. By introducing such devices into one's own sexual life, they become relevant for the discourse created around the distribution of sexual power relations. This discourse is also shaped by the depictions and representations of sex toy use in cultural productions.

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are, among others, perceptions of sex toy usage shaped by the dominance of heteronormativity and further, particular attitudes towards sex toys reflected in society and filmic text productions popular culture. To determine the interconnectedness of these factors, two perspectives are considered within this paper: firstly, different sets of research conducted and performed in either subjective or empirical forms, and secondly, the representation of sex toys in various 21st century films and TV productions.

3 The acknowledgement of the existence of devices built exclusively to deliver sexual pleasure only emerged in the 1960s (Maines 20), though devices that were associated with this function had been created a long time before. To classify the variety of devices that can serve to cause sexual pleasure, two differentiations have to be made: on the one hand, the historical context of the development of such devices and later, the categorization of more contemporary objects regarding their sexual functionality.

4 Firstly, the development of devices that functioned as sex toys but were not promoted and conceptualized with the expectation of arousal of sexual pleasure is a relevant factor for historical contextualization. These objects mainly appear in association with medical discourse and later, promotion of relaxation devices for the domestic sphere. The vibrator as a medical tool, for instance, emerged in the 1880s (Maines 11) with the purpose of clinically treating hysterical women, where the success of the procedure relied on the accomplishment of paroxysm, presently known as orgasm (Minge and Zimmerman 334).¹ Hysteria was commonly presented as a female disease and only lost its pathological status in 1952 (Maines 11) after sexuality ceased to be considered as serving only procreational purposes. At the same time, the focus of sexual discourse shifted to the pleasure bringing features of human intimacy. However, there is an explicit pathologization of female arousal in contrast to the absence of medical, either pathological or apathological, discourse around male sexuality led by the male-dominated medical community. Accordingly, this indicates an uneven distribution of agency in favor of the male-identified part of society (Maines 334), based on gender-bound distinctions of sexual normalcy. The absence of clinical interest in male sexuality then marks it as generic, or integrated, whereas the conscious investigation of female sexuality signifies it as deviant, justifying the investigation. Protecting women from hysteria through medical regulations of sexual arousal thus also served as a way to regulate their general behavior outside an intimate context (Fahs and Swank 667). The universal lack of knowledge about female pleasure did not allow for a multi-layered structure of behavioral

¹ While 'paroxysm' was used to describe a physical reaction desired in the context of healing hysteria, 'orgasm' denotes the climax of sexual intercourse in the context of pleasure, not illness.

patterns, explaining the efficiency of female sexual gratification, though not officially known as such, as an effective method of treatment for a disease whose cause was precisely the lack of knowledge about the same. The later development of massaging devices for the domestic sphere then allowed the private exploration of the device without medical experts and therefore outside a medical context, whereas the promotion of these devices was strongly directed towards the enhancement of social and professional life as a consequence of biological health and physical fitness (Maines 108).

5 Secondly, the identification of devices that were built exclusively for the purpose of sexual stimulation (Vergy 11) strongly requires the explicit isolation of their function, meaning the intent of their production. A distinction has to be made between devices that are *built or used for non-sexual practices* but, nevertheless, hold the features that deliver sexual pleasure and therefore can function as sex toys as well, and devices that are *built for uses in sexual contexts only* and also explicitly are promoted as such. The first categorization can apply to almost any thinkable artefact available to individuals, while most of them, in one way or another, either resemble features of the anatomy of the gender preferred for sexual relations or carry functions that imitate sex toys themselves, without assignment to and addressing of a specific gender.² Examples of anatomy-inspired devices can be divided into two main categories: phallically shaped objects such as bottles, cucumbers or, as famously introduced in the teenage comedy *American Pie* (1999), flutes, or objects that resemble vaginal features, as for instance the American apple pie, vacuum cleaners and other objects found in the domestic sphere, such as the gap between couch cushions (Greg 1). Alternatively, non-gendered artefacts such as electronic toothbrushes, pegs or ropes can very well be introduced into sexual scenarios. However, these devices will not be discussed further as their association with sexual pleasure is contingent on their shape and not their initial function. These objects therefore only could have an impact on power negotiation if their users choose to transform them into sex toys, in which case the power distributions established are, like the process of transformation of the device itself, chosen by the initiator and therefore, not hegemonic. Objects specifically created for the purpose of sexual satisfaction, in contrast, can contribute to the establishment and reproduction of power relations not only after the user's conscious choice of purchase, but can hold a variety of

² Though, as shown later, resemblance to specific body features does not necessarily imply a direct imitation of them, but rather can serve as an independent characteristic of the pleasure device appreciated for its function, not its connotations.

features the consumer has no control over and are embedded in a wide discourse that might affect attitudes towards them.

6 The usage of devices explicitly manufactured to enhance sexual pleasure is influenced by numerous factors, all of which can contribute to constructions of uneven power relations in the context of gender. These factors can be divided into two sections: firstly, the toys and the industry surrounding them (such as the marketing of the product and the space of purchase) and secondly, the attitudes and opinions associated with the use in either single or multiple individuals' constellations and varying by sexual orientation and the actual use of the devices for the achievement of sexual pleasure. In addition, the emergence of these attitudes, analyzed in current research, needs to be viewed in the context of textual representations of sex toys and their use in cultural productions, focusing on popular film and television in the decades around the millennium. Representations in media strongly influence or pre-fabricate the viewer's attitudes about sex toys because they provide examples of usage and also, platforms to negotiate opinions about these devices without actually having to use or possess one. As shown later, the films at hand, in most cases, do not provide common representations of sex toys and thereby promote rather negative attitudes towards their use.

7 Generalizing issues of gender and sexism in the sex toy market is a task impossible to accomplish as the present fluidity of sexualities is mirrored in the offerings of the market. Nevertheless, it is possible to exemplify instances that assign a specific gender or sexuality, and therefore often a hierarchic element to specific devices. The appearance, for instance, determines whether a sex toy is intended to be viewed as a copy of human sexual organs or a gender-independent, pleasure giving entity. Here the resemblance varies on a spectrum where there are, on the one hand, very accurately copied devices, as for instance those that replicate a specific person, fictional character, their bodily features or, more specifically, their sexual organs such as blow-up dolls or other objects directly inspired by adult-movie stars and promoted with their name. The purchase of this merchandise gives opportunity to fully control the specific body and therefore, also construct narrative traits and characteristics that may contradict the original such as the model's sexual orientation which, even if known, can be negotiated via individual fantasy rather than its model's preferences. At the same time, it remains an object whose association with a specific real world referent is contingent on the production company, which is a third party that is neither the model nor the user of the product. Nevertheless, its main promotional feature remains the simulative relationship with the human model. On the other hand, there are devices that assume a number of features of

the human body but leave out others, such as coloring to avoid direct association with a specific individual and consequently, also gender and sexuality.

8 The prioritization of features discloses focuses of sexual preference that can serve as grounding for various fetishistic and partly discriminatory assumptions, though keeping a steady distance to the living original body part. Focusing on phallically shaped toys, Fahs and Swank (2013) point out that these are marketed primarily towards women and, to a lesser extent, gay men, whereby potential male consumers seeking penetrative stimulation in a heterosexual context are ignored. The function of the toy then assigns specific sexual practices to specific customer groups and therefore, sets normative instructions for purchase while the customers that do not fit the target audience are made aware of their deviant consumption through the explicit marketing.

9 Apart from gender and sexuality, other intersectional categories are present in the crafting of sex toys. For instance, phallic toys can either fetishize a particular ethnicity by for example reinforcing the stereotype of the “gigantic black penis” (Fahs and Swank 671) or infantilize the user by taking inspiration for the design from infant toys. Some sex toys are also produced by brands typically selling products to an infantile target audience, such as Hello Kitty (*ibid.*). In addition, some devices are assigned formal qualities that do not enhance the sexual experience, but reproduce heterosexist views on the pursuit of sexual pleasure, as for instance some vibrating toys for clitoral stimulation that unnecessarily have a phallic shape.³ Through this, the importance of a phallic object for female sexual satisfaction is reinforced regardless of whether the toys are used for clitoral or vaginal use. Also, this shape restricts the usage of the vibrational function on bodies that do not necessarily hold either of these features or the application of vibrating sensations in completely different body regions all together. However, a number of non-phallic variants of the vibrator explicitly aimed at female clitoral pleasure, such as the ‘Butterfly’ strap-on, and more generally, the normalization of vibrating sensations without gender attribution became more accessible in the decade after 2000 (Fahs and Swank 671).

10 Design aside, the space of purchase and the product’s packaging also offer opportunities for gender-specific or gender-neutral use. Paradoxically, the packaging for toys used for female stimulation in mainstream sex shops (where mainstream is to be understood as conceptualized for a heterosexual target audience), is addressing male buyers through pictures of female models in stereotypical pornographic depictions while using the usually

³ Also, the “original vibrator” (Maines 121) did not have a phallic shape.

phallically shaped product. In other words, the public mainstream market considers men to be the purchasers for female pleasure products by promoting them with explicit depictions of male heterosexual fantasies, rather than focusing on the device's function or addressing the assumed and desired future users of this device, namely women. The pre-determination of a male target audience denies female agency in and spending power on sexual stimulation devices (Fahs and Swank 672).

11 Precisely this lack of adequate purchase spaces caused the emergence of so-called alternative sex shops. Those can be further divided into a number of sub-categories that explicitly address their target audience by defining their space to be female-friendly, feminist or queer. While sellers aiming at an exclusively female audience often restrict access for male customers without female company in order to create a comfortable environment for all shop visitors, queer sex shops do not set boundaries for entrance based on gender but rather, expect either particular understandings of gender, sexuality and sexual orientation and their relevance in social and political contexts, or the customer's desire to learn about these issues. Directed at various bodies, genders and sexualities, they do not only acknowledge and encourage female sexual agency (Loe 99), the increase of visible diversity in sexual preferences and the relevance of the personal to be political but, furthermore, approach the sex industry, including sex toy businesses themselves, as political agents altogether. This involves considering factors such as ethical, fair-trade and toxin-free production of merchandise and, above all, educational work as a mandatory factor in the concept of a sex-positive, inclusive space for purchase (ibid. 109).⁴ In addition, further concerns about the intersection of capital privilege and the ability to maintain and promote sex-positive attitudes is expressed in the context of "feminist" sex toy research (ibid. 97). Here, the emphasis is placed on showing that the purchase of pleasure devices is by no means a dominant strategy for constructing an empowered sexuality outside of socially normative regulations as the center of sexual pleasure remains the body's affective response to external stimulation that can, but does not have to be, performed with manufactured devices that come from a feminist or queer background.

12 At the same time, a certain amount of sex merchandise has found its way into regular stores, increasing the visibility of these products. Consequently, the use of such devices is demystified and the stigma of unsatisfying sex that needs improvement through sex toys is eliminated by presenting them as products occurring regularly in sexual contexts in the same

⁴ Sex-positivity here is understood as empowerment through the ability to express sexuality freely.

ways as other goods such as condoms or lubricants. The availability of sex toys in non-sexualized spaces of purchase furthermore normalizes fun and play in sexual intercourse in any kind of single or shared use (Herbenick et al. 343) as it de-centralizes the target audience by simply being available to all individuals shopping for just about anything while none of the potential intersectional characteristics, besides spending capacities, matter. On the other hand, the emergence of bookable events or social gatherings where sex toys and pleasure are put into focus, such as “home parties” that are mostly targeted at a female audience (Ehrenreich 104), confirms the demand for dialogue and education about the use and purchase of such devices in a more protected surrounding when it comes to more specific information. For these events, the domestic space, or any kind of closed space with the requirement for exclusive entry can become a temporary platform for communal exchange about sexual matters guided by an ‘expert’. Thus, Dawn Heinecken critiques precisely the temporality of the safe space for communication and the consequential lack of endurance regarding the possibly interesting new revelations for the audience (134). Accordingly, the new findings and the change of opinions on sexuality are not transferred into daily routine but left inside the closed space in order to not threaten the “status quo” (ibid.), leaving the question about the function of these events if the newly gained knowledge will not be adapted into practice. While ‘empowerment’ through education about alternative ways of receiving sexual pleasure as promoted at home parties is partly achieved through the exclusion of participants based on gender and the following assumption of shared problems and questions based on the same, the lack of information about how these findings can be made accessible not only to individuals who share the same problem but more importantly, individuals who should be part of the solution demands for the creation of an environment that enables both parties to participate in the process of education and communication. Though this, negative attitudes towards unsatisfied sexuality and the lack of pursuit of pleasure can be addressed more directly.

13 Most sociological research performed in the field of sex toys is aimed towards the use of dildos and vibrators, suggesting a wider popularity of these devices. While quantitative studies (Herbenick et al.; Reece et al. and Schick et al.) report mainly positive attitudes by women and men towards the usage of vibrators and dildos likewise, with the highest percentage of users in a sample of homosexual women (Schick et al.), no research was found on the frequency and attitudes towards and sex toy use among homosexual men, suggesting that sociological research perceives sex toys to be mainly produced for and used by female customers, reproducing the stereotype often found in marketing as illustrated before. In

addition, the extensive focus on females as users also creates the impression that women need those devices most while men are responsible for the purchase as they are targeted by the product's advertising, indicating general sexual dissatisfaction and its resolution to be determined by gender. However, this also allows for the illustration of a bigger variety of merchandise to choose from, whose purchase and exercise, albeit being promoted for a specific gender, is ultimately not restricted by the gender of the purchaser. It is, therefore, important to include both negative and positive attitudes towards sex toys into the investigation within the context of prior findings.

14 Negative attitudes towards female sex toy use include shame about the confession of practice to the partner in a heterosexual constellation, firstly because it deems the user lonely, but also because it puts pressure on the male partner (Herbenick 333). The concerns about pressure are explained by the common belief that phallic sex toys are replica of the penis, therefore are assigned the male gender and viewed as sexual competitors, posing a threat to the man's ability to give pleasure and therefore remain in a relationship with his female significant other (Fahs and Swank 674). Furthermore, the same study, focusing on women's subjective feelings and narratives about the usage of sex toys, found that heterosexual women perceive pleasure from penetration as the norm from which clitoral stimulation, though being the dominant solo practice according to statistics, deviates. In a non-shared setting of masturbation where the participants are assumed to act according to personal preference that does not have to agree with their partners', penetration is not listed as a frequent practice. The discrepancy between own preference and performance in shared settings emphasizes the androcentricity upon which both females and males negotiate understandings of norm and deviance of sexual practice instead of communicating about subjective perceptions of pleasure. This attitude can be summarized as hegemonic penetrative pleasure for female-identifying individuals, although the use and consequently, the function of sex toys in sexual acts with respect to gender and power relations highly depend on the constellation of characters in the scene. Sex toys are used alone or in a shared sexual experience, whereas the interpersonal sexual experiences with sex toys have different significations depending on the sexual preferences of those involved, ranging from homo- and heterosexuality to completely non-specified or all in- or exclusive sexual preferences. As sexualities and attitudes towards them are fluid, there can be no fixed formula for signifying the application of sex toys in particular interpersonal constellations.

15 However, sex toys also can function as props to modify and create new character structures in an enacted sexual setting, as Ehrenreich describes in the context of

sadomasochism in heterosexual relationships. Here, power negotiations are eroticized whereas the identification of submissive and dominant characters is signified by specific tools such as whips or masks. The possible break from traditionally assigned power distributions in heterosexuality becomes a narrative or drama (Ehrenrich 123) whose authenticity requires the assignment of devices that support the display of the superior or inferior position. Furthermore, the use of phallic toys in shared heterosexual settings can draw attention to the artificially assigned dominance of phallus, meaning the assignment of the active role to the individual with penetration privilege and the consequential reproduction of possessive heteronormativity, understood as a privileging of white, heterosexual, monogamous relationships where the male occupies the dominant position. Besides this, it creates scope for new experiences outside of the normative spectrum as for instance the use of phallic toys on a male body in a heterosexual setting (Fahs and Swank 669).⁵

16 The use of phallic sex toys in lesbian intercourse, however, is met with less focus on the question of whether the toy is a simulacrum of the penis as the original organ is not present in the sexual setting and the toy can be equally put on by both agents (Minge and Zimmerman 342).⁶ Through this, prescribed, heteronormative power relations based on gendered body features are eliminated. The device itself, then, is also free from gender definition and functions as an independent agent for female pleasure (ibid. 340), mutating the user's body in the process of intercourse from female to post-gender or queer, rather than male (Hamming 329). In contrast to this, earlier movements such as second-wave feminism considered the use of penetrative stimulation devices in lesbian sexuality to be deviant. In the context of political purity in the private sphere (the personal is political), lesbian women's preference for vaginal stimulation was met with critique and skepticism, as phallic toys and phallic intercourse were said to recreate heterosexual power structures of active and passive actors in lesbian relationships. Thereby, the sexual pleasure individuals could gain from phallic penetration and possibilities of non-vaginal use of phallic toys were disregarded and consequently, only established reverse power relations regarding authentic and proper lesbian sexuality (Minge and Zimmerman 338). In contrast to this, the use of sex toys without partners gives the maximum agency over one's own sexuality and pleasure (Fahs and Swank 668) as the lack of another body and, consequently, another body's functions and abilities

⁵ Empirical data suggests that the use and purchase of phallic toys in and for heterosexual intercourse is, nevertheless, mainly directed towards the application on a female body (Reece et al. 402).

⁶ It seems that Minge and Zimmerman only consider lesbian intercourse between cis female bodies here. Thus, the penis in lesbian intercourse performed with or by transwomen or other female individuals that possess this organ can be detached from its immediate association with masculinity as it remains up to the individual to define gender identity and consequently, the function of this organ in intercourse.

allows for a more independent experimentation. Besides the active and possessive choice of pleasure and full control over it in the situation of single use, these objects also help experimenting with one's own sexual identity, breaking with constraints based on gender, sex and sexuality. Nevertheless, gender marking is deeply embedded into the social perception of any kind of sexual pleasure including the usually private process of masturbation, whereas the prioritization of penetration over other types of sexual fulfillment is the normative and thereby dominant entity, along or against which one's own sexuality has to be defined (Fahs and Swank 681).

17 As shown here, attitudes towards sex toys are, indeed, shaped by multiple factors regarding the display of the products. Design then determines whether a toy should be perceived as a toy, signified by, for instance, bright colors and improvised shapes, or, in contrast, as a simulation of the body part that can produce arousal. Sex toy use is considered to be fairly common in all research at hand, suggesting a basic openness towards and curiosity about bringing these products into own sexual practice, as most participants in all studies at hand had used a sex toy at least once, though the frequency of use is not inquired in every study. However, the media presence of the toys and their use in specific genres also has an impact on how individuals negotiate these products' relation to their own sexuality. For instance, the heterosexist display of phallic toys in mainstream pornography (Minge and Zimmerman 337) combined with the way sex toys are occurring in popular culture does not communicate enjoyable, pleasure-centered and non-deviant sex toy use even if it is not directly presented as unusual. Non-sensational examples of use where sex toys are not used to catalyze specific affect then have to be acquired from other sources whose determination requires investigative effort in contrast to the casual display of sex toys in mainstream media.

Sex Toys in Film and Pop Culture

18 Nowadays, popular culture is acknowledged as an important source of learning in the contemporary, postmodern society (Giroux in Pearce 367) on the one hand but also, as an instance that can "shape public opinion" (Dolby in Pearce 369) on the other. Precisely because of this impact it is important to include the analysis of cultural texts displaying sex toys into the investigation of the formation of attitudes about these devices. Focusing on the decades around the year 2000, there are multiple ways in which sex toys are displayed in mainstream media. Firstly, there are productions illustrating the historical development and significance of sex toys, presenting the devices in a rather neutral manner. This applies to the film *Hysteria* (2011) and partly, is found in the television series *Masters of Sex* (2013-).

Albeit directly associating sex toys with pleasure, this relation is embedded in a different historical and social context and displays antique devices not used in contemporary society anymore. In addition, both cases show sex toys in a medical milieu where they are used to achieve specific effects within the context of researching human biology or sexuality. Thus, pleasure is transformed into numeric material in these films and thereby is abstracted from today's connotations of sexuality. Given a more domestic use in contemporary society, the display of toys in these productions does not directly influence current social and cultural discourses around sex toys. The focus on domesticity, however, allows for the application of sex toys to support narrative development, particularly for the creation of humorous situations in mainstream comedy.

19 As established by Adorno and Horkheimer, "[l]aughter about something is always laughter at it" (122). More specifically, this also means that "comic laughter [...] is rooted in feelings of superiority" (Hobbes in Carroll 153), confirming humor's ability to display hierarchic relationships within film contexts. These hierarchic structures can work on both the narrative and the meta-narrative level and therefore, possibly serve as blueprints for attitudes towards sex toy uses. Humorous connotations are established through various factors: in some cases, the public exposure of the private practice of masturbation with a sex toy or an everyday device with the same abstracted function serves to support humorous effect, such as the introductory scene in *Not Another Teen Movie* (2001) or the masturbation scene at the beginning of *American Reunion* (2012), where Jim walks in on Michelle masturbating with the showerhead after being caught masturbating with a sock by his son. Both cases draw on the surprise of exposure and following shame about usage to create comedy. Alternatively, in *American Wedding* (2003), Michelle's reinterpretation of anal beads (explicitly identified as such by the possessors) for a neck massage chain and the according application by her mother requires the viewer's knowledge about their real function in order to create disgust that immediately can be discharged by laughter. *Sex and the City* reproduces stereotypes of loneliness and addiction to sex toys in "The Turtle and the Hare" (1998) when Charlotte withdraws from social activities with her girlfriends in order to play with her new Rabbit. This determines a discrepancy between proper and deviant use of sex toys where excessive usage becomes comic as it draws on the parodic effect of camp.

20 However, some films also abstract phallically shaped toys as weapons in order to amuse the viewer. For instance, in the process of becoming heterosexual, the protagonist in *Brüno* (2009) seeks to find strategies to protect himself in case of a homosexual attacking him with one or multiple dildos and learns to fight off potential 'penetrators' with karate

techniques. In contrast, Hank, the split personality of protagonist Charlie in *Me, Myself & Irene* (2000) seemingly applies a dildo on himself during intoxicated intercourse with Irene, who later uses the toy to beat off one of their persecutors. In both cases, the sex toy is displayed as a threat to hegemonic heterosexuality when used on a male body, confirming the prohibition for a heterosexual man to be interested in penetration and further, constructing it as a device that can de facto harm the body. This equation hits its peak in the promotional video *Playthings* (2014) by Evolve Together Inc., an organization promoting gun safety in the USA. In the video, two young boys are displayed ‘fighting’ with sex toys as swords while the mothers awkwardly exchange glances after realizing what the toys in their kids’ hands are. The clip terminates with the slogan “always lock up your guns” (while no guns occur in the video), suggesting that sex toys in children’s hands are, if not equally dangerous, then at least as inappropriate as guns and unfit for public display in general.

21 Aside from comedy, sex toys are also displayed in situations of proper threat without comic effect, used as weapons or indirectly personified as an ‘enemy’. For instance, in *American Pie* (1999), Kevin inherits his older brother’s secret manual for satisfying women sexually called the Bible, where a brief close-up of the book reveals a section headlined “Know your enemy!” with a picture of a phallic vibrator below. This supports the formerly mentioned perception of sex toys being direct rivals of men’s abilities for producing pleasure in their female partners’ bodies. However, there is no further mentioning of this enmity throughout the story and this equation is not explicitly discussed by the characters, merely suggesting a subliminal sentiment towards toys in this film world. In a similar way, sex toys are given age or maturity appropriation in *True Blood’s* “May Be the Last Time” (2014) where Adilyn and Wade, a teenage couple, are encouraged to use sex toys in their first sexual experiences together by Violet, a revengeful vampire. Albeit having selected a few items from the collection for closer inspection, they ultimately find out that both are “not into this (at all)” (Wade in TB). Their disinterest in sex toys is explained with their lack of sexual experience, indicating that sex toys only become relevant when the variety of techniques performed with the own body is exhausted. Also, Violet’s ‘sex room’ is used as a torture dungeon in the following episode (“Almost Home” 2014), drawing a parallel between devices used in contexts of pleasure and their ability to produce pain.

22 In contrast to this stand films where sex toys are directly used to brutally harm characters. In *Pulp Fiction* (1994), Butch Coolidge and Marcellus Wallace are captured by the pawn shop owner Maynard who later rapes Marcellus with his friend Zed. Butch and Marcellus wake up in the shop’s cellar with gag balls in their mouths, one of many toys often

used for BDSM role-play, and later, Butch is watched by a 'gimp' while Marcellus is violated. This scene has two layers of transgression and abstraction of sex toys and their initial function. On the one hand, BDSM sex toys are abstracted from their normal sphere of application in consensual dominance submission role-play and fantasized situations where pain contributes to sexual arousal into the direct opposite, namely non-fantasized, brutal abuse. Also, the blending of human and toy, more specifically the voluntary reduction of an individual to an object or 'gimp' and his later more humanized assignment of watching Butch presents an interesting dichotomy regarding power structures in BDSM. These two factors together signify the transition from fantasy to actual brutalization, albeit signified by the same props. In a different way, an abstracted device is used to perform the murder in the context of the deadly sin 'lust' in *Seven* (1995). Though the strap-on suit with a dagger attached to it is not a device directly available or used widely, it nevertheless draws on associations with BDSM and 'pain for pleasure' sub-culture. Finally, a dildo is used as a penetration device by Lisbeth Salander in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), where she takes revenge on her guardian Nils Bjurman who formerly raped her, also drawing on transgressions of voluntary and involuntary intercourse, punishing the delinquent with his own crime and the ability to inflict pain with a device originally produced for pleasure. Indeed, both humorous and negative displays of sex toys in film and TV can be read as means to develop particular hierarchies in character constellations through different assignments of the device. However, they also have to be in agreement with the viewer's reality and experiences in order to come to full effect.

Power and Sexuality

23 As mentioned in the beginning, the medical discourse led by a majority of men in combination with the lack of educated understanding and even the awareness of existence of female sexual pleasure forms the very core of the development of the first vibrator. Without the context of clitoral orgasm, sexual dissatisfaction was labelled and treated as a disease that needed to be cured, emphasizing the resulting improvement in social behavior and appearance of women, which then again served male participants in society, as illustrated in *Hysteria* where Charlotte Dalrymple is considered an outcast for her non-feminine behavior and skepticism towards hysteria as a disease. Framed by further structural factors such as the indoctrination of heterosexual intercourse for procreational purposes only, declaring the family as a central institution of public life, the first power issue regarding sexuality lay within the arrangement of society by strictly heteronormative and androcentric conventions.

This still present heterosexual norm strongly shapes the individual's perception of sexual enhancement devices, in the sense that even if sex toys are not made to simulate particular, gender-specific features of the male or female body, the distinction from a gender biased modelling object has to be made explicit. In other words, a gender neutral interpretation of sex toys has to be emphasized and explicitly opposed with the norm that positions objects used and created for sexual purposes on a gender-bound spectrum even if they do not replicate gender specific organs. In this model, the division of sexuality follows the classic, deterministic distribution of agency of men being dominant and superior, women on the other hand submissive and inferior (and liking it), setting penetration as the normative sexual act although it often only satisfies the male phallic arousal while other forms of arousal serving female pleasure deviate from it (Fahs and Swank 675). According to Freud, however, the sexuality of both genders is phallic in the pre-oedipal state, centered on either the penis or the clitoris, though female sexual desire is later shifted into vaginal normalcy as this form of pleasure complements the masculine phallic arousal (Irigaray 114). Furthermore, the domination of male primary sexual organs in this model is also likely to influence society's focus of interest in the topic, explaining why most research (Herbenick et al.; Schick et al. and Reece et al.) found is dedicated to phallically shaped sex toys along with the lack of representation of non-phallic stimulants for female characters in the films at hand.

24 Nevertheless, there are sexual constellations that are not determined by the heteronormative model and it is in these that one can find toys not specifically tailored to gender-specific use. For a maximum degree of inclusion, these are only specified as non-heterosexual to avoid label misinterpretations, although it is necessary to say that not every heterosexual interpersonal relation is automatically heteronormative and power relations within it unevenly distributed. Arguably, power relations in any interpersonal sexual engagement outside of the heterosexual- and social norm then are a matter of consensual agreement between the participating characters, where sex toys can be used to symbolically support the artificially created hierarchies, which, nevertheless, can be chosen to adapt the phallocentric model of power distribution due to personal preference. In this context, the power assigned to the object relates to the figurative properties of a penis, while potential flaws and peculiarities of the original human organ such as impotence, premature ejaculation, lack of arousal or consequences of unprotected intercourse such as pregnancy or transmission of STDs are inexistent in its artificial simulacrum (Hamming 331). Furthermore, the device stands out for its constant availability as the purchase only depends on a single event of

spending effort and not on the needs of human partners who have to be physically present, agree on sexual intercourse and, above all, fulfill the needs of their lover (ibid.).

25 The adaption of the object or the attachment of it to one's own body to be used on another one ultimately should only serve to satisfy sexual needs without consequences for the user's non-sexual life if the exercise is based on consent. A person occupying the penetrating position (no matter whether male or female) is not automatically assigned sexual or social dominance unless explicitly discussed and desired, much like submission or passivity on a non-sexual level does not logically follow from being penetrated. According to Haraway's model of the cyborg, the merging of the active user with the object transforms the individual into a post-gender and consequently also post-human being, indicating that the object is liberated an from gender-specific classification and simultaneously transfers this liberation onto the human body of the user (Hamming 335). Power, in this context, is assigned to the ability to create sexual arousal in either oneself or the individual(s) the experience is shared with, signifying the sex toy only as a tool for the achievement or practice of consensual power relations that support and serve sexual arousal. However, sex toys also can contribute to negotiations of power outside of the process of application to bodies such as the ability to give or receive orgasm.

26 The presence of sex toys can encourage a dialogue about sexuality and the satisfaction of sexual needs as much as it can cause conflict regarding the same (Herbenick 330). In contrast to rather cryptic and subjectively connoted concepts such as arousal or orgasm, toys serve as real-world referents for the practice of sexuality as the involvement in intimate settings is their predominant function. Not being bound to male or female identified bodies, they are positioned as a neutral signifier for sexual play and possess positive connotations as additives for the achievement of climax. Communication about sexuality then can revolve around an object without the risk of discomfort caused by referencing the bodies that are unable to meet the needs of the partner and have to be complemented by the device or object, as shown in a car-dialogue between Jim and Michelle shortly after the aforementioned introductory scene in *American Reunion*. At the same time, sex toys can cause conflicts in interpersonal sexual relationships when they are not perceived as a neutral object but rather interpreted as carrying a gender signification and thus functioning as a mechanical version of the partner's organs that are potentially unable to fulfill the user's sexual needs (Fahs and Swank 676). This interpretation is supported by the fact that many female users are secretive about their engagement with sex toys in heterosexual relationships but contradicted by research findings which show that attitudes towards sex toys are generally positive. Hence,

the power assigned to the sex toy depends on the individual's interpretation of social power distributions along the gender spectrum and the perception of sex toys as being gendered or not.

27 Most of these structural differences are also mirrored in the films at hand. For instance, the absence of interest in communicating an authentic application of differently shaped devices is shown in both cases where non-phallic toys occur (*American Wedding*; *Pulp Fiction*): they are abstracted from their initial purpose. Also, characters never use sex toys alone without being interrupted or 'caught' by others, occasionally producing the above mentioned conflict or communication situation where the toy serves as an entity isolated from both parties of the conflict caused by the dissatisfactory sexual relationship as shown in *American Reunion* (2012). At the same time, sex toys also do not occur as devices that can be used in a shared setting without the following regret or emphasis of deviance of this practice as shown in *Me, Myself & Irene*, or abusing them as weapons as in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* or *Seven*, and finally, the context of campy homosexual promiscuity, as in the case of *Brüno*. Moreover, sex toys are used to construct female homosexuality in *American Pie 2* (2001), displaying the possession of a sex toy as an identifying feature for this sexual orientation assumed by the women's social behavior while lesbian⁷ or female bisexual characters in other films at hand are never shown using devices in intercourse.

28 On the one hand, the absence of non-comical or terrifying displays of sex toys in shared settings agrees with the general construction of 'flawless' fictional characters who are never shown to use the bathroom or perform other everyday tasks without narrative purpose. On the other hand, the occurrence of sex toys in most cases serves exaggerated symbolic purposes and their inclusion usually marks the scene as highly sexualized, albeit this sexualization often also has symbolic meanings attached to it. Phallic sex toys are mostly displayed as catalyzers of either comedy or threat, while one exception is found in *Fight Club* (1999). Here, a dildo sits on Marla Singer's shelf and is slightly brought into movement by Tyler Durden, but is not directly involved in action or narrative and therefore, cannot be said to advocate any specific use in sexual contexts. Nevertheless, its casual placement on a visible spot in the shot combined with the lack of explicit purpose in the scene marks it as a normalized item in the film's world.

⁷ "I need confirmation!"- Stifler when breaking into an apartment shared by two women assuming they are sexually involved in "AP2".

Conclusion

29 Nowadays, sex toys are a staple in the sex industry with a high popularity and use rate. Their significance for social impact comes with the wide spread of these products within society and consumer sphere. Here, the products are presented, marketed and promoted in a certain way to reach a specific audience that is assumed to exist, causing potential customers to adapt to the industry's offerings rather than modifying the industry's assumptions according to their own demands. It has been shown that sex toys are, in many ways, a significant part of today's formation of discourse around and practice of sexuality. It is, however, not possible to come to a full conclusion from the findings as the variety of objects, sexualities, circumstances and constellations in which sex toys can be used is not possible to grasp and, above all, highly subjective. However, it is also important to acknowledge the different factors that influence this subjectivity.

30 One dominant influence can be found in mass media productions and the according display of sexuality that is subject to normative regulations because of media's wide sphere of influence. As shown here, popular culture and film as one of the major media forms that shapes public opinion, rarely display sex toys as neutral devices for enhancing sexual relations, but rather, reproduce negative attitudes towards these devices by showing them in comical or violent contexts. On the one hand, the abstracted occurrence of sex toys as weapons or comic toys can be explained by the facilitated display of these devices outside of a sexual context but nevertheless, maintaining narrative significance, as it would be impossible to show the devices for genital stimulation in direct action outside of an adult movie. On the other hand, however, the example of non-sensational display of sex toys in *Fight Club* shows that there is a way to integrate and therefore, normalize these devices by placing them in the film world but not relying on their occurrence as catalyzer for narrative development.

31 In addition, the predominant presence of female-targeted sex toys and the plurality of research addressing female pleasure devices leads to the conclusion that females are assumed to benefit most from the market as either active users and consumers or partners that benefit from the presence of toys in interpersonal sexual relations. However, this targeting does not imply an unjustified distribution of power in general, but has to be attended to on a case-to-case basis. In the same way, the appearance and conception of toys themselves does not necessarily imply the prioritization of one gender over the other, unless explicitly stated to do so. However, outside of an interpersonal context, sex toys very much serve as empowering devices for the enhancement and better understanding of one's own sexuality, though the

attitudes towards them are never outside of the public discourse around sexuality. To determine the social relevance of sex toys more accurately, this issue could be investigated through a stricter division of various sexual orientations and genders although the creation of isolated groups can lead to a full exclusion of individuals who cannot identify with any of the created categories and are either ignored completely or have to modify their own self-identified sexuality in order to participate.

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