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Consumer Sexualities: Women and Sex Shopping

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Gender Studies

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I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:.....

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Abstract

The thesis investigates contemporary sexual cultures through the lens of British women's experiences of buying and using sexual commodities. Sexual consumer culture offers women a comprehensive programme of what Foucault calls 'technologies of the self': a language, set of knowledge, and field of expertise through which the sexual self learns to articulate itself in order to become intelligible. Consuming and using sexual products to achieve 'better' sex and construct a knowledgeable and 'confident' sexual identity form a key part of the neoliberal project of the sexual self. Sex shopping culture reproduces a 'postfeminist sensibility' (Gill, 2007), representing a 'double entanglement' (McRobbie, 2009) with feminism by inciting and requiring women to construct and perform their sexualities through a narrow depoliticised discourse of sexual 'choice', 'empowerment', and consumerism.

The thesis draws upon data from 22 one-to-one semi-structured interviews and 7 accompanied shopping trips to sex shops. A central contention of the analysis is that women use a diverse range of discursive, embodied and everyday strategies in order to 'make do' with the kinds of femininity and female sexuality that sex shop culture represents (de Certeau, 1998). The thesis investigates three key spheres of social and everyday life at which sexual consumer culture is negotiated: spaces (the location, layout and experience of sex shops); bodies (the forms of bodily 'becoming' offered by wearing lingerie in sexual contexts); and objects (using sex toys and the enabling and disabling of possibilities for sexual pleasures and practices). Each section demonstrates the constraints, anxieties and potential pleasures of constructing sexual identities in and through neoliberal and postfeminist consumer culture, whilst at the same time exploring the potential for contradiction, negotiation and resistance evidenced in the multiple ways in which women take up the sexual identities and practices offered by sex shopping.

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Consumer Sexualities: Introduction

According to their website, there are currently 352 Ann Summers stores in the UK (Ann Summers, 2014). Located on high streets and in shopping centres from Aberdeen to York, the erotic retailer, established in 1972, has grown to become the UK market leader. Amongst stalwarts of the British high street both old and new, Ann Summers is an established brand as ordinary and familiar to shoppers as British Home Stores, Primark, WH Smiths or Poundland. Yet it also carries with it a frisson of naughtiness, of sexiness and even taboo. As a number of the women interviewed for this thesis would tell you, a shopper may have to be feeling particularly confident to walk through the doors of Ann Summers. She might worry if onlookers will notice her going in, and what they might be thinking if they do. The location and design of the store does all it can to assuage these potential fears; the signage and décor employ a pink, feminine colour scheme, and the products visible upon entrance are primarily matching bra sets in colourful or floral designs. As the visitor moves further into the store, however, the lingerie becomes more explicitly 'sexy'; the shopper might browse corsets, suspender belts, stockings, peephole bras and crotchless underwear in black, red or leopard print. Displays of boxed vibrators and accessories such as silky blindfolds and fluffy handcuffs may come into view. Novelties such as 'penis pasta' and 'cock candy' sit alongside pink L plates and feather boas, providing fodder for hen nights and secret Santa gifts. Racks of club wear and revealing costumes such as nurse, maid or police officer can also be browsed and tried on in the fitting rooms. Throughout the shop numerous mannequins and photographs of models can be seen; making evident the sexiness of the (young, white, slim) feminine body in lingerie.

As they venture further into the shop, the shopper will likely notice the area reserved for more sexually explicit products. Depending on the store this will be located behind or between curved display partitions, or down a small flight of stairs, perhaps accompanied by a sign, as in the current Manchester store, reading 'going down has never felt so good'. This section is where packaged sex toys are displayed alongside those unboxed and containing batteries, allowing customers to pick them up and sample the vibration or movement. Sex toys may include small 'bullet' vibrators, cock rings, anal toys such as butt plugs, male masturbators, and, most prominently, Ann Summers own range of 'Rabbit' vibrators, featuring a shaft designed for penetration and small vibrating 'rabbit ears' for clitoral stimulation. Of course, a number of shoppers may never enter this section; it is perfectly possible to browse, try on, and buy lingerie and novelties in Ann Summers without ever having to look at a sex toy. Yet it remains the case that a consumer may, on an ordinary Saturday in the average British high street, purchase a commodity explicitly and exclusively intended to give her an orgasm.

It was this space, that of the Ann Summers store, that first piqued my curiosity about women and sex shopping. I was, and still am, fascinated by this contradictory place, one that feels both ordinary and risky, normal and shocking. Ann Summers as a space of representation raises questions about how certain kinds of sexual practices and identities are normalised and regulated for women through consumer culture. From a

critical perspective, the store and its products are deeply normative in their reproduction of sexual pleasure as exclusively heterosexual and only available to those women who are willing and able to perform feminine 'sexiness' according to extremely narrow parameters of race, age and body size. Moreover, like many British high street shops, Ann Summers carries complex class and taste connotations, offering consumers access to 'respectable' feminine heterosexual identifications (Skeggs, 1997; Storr, 2003). Finally, Ann Summers can be productively understood within a wider sexual culture that a number of critics have described as 'postfeminist' and linked to contemporary Western neoliberalism (Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 2009; Evans and Riley, 2015). This is a culture in which young women are incentivised, even required, to work upon themselves to become sexually knowledgeable, active and agentic, all in ways that are primarily made visible through the performance of visible 'sexiness' and sexual consumption.

And yet, as someone who has been shopping in sex shops including Ann Summers since my late teens, I also felt that the many pleasures, desires, amusements, frustrations and anxieties available to women through sex shopping would remain unexplored by this kind of critical analysis of the shop as a space of representation alone. Sex shops are also spaces of experience, where multiple and shifting embodied negotiations are always taking place. The question of experience could only be fully explored through a qualitative methodology. Twenty two semi-structured one-to-one interviews and seven accompanied sex shopping trips were undertaken for this project. Talking to other women about their experiences necessarily widened the focus of the thesis beyond the shop space; after all, sex shopping does not begin nor end when a woman enters or exits an erotic store. Moreover, although Ann Summers is the most accessible and visible erotic shop in Britain, there are a plethora of other 'sex shops' including licensed adult shops, independent erotic boutiques, 'women only' sex shops¹, LGBT sex shops and a range of online sex retailers. As I will explore, this landscape of locations and forms of sex shopping is often understood relationally, so that a preference for an independent erotic boutique is expressed through the shoppers distaste for Ann Summers, for example. In addition, consuming erotic products plays a complex role in women's everyday lives and life course: from attending an Ann Summers party; to giving or receiving a novelty 'sexy' gift; to growing in and out of lingerie styles and sizes; washing, cleaning and storing sexual products; wearing lingerie for a special occasion such as Valentine's Day; using sex toys alone or with a partner, and so on. The wider question for the thesis then, would be one of how and in what ways sexual consumer culture operates within the everyday construction and experience of 'being sexual'. How are sexual identities, activities and pleasures produced and performed in and through a culture of consumption?

This is not a question of whether sexuality is, or should be, 'commodified'. As Clarissa Smith notes, much public media hand wringing has taken place in recent years over the growing creep of consumer culture into every facet of everyday life, and in

¹ Sh! Women's Erotic Emporium in Hoxton, London currently welcomes self-identifying female customers who may bring male partners/friends with them if they wish. The store is open to male identified customers shopping alone or with male partners/friends one night per week (Sh! Women's Erotic Emporium, 2014). In the early 2000s, Tickled in Brighton operated a similar policy.

particular around the perceived increasing commercialisation of sex and sexuality (2010). And yet, as Smith contends:

Why sex should not be commercialised when every other human endeavour is commercialised is unclear – just like any other academic, my life is entirely commercialised, from the foods I ingest, the clothes that keep me warm, to the music, books and films which entertain me; there is no pleasure, no emotion, no physical sensation that is not commercialised, and while I might want to claim that my sexual self is some sort of authentic real me, the idea that this can be separated out from all the other ways in which I exist in this world, to be unsullied by commercialism, is ridiculous and simply a means of replacing analysis with condemnation (2010, 107-8).

As Smith suggests, commercialisation and consumerism are foundational conditions of every facet of modern Western life, and sexuality is no exception. At the same time the arguments in this thesis remain critical of the relationship between consumer culture and sexuality, seeking not to condemn, but to analyse the implications of constructing and performing sexual identities, pleasures and practices in and through consumption. In what ways do sexual knowledge and consumer knowledge intersect and interact? How are ideas of ‘good sex’ constructed, and how and in what ways can ‘good sex’ be acquired through becoming a ‘better’ consumer? Sexual consumer culture constructs, reproduces and regulates ideas around the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ orientations towards sex and sexuality. I contend that the ability to embody and perform the appropriate forms of sexual consumption – confident, knowledgeable, and tasteful – is deeply entangled with discourses around a ‘healthy’ and suitable attitude towards being sexual more broadly.

The construction of this ‘good’, healthy, and appropriate orientation towards sexual consumption and being sexual is frequently made contingent upon the othering of those who are understood to lack the ability or disposition to access this mode of being: that is, those whose performance of sexual consumption is ‘wrong’ in some way (Evans and Riley, 2015, 64). Time and again in interviews and shopping trips, women explained their own sex shopping tastes and choices primarily through describing what they were *not*: not ‘tacky’, not ‘cheap’, and not ‘slutty’; something more appropriate for ‘women like me’. In Bourdieu’s framework, these kinds of distinctions are key to the construction of a respectable middle class identity² (1984). The politics of taste is one where class boundaries are drawn and maintained; it ‘unites all those who are the product of similar conditions while distinguishing them from all others... taste distinguishes in an essential way, since taste is the basis of all that one has – people and things – and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others’ (49). As the use of the word ‘slutty’ would suggest, the maintenance of a tasteful feminine identity is particularly fraught with anxiety about being *unrespectable*, sexually inappropriate, a figure of ‘disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance’ (49). As Beverley Skeggs contends, for women in particular class is an ‘emotional politics’ structured through feelings of denial and disidentification

² As I discuss in the research methodology (Chapter Three), the majority of the women who took part in this research can be understood as middle class (with the understanding that ‘middle class’ is a broad social category in contemporary Britain).

(1997, 75). Skeggs points to the fact that, despite the emotionally fraught nature of these classed identity negotiations, class itself is rarely explicitly named in women's accounts of themselves, instead forming a 'structuring absence' and operating only through the measuring of the self against others (74).

These two intersecting identity concerns – that of being a 'good' consumer and a 'good' sexual person, and that of being tasteful, respectable and appropriate in a context where the naming of class is obscured – both draw on a particular form of individualism that is a key structuring force in contemporary neoliberal Western life. Neoliberal governance involves the continual rolling back of the state, which is replaced by the free competitive marketplace (Brown, 2003). This creates a new rationality of selfhood (Rose, 1989), in which citizenship, welfare and economic participation become a case of individual responsibility (Evans and Riley, 2015, 4). In this context, class is no longer seen as an organising social issue but instead becomes an individualised 'problem', allowing for a 'new rhetoric of class hatred' where divisions are 'redrawn in a context where class is no longer seen to count' (Evans and Riley, 2015, 11). A number of critics have pointed to the particular address of neoliberal individualism to the postfeminist female subject (Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 2009; Evans and Riley, 2015). The ideal female neoliberal subject, whom McRobbie calls the 'top girl' (2007), must continually work upon the self, becoming the best and most successful version of herself through a range of techniques including consumption. This work takes place in a range of contexts, from appearance, to career, leisure, relationships and family. In the realm of sexual practice this labour is primarily about gaining knowledge – not only technical knowledge regarding the best skills, positions and sex toys – but about her sexual self, her desires, potential hang-ups or inhibitions in need of work, and her body's ability to be sexually desirable and to have the appropriate quality and quantity of pleasure.

The discourses and practices available through which to undertake and make visible the individual's work on the self are described by Foucault as 'technologies of the self'³. Foucault argues that subjects are obligated to self-care by making continual efforts to become knowledgeable about themselves (2011, 43), and that a range of technologies for articulating, analysing, monitoring and understanding the self make this possible. I contend that sexual consumption represents a key arena for such technologies, whereby postfeminist subjects can articulate, embody and perform their knowledgeable sexual selves through the practice of informed, confident and appropriate consumption, and so become intelligible as an individual in a neoliberal age.

However, given the priority of the realm of the experiential and the everyday in my method and approach, the thesis is also shaped by a cultural studies model that

³ This concept was developed primarily in Foucault's lectures of the 1980s (2011), and was still being explored at the time of his death. Foucault uses 'techniques' and 'technologies' fairly interchangeably in this period. Whilst scholars immediately following Foucault refer to 'techniques' (Rose, 1989; McNay, 1992), more recent feminist work adopts the term 'technologies', as I do here (Radner, 1999; Gill, 2007; Evans et al., 2010b; Evans and Riley, 2015). However, it should be clear that, by 'technologies' Foucault does not refer to machinery or devices, but to ways of working upon, speaking about, understanding, and making intelligible the self. These ideas and their various interpretations are explicated in further depth in Chapter Two.

understands the everyday as a space of contradiction, negotiation and, to use Michel de Certeau's term, 'making do' with ready-made consumer capitalism. The focus here is on the *practice* of consumption, not only 'what is used' but also importantly 'the ways of using' the texts, materials and objects of sexual consumer culture (de Certeau, 1998, 35). De Certeau refers to those ways of being/using that enter into a 'field that regulates them', whilst also 'introduce into it a way of turning it to their advantage that obeys other rules and constitutes something like a second level interwoven into the first' (30). These tactics are 'an art of the weak'; they do not challenge or stop the flow of power and regulation, but they might disrupt, divert or stall it (37). Indeed, these tactics are found, made and practiced within the field of regulation, the two are 'interwoven'. I do not intend to characterise de Certeau as the counterpoint to Foucault's concept of 'technologies of the self' here; indeed, elsewhere in his work Foucault conceptualised the 'relational character' of power and resistance in ways that have also enriched my understanding of the negotiated space of the everyday:

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power... [The existence of power relationships] depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. But this does not mean that they are only a reaction or rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat. Resistances... are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite. Hence they too are distributed in irregular fashion: the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behaviour (1978, 95-96).

These 'mobile and transitory' moments of resistance, positioned within and as part of the logic of a distributed network of power relations, are key to understanding the negotiation of sexual consumer culture in practice. Whilst the neoliberal logic of consumption is foundational to how the sexual self is understood and performed, the sphere of everyday life is, to return to de Certeau, nuanced and stubborn, never wholly reducible to the logic of the marketplace (1998). Alongside critical analysis of the ways in which sexual consumer culture defines and regulates being sexual, I remain attentive to the contradiction and subtlety with which women negotiate this culture. The analysis draws out those everyday, embodied, unpredictable and fleeting moments of resistance which, I argue in Chapter Two, are central to the feminist project undertaken here. Demonstrating women's everyday resourcefulness in the

context of postfeminist neoliberal culture is central to the critique and deconstruction of that culture.

This focus on the everyday and experiential aspects of sexual consumption represents the key original contribution of the thesis. A small yet significant body of scholarship has examined various elements of sex shopping culture, but an investigation wholly devoted to women's engagement with sex shops and the products they sell represents a significant gap in the existing literature. In the following section I outline the scholarship that has so far dealt with the topic of sexual consumption, showing the contribution this thesis makes to a developing field.

Sex shopping scholarship

Research on the cultural representations of sex and sexuality reproduced by sexual consumer culture makes up a significant portion of the existing scholarship. Sexual products marketed at women, particularly vibrators, are a particularly rich area for analysis. Greg Tuck has argued that contemporary cultural representations and perceptions of masturbating women with vibrators usually (although not always) reproduce female auto-eroticism as an act of liberation and empowerment (2009). He contends that such positive representations have flourished at the same time as women have been defined as 'needing' a consumer object to aid their auto-erotic pleasure; making the masturbating woman the 'ally' of capitalism. Feona Attwood has argued that women's use of sex toys has been central to a postfeminist neoliberal project of individualistic self-fashioning through consumption (2005, 400). Attwood contends that 'sexual consumerism is equated with the development of sexual knowledge' (394). She argues that the representation of the iconic Rabbit sex toy is 'typical of a contemporary cultural trend towards representing women's sexual pleasure as fashionable, safe, aesthetically pleasing and feminine' (393) The Rabbit reproduces sexual pleasure as 'nice, bright, and accessible' (399). The Rabbit vibrator was first popularised by a 1998 episode of *Sex and the City*, in which, Lynne Comella argues, use of the vibrator was presented as a substitute for 'real' sex with men (2003). She goes on to suggest that the episode ultimately reproduces shame around female auto-eroticism through its repetition of the idea that 'masturbation isn't "real" sex' (112). Her analysis also demonstrates that the cultural anxieties surrounding female masturbation are not always successfully neutralised by efforts to produce female sex toy consumption as appropriate, feminine and empowering.

These arguments highlight the role that sex toys as commodities play in contemporary postfeminist consumer culture. However, these objects have longer histories that have been explored by a handful of critics. Most widely cited is Rachel Maines' history of the vibrator (2001). Maines traces the origins of this electrical device from 19th century medicine, where it was used to 'treat' women pathologised as hysterical, to its use as a domestic appliance, sold as a health massager and not openly acknowledged to have a sexual function, to its deployment in pornographic material from the 1920s, and its sale in pornography stores as a 'marital aid' in the 1960s. Jane Juffer expands upon the role of sex toys as domestic appliances as part of her analysis of the mundane domestication of a range of erotic materials in *At Home with Pornography* (1998). Juffer's text asks how and why a range of sexual materials become part of women's

everyday home environments: what conditions of access and discourses of gender allow sexually explicit objects and texts to become part of ordinary domestic routines? Her analysis of the vibrator picks up its history in the 1970s, pointing to the influence of feminist 'sex positive' arguments that linked masturbation to the liberation and self-definition of female sexuality. At the same time, Juffer attends to the various anxieties around the ease of access to the vibrator as an 'alienating technology' that might aid the 'commodification of sex' and mechanisation of orgasm, detaching it from both emotion and politics (1998, 89). Despite the anxieties around ever increasing access and use of vibrators, Juffer points to the fact that, in 1990s America, women who cannot access those 'women-friendly' sex shops located in liberal Western coastal cities are faced with buying a vibrator in an adult store selling hardcore porn and sex dolls, and more than likely owned and run by men (97). She points to the importance of mail order catalogues, which serve to 'demystify' the vibrator and bring it into the ordinary space of the home and the domestic routine (98).

Sex shops spaces themselves have provided a focus for analysis for scholars from a range of academic fields. Kent and Brown review the changes that have occurred in shop layout and location in the UK market between 1963-2003, concluding that sex shopping has gradually become more socially acceptable and female or couple friendly (2006). Coulmont and Hubbard's comparative overview of legislation that applies to sex shops in the UK and France provides some explanation as to why this shift has occurred (2010). They demonstrate that forms of regulation and control have been extremely powerful in shaping the market. In Britain, they argue, regulation has shifted from external surveillance and criminalisation to a system of licencing under the Local Government Miscellaneous Provisions Act 1982, which places the responsibility for self-surveillance on the business owners themselves. The terms of the licence mean that the owner must ensure that the shop is 'well-run and has no detrimental effects on its locality' in order to stay in business (208). Furthermore, shops such as Ann Summers, where products explicitly designed for sexual use do not constitute a 'significant degree' of stock, are not required to obtain a licence (205). The combination of these factors has allowed 'well managed' corporate retailers with an 'open', feminine image to flourish (208). Extending this analysis, Amber Martin explores the impact that regulatory frameworks have had on the changing geographies of sex shops in UK cities (2014). Martin shows that the application of sex shop licencing regulation in the UK is often ambiguous, subjective and locally variable. Licenses are granted or rejected based in part on whether the character of the premises is deemed 'inappropriate', yet there is no legal definition of what 'inappropriate' might entail (50) This has resulted, she contends, in the geographical shift of sex shops from the 'back street' to the 'high street', as shops that present themselves as 'light, stylish and orientated towards the female consumer' are likely to escape regulation (44). As such, this feminine sex shop aesthetic has become both geographically and culturally mainstreamed, while consumer spaces that diverge from this in any way are marginalised.

Research has been attentive to the role of independent sex shops, particularly those that expand upon the 'feminine' sex shop presentation that Martin describes. Over the last decade 'boutique' or designer shops selling lingerie and sex toys have flourished,

particularly in fashionable areas of London. In her analysis of the branding, marketing and product design of these stores Clarissa Smith argues that they 'offer the cachet of exclusivity and sophistication' to their customers (2007: 177). Smith notes how the owners of Myla, which opened in Notting Hill in 2001, and Coco de Mer, which launched in Covent Garden in 2004, courted the broadsheet and glossy magazine press in order to situate shopping in these stores as a respectable, middle-class, tasteful form of consumption. In press interviews the store owners differentiated themselves from the market leader Ann Summers, positioning themselves as more sophisticated and knowledgeable about sex (180-181). Smith analyses the ways in which designer sex toys have been marketed as aesthetically beautiful 'works of art' in order to distinguish and legitimate them as a source of sexual pleasure for the sophisticated consumer. She concludes that shopping in these stores is produced as an act which 'confers superiority' on the shopper through a 'reworking of symbolic capital' that positions the consumer as sexually knowledgeable (178).

Another important phenomenon with a somewhat longer history is those shops that could be seen to promote a feminist agenda. In the UK, most notable of these is Sh! Women's Erotic Emporium, which opened in London in 1992 with an explicit mission statement to provide a woman focused sex shop space. Two articles from the field of marketing have explored the shop's knowledgeable customer service (Danusia and Schmidt, 1997) and 'female focused' design (Kent and Brown, 2006), although the implications of the branding of Sh! from a critical feminist perspective remain unexplored. American scholarship has gone further in examining the implications of the self-proclaimed 'feminist' sex shop space, most likely due to the fact that such sex shops have been open in liberal cities such as New York and San Francisco since the 1970s. Lynne Comella presents a history of women owned sex toy shops in America by drawing on participant observation, interviews with store owners, and archival materials (2004). Comella demonstrates the ways in which these stores have promoted their own particular strand of sex positive feminist politics, presenting themselves as spaces not only of consumption but also education and even liberation. She contends that this marketisation of feminist sex positivity has been far from straightforward. Not only do store owners face various forms of regulation or even prohibition in some US states, they must also carefully negotiate the inherent tensions between consumer capitalism and feminist politics; they need to remain profitable in order to survive, whilst also being attentive to the politics of sexual education, identity and inclusivity. Meika Loe explores how commercial pressures have affected the politics of one such female owned sex toy business: 'Toy Box' is a democratically structured woman centred sex toy business established in the 1970s which, Loe argues, has gradually responded to pressure from a number of forces to move away from explicitly naming itself as feminist (1999, 710). Whilst many of the 'sex positive', knowledge raising aims inherent to the store's launch in the 1970s remain the same in the late 1990s, the use of the word 'feminism' has been filtered out due to its increasingly contested meanings, with workers concerned that a feminist store conveys restrictive, censorious, anti-sex, anti-men values and thus will restrict the potential consumer base of the business. Loe's analysis points to one of the many challenges involved in furthering a feminist sex politics through consumption, particularly in a cultural climate of postfeminism.

There are a smaller number of studies of sex shopping that employ empirical methodologies⁴. Melissa Tyler observed and interviewed staff who work in some of the many sex shops in London's Soho (2011). Her analysis suggests that their work requires the performance of 'implicit' forms of sexualized labour and necessitates careful management of the stigma and taint of 'dirty work'. Focusing on consumers, Evans et al. examine Ann Summers as a postfeminist shopping space, analysing women's experience of sex shopping through the use of focus groups and 'mapping' exercises (2010a). The women contrasted the 'safe' high street retailer with the 'seedy' 'male' licenced sex shop which was seen as bleak and exclusionary (220). Developing this work, Evans and Riley's book explores the way that women engage with a spectrum of cultural discourses of female 'sexiness' in contemporary life (2015). As part of a series of focus groups with younger and older women, women were asked to visit Ann Summers and spend a £5 voucher. The authors contend that, for the younger women, the erotic store represents a technology through which they can articulate 'sexy' identities in line with neoliberalism and postfeminism. The authors found that the judging and rating of Ann Summers' products was central to women's construction of themselves as knowing sexual consumers (67). Yet Evans and Riley also contend that Ann Summers is a 'postfeminist heterotopia': a liminal or risky space in which 'good' sexual identities are continually predicated on the othering of 'bad' (tasteless, non-knowledgeable) versions of female sexuality. Such 'good' identities then, are risky and contingent, and must always be worked upon to avert the risk of failure.

Also focusing on Ann Summers, Merl Storr's book provides an in depth ethnography of Ann Summers parties and party planners (2003). The party plan is the second element of the Ann Summers business model, where party organisers set up raucous, suggestive games and present Ann Summers lingerie and sex toy products at parties in women's homes. Storr, who undertook participant observation at parties and interviewed party organisers, argues that Ann Summers constructs sexual pleasure and knowledge as a consumer good (32). She conceptualises the Ann Summers party as a space of female homosociality and analyses the ways in which heterosexual pleasures and identities are constructed between women. In the chapter on 'classy lingerie' she details the ways in which classed femininities are constructed and negotiated through the women's taste judgements of Ann Summer's products. Storr argues that the parties are spaces in which heterosexual women negotiate their position within power relations, offering opportunities to critique the failures of hegemonic, phallic masculinity through jokes and games that use penis-like sex toys (90). However, Storr concludes that the pleasures available at Ann Summers parties, while they may appear resistant in some respects, ultimately play a key role in reinforcing gender power structures by making them more liveable for heterosexual women.

Two smaller scale studies of American sex toy parties by McCaughey and French (2001) and Curtis (2004), offer differing perspectives. McCaughey and French argue

⁴ Debra Herbenick has published a number of papers resulting from quantitative research about sex toy purchase and use in the field of sexual health; her work is concerned with quantifying the popularity of sex toys and the frequency of their use amongst various populations (eg. Herbenick et al., 2009a and 2009b), or examining sexual health education opportunities in sex shops or home sex toy parties (Herbenick et al., 2005 and 2008).

that sex toy parties represent one part of the 'orgasm body project', whereby orgasm is offered as a symbol of personal liberation, and achieved primarily through a 'capitalistic consumption model' (2001, 91). However, much like Storr (2003), they conclude that the focus is on coping with or 'fixing' dissatisfaction through sexual consumption (93), ultimately preventing women from voicing a broader critique of gender power relations. Conversely, Debra Curtis argues that, whilst the advance of the consumer market into sexual practises and identities can be read as problematic in a number of ways, this argument can also be overstated at the cost of recognising the potentially liberatory multiple pleasures and desires permitted and produced by a diverse sex toy and lingerie industry (2004).

As this review of the existing field makes clear, there a number of key gaps in the literature around sex shops and sexual products for women⁵. I address one of the major gaps in this thesis by presenting the first study to undertake a sustained engagement with women's experiences of being sexual consumers through a qualitative methodology. Whilst valuable work has focused on the cultural representations reproduced through shops and products, the regulatory and geographical aspects of sex shops, and the histories of sex shops and vibrators, studies using ethnographic methods makes up the minority of research into this topic. This thesis takes up women's experiences of sexual consumer culture as the primary focus. Furthermore, the handful of existing studies that employ ethnographic methods have focused on one aspect of sex shopping culture, such as sex shop staff (Tyler, 2011), Ann Summers' shops (Evans et al., 2010a), or Ann Summers parties (Storr, 2003). Evans and Riley's book is the first exception to this in that it places Ann Summers within the broader context of cultural discourses of 'sexiness' including media debates around 'sexualisation', and celebrity culture. Their work suggests that Ann Summers is a space where risky and contingent sexual identities are constructed through the disavowal of 'othered' forms of sexiness. This thesis builds upon their analysis by looking at how these processes of distinction occur across a range of sexual shopping spaces. A key contention of this project is that women experience the sex shop market relationally. The experience of sex shopping does not just happen in relation to one retailer or one product: taste judgements, experiences and identity constructions gain their meaning through choices that women make across and between a diverse landscape of sexual (and indeed non-sexual) retailing both actual and virtual.

⁵ Clearly, not all of these gaps will be addressed by researching consumer experience. Further ethnographic studies on the labour of sex shop staff, building upon Tyler's valuable work in Soho (2011), might pay attention to the kinds of knowledge and emotional labour required and performed by workers in 'women friendly' erotic stores (Comella does explore this in the context of her history of the American 'feminist' sex store, 2004). More fundamentally, as the review of the current field demonstrates, there is a largely Western focus to the scholarship. Jo McMillan's chapter on the developing sex shop industry in China is a notable exception to this (2006). The substantive body of research on sex tourism to destinations in areas such as Asia and the Caribbean often refers to sex shops, but they remain an underexplored aspect in comparison to other facets of the sex industry in these contexts (Mullings, 1999; Sanders, 2011). There is also a pressing need for work that reveals the chain of production for sexual products, looking at the networks of global industry and labour that are so often invisible from the consumer perspective; McMillan explores the operation and organisation of a sex toy manufacturer in China tantalisingly briefly (2006).

Furthermore, the current focus of the existing work on sex shopping, qualitative or otherwise, is overwhelmingly on heterosexual women. This could be explained in part by the heteronormativity of both postfeminist consumer culture and the existing sex retail market, most notably Ann Summers and other feminine retailers which have become mainstreamed partially through the regulation of the 'inappropriate' (Martin, 2014). These brands may actively exclude non-heterosexual women; Merl Storr discusses her discomfort with lesbophobic attitudes in the Ann Summers parties that she attended (2003). However, this is not to say that lesbian, queer or bisexual women do not shop in Ann Summers stores and other such sexual retailers that promote and naturalise heterosexual sexuality. Moreover, some of the alternative sex shops for women that have appeared since the 1990s such as Sh! Women's Erotic Emporium in London and Tickled in Brighton, alongside online sex shopping websites both niche and mainstream, explicitly promote products designed for sex between women. My research addresses this gap in the literature by speaking to women of all sexual orientations. Their accounts point to the complexity of and potential for constructing lesbian, bisexual and queer sexual identities through an often heteronormative consumer landscape.

Finally, there has not yet been a comprehensive study that synthesises an argument around how women experience and negotiate both the shop spaces and the products themselves. The moment of consumption is only part of the story, and indeed shopping for and using the products are often spoken about simultaneously in women's accounts. Moreover, I contend particularly in the chapters on lingerie and sex toys that the intended meanings of commodity objects may gradually shift or be explicitly adapted and challenged through their ongoing use. Shopping for and using sexual commodities are not activities that women engage in uncritically or passively. My argument is that women's experiences of sex shopping speak to an active negotiation of sexual consumer culture, occurring over time in ways that both reproduce and exceed the postfeminist and neoliberal 'technologies of the self' offered by sexual consumption (Foucault, 2011).

Structure of the Thesis

A number of the authors examined above have pointed to the postfeminist framings of sex shopping and sex toys (Attwood, 2005; Evans and Riley, 2015; Storr, 2003); these commodities play a key role in making visible the disciplinary project of fashioning a sexually active and knowledgeable femininity. At an early stage in the research it became apparent to me that some historical context for this contemporary role of sex shops and sexual products would be necessary. As I have shown, elements of the histories of sexual commodities have been addressed by Maines (2001), Juffer (1998) and Comella (2004). The latter two authors in particular look at the role of sexual consumption and commodities in second wave feminist and 'sex positive' feminist projects of the 1970s and 80s; I wanted to continue that story in order to contextualise and understand the foundations for understandings of sex shopping in *postfeminist* consumer culture. After all, as McRobbie contends, a key characteristic of postfeminism is its 'double entanglement' with feminism, whereby elements of feminist politics are taken up in a depoliticised form in order that others can be disavowed (2009).

Chapters One and Two trace the ways in which various, often contested, meanings became attached to sexual commodities and consumption within feminism, and have subsequently been picked up and reconstructed in postfeminist culture. I begin by taking up the history of sexual commodities in the late 1960s, detailing those historical instances that show the connections between sexual liberation and sexual consumption being forged, disputed, reframed, and, finally, 'made over' in the 1990s as part of postfeminist and neoliberal discourses of the (sexual) self. These chapters demonstrate how and why consuming sexual products has become a key component in contemporary discourses of the postfeminist and neoliberal sexual self. In Chapter One, 'Sexual Consumption and Sexual Liberation in Feminism', I catalogue a number of historical moments, from the late 1960s to the 1980s, in which connections between sexual emancipation and sexual commodity consumption were suggested and developed. A full history of feminism's comprehensive and ongoing reframing of female sexuality and sexual liberation is beyond the scope of any thesis, and would inevitably be cursory. However, I do contend that the selection of historical texts, ideas and occurrences detailed in this chapter tell a story of how sexual consumption as an enabler of sexual, and even socio-political emancipation, emerged as a key area of debate, although not of agreement, over this period. These moments represent the development of an important foundation, both discursive and material, on which the postfeminist 'makeover' of sexual consumer culture could occur in the 1990s.

Chapter Two, 'Postfeminist Sexuality and Consumer Sex' details the role of sexual consumption and commodities in an age of postfeminist neoliberalism. Drawing on the work of a number of critics but particularly that of Rosalind Gill, Angela McRobbie, and Evans and Riley (2015) I argue that neoliberal forms of self-actualisation form a powerful address to women through postfeminism. This address simultaneously draws upon and negates feminist politics, creating what McRobbie calls a 'double entanglement' with feminism (2009). This chapter sets out the importance of Foucault to the argument of the thesis, particularly the idea of 'technologies of the self' (2011). Examining popular forms of sex advice for women, I argue that women are enjoined to participate in technologies of the sexual self that enable them to work upon their sexual knowledge and identities. In particular, the chapter explores the role that buying and using sexual commodities plays in the project of the sexual self, demonstrating the reframing of vibrators as symbols of agentic, empowered female sexuality. I explore the heteronormativity embedded in both sex advice for women and sexual consumer culture, analysing the various strategies that are used to contain and neutralise the threat of a female sexuality that might no longer need the 'real thing', that is, penetrative sex with a male partner. Finally, this chapter puts forward the approach in the thesis to the question of women's agency and lived experience – arguing that attending to women's ambivalent negotiation of postfeminist culture is a critical feminist project.

Prior to the analysis in the final three chapters, Chapter Three, 'Constructing (Sexual) Knowledge: Research Methodology', introduces the qualitative work undertaken, outlining the decisions made in the research design and the issues that arose over the course of the field work. I examine the challenges and possibilities of the two core methods: one to one interviews and accompanied shopping trips. Building on the

previous chapter, I demonstrate that issues of sexual knowledge, 'openness', and confidence were continually negotiated between researcher and participant in the research encounters. Indeed, I propose that, despite my efforts to the contrary, the research itself at times appeared to play a role as a kind of neoliberal technology of the sexual self, despite my efforts to prevent this. Some interviewees located their participation in the research as a technology to articulate or work upon their sexual selves in various ways, leading to complex negotiations of sexual knowledge between researcher and participant. This chapter also makes space for researcher reflexivity, exploring in further detail how my own role as a sex shopper shaped and was shaped by the research. Finally, this chapter outlines a sub-group of participants, described as 'expert' sex shoppers, and explores the particular construction of sexual/consumer knowledge that was negotiated through field work involving them.

Analysis of the qualitative data is divided into three sections: 'spaces', dealing with the shops as spaces of sexual representation and experience; 'bodies', examining the everyday experience of wearing lingerie in sexual contexts; and 'objects', exploring the role that a range of material artefacts described as 'sex toys' play in sexual practice. These chapters illustrate three key levels at which consumer sexualities are represented, experienced, embodied and performed. As such, each draws upon a different strand of scholarship specific to that facet of social and sexual life. At the same time each of the three chapters deepens the broader enquiry of the thesis, exploring a different level at which the neoliberal technologies of the sexual self, embedded throughout postfeminist sexual consumer culture, are taken up and negotiated in various ways.

These themes appeared to 'emerge' from across the interviews and shopping trips. However, the themes were also shaped by my own expectations about the kinds of topics the interviews would cover. In focusing analysis on these three fields I am undoubtedly excluding some of the other kinds of shopping that might take place in sex shops and that does not neatly fit within an analysis of either the shops themselves, lingerie or sex toys. Ann Summers and other sex shops sell a variety of products that may be used in a range of everyday contexts both sexual and non-sexual, including hen party supplies, novelty gifts for men and women, revealing night club wear, massage oils, pills and creams claiming to enhance sexual pleasure or performance, contraceptive items and, perhaps most crucially, pornography and erotica in DVD and book form. Although discussion of these areas of consumption did feature in interviews on occasion, it was not something I particularly sought out through questions. Given the paucity of research on women's engagement with sex shop culture, I aimed to cover what I considered to be the 'main' areas of experience based on my own knowledge and that of women I already knew: encountering the spaces of the shops and browsing and buying items in them, wearing lingerie, and using sex toys. Valuable research has already been undertaken on areas such as women's experiences of hen parties (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004; Storr, 2003), and of consuming pornography and erotica (Juffer, 1998; Deller and Smith, 2013), although there is undoubtedly room for further research on these and other sex shopping related issues. With regard to this thesis however, my priority is to outline ways of understanding

women's negotiation of sexual consumer culture on the three key levels: spaces/shops, bodies/lingerie, and objects/sex toys.

Chapter Four, 'Sexual Spaces: Going Sex Shopping' explores the sex shop as a space of 'encounter' (Hubbard, 2002) where sexualities are both represented and experienced. The chapter draws upon the framework of cultural and consumer geographies in order to argue that women form a 'relational' landscape of consumption based on various perceived and experienced differences between shop location, layout, staff, product range and image (Gregson et al., 2002). Through the distinctions forged between sex shops – as accessible, feminine, tasteful, classy, tacky, seedy, and even dangerous – gendered and classed sexual identities are constructed and performed whilst non respectable sexual identities are othered. The 'right' kind of sex shopping then is 'confident', respectable and knowledgeable, constructing any form of discomfort with doing sex shopping as an indication of an unhealthy or problematic orientation towards sex and sexuality more generally. Performing shopping in a feminine, tasteful, confident manner can then be understood as a key regulatory technology of the sexual self through which female subjects are incited to articulate and work upon their sexual identities and lives in neoliberalism.

Chapter Five, 'The Sexy Body: Wearing Lingerie' attends to women's embodied experiences of wearing lingerie in their sex lives. This chapter demonstrates that the visual discourse of lingerie, which represents the normative 'sexy' body as an object to be presented for a (male) partner's visual pleasure, is complicated by women's bodily narratives that demonstrate what it 'feels like' to be a body in lingerie. This chapter is informed by research detailing the processes by which bodies become 'docile' (Foucault, 1995; Bordo, 1993) through normative 'body work' regimes (Coffey, 2012). At the same time I argue that it is too simplistic to see the body as 'internalising' norms of sexiness and instead turn to theories that deal with 'bodily becoming', understanding the body as always in process: a borderline at which norms are performed and contested (Budgeon, 2003). Interview accounts point to the pleasures but also the discomforts of wearing lingerie and suggest that bodies and bodily sensations can be understood as sites for negotiating and contesting the postfeminist and neoliberal language of 'sexiness' and the 'sexy body' as a project to be worked upon. In addition interview accounts speak to the ways in which lingerie can be deployed in non-(gender) normative ways through the process of pleasurable laughter, performance and play.

And finally, Chapter Six, 'Sexual Objects: Using "Sex Toys"' details the various ways in which material commodity objects are mobilised in sexual activities and identities. Drawing upon theorisations of human/object relations (Cetina, 1997; Haraway, 2013), the body and sex toy are understood here as an 'assemblage' (Dant, 2004) that enables and disables particular sexual pleasures, identities and practices. Sex toys are undoubtedly imbued with 'intentionality' (Dant, 2004) – making possible commodified and normative forms of sexual pleasure that require the female body to perfect a repertoire of 'intimate entrepreneurship' (Gill, 2009). Interviewees' accounts point to the pressure to perform feminised sexual and emotional labour by 'working on' the orgasmic sexual self and 'making the effort' in sexual relationships. However, participants' experiences also demonstrate that, as sex toys are made ordinary

through their repeated everyday use and their assemblage with bodies, their meanings may shift in ways that often exceed or directly contradict their significance as commodities in postfeminist sexual culture. In particular, women's everyday orgasm 'routines' show vibrators diverging from their intended meanings through a process of mundane attachment and adaptation. Moreover, the meanings assigned to sex toys in intimate relationships, and the assemblage of body and strap-on dildo in particular, point to the ways in which these objects become transformed through sexual practice.

As these summaries of the chapters on bodies/lingerie and objects/sex toys suggest, it is through the everyday use of sexual commodities that processes of negotiation or 'making do' with postfeminist sexual consumer culture become most visible (de Certeau, 1998). By attending to the experience of sexual consumer culture in both sex shops and everyday sexual practice the thesis is able to theorise but also, importantly, look beyond the moment of sexual consumption. The final two chapters present the ways in which commodities like lingerie and sex toys are adapted, negotiated and transformed as they become embedded in the mundane, ordinary, embodied context of everyday sexual use. As such they play a crucial role in the feminist politics of the thesis, which critiques the structures of neoliberal and postfeminist cultures whilst remaining attentive to the potential complexity, nuance and contradiction of being a woman and being sexual in such a culture.

Sexual Consumption and Sexual Liberation in Feminism

Feminism in the 1960s, 70s and 80s transformed the ways that women's sexual desires, identities and practices were defined and spoken about, and by whom. Sex shops and sexual commodities, namely the vibrator and dildo, were frequently mobilised in feminist debates around sexuality across this period. This chapter investigates a series of selected historical 'moments' in which the discursive and material connections between ideas of 'sexual consumption' and 'female sexuality' were forged. The role that sexual commodities should play (or not play) within women's sexual identities, practices and lives has never been fixed or simply agreed upon; yet taken together the episodes explored in this chapter make up a narrative, albeit a fractured and sometimes fractious one, by which sexual commodity objects and the spaces in which they are sold acquire the potential to be understood as being 'for women'. By this I do not only mean that these objects and spaces gained greater acceptability and accessibility for female consumers. More fundamentally, a discourse has emerged in which consumer sexual products gain at least the potential to be understood as objects that might facilitate women's sexual and even socio-political liberation.

In the feminist debates of the late 1960s to the 1980s an idea repeatedly emerges, is contested, and re-emerges, in which the vibrator enables women to define and discover sexual identities and pleasures on their own terms, and so resist and replace patriarchal or prescriptive constructions of female sexuality. Though continually challenged and re-framed, the idea of sexual commodities as in some way 'a good thing' for women inarguably became a subject for debate if not agreement over the course of this period. Without this discursive shift to underpin it, sexual consumer culture could never have emerged to play such a pervasive role in later understandings of female sexuality in British life. Feminist re-framings of women's sexuality and sexual consumption laid foundations for the 1990s and 2000s postfeminist 'makeover' of sex shopping explored in the following chapter, in which sexual commodities were remodelled as an integral part of the neoliberal project of the sexual self.

This chapter draws upon a range of popular and theoretical texts produced by feminists during the period under investigation, supplemented by some of the many histories that have since been written on this era. I also use a significant body of material including articles, letters and advertisements from the women's liberation magazine *Spare Rib*. Launched in 1972, *Spare Rib* captures the changing conceptions of self-defined sexuality, sexual pleasure and sexual consumerism in British second wave feminism. Often a forum for debate and conflict around feminist issues, the magazine represented a range of voices drawn from among the readers as well as the collective that produced each issue. Marsha Rowe, the magazine's co-founder, explains that the editorial collective had a two-way role, 'sifting information and ideas and continually making alterations according to response' (1982, 19). Rather than simply 'voicing opinion', the content of *Spare Rib* shows a range of women participating in a dialogue and sharing their experiences (Winship, 1987, 136). Ideas

of female sexuality were under continual revision and contention in *Spare Rib*, and the women's movement in general, over the period discussed in this chapter.

Whilst the subject of this thesis is women's experiences of sex shopping in the UK, it would be near impossible to tell the story of the emerging connections between women's sexualities and sexual consumerism in this period without also considering developments in the United States. American and British feminisms developed simultaneously but they were far from identical in focus, and frequently had divergent agendas; I do not want to propose a simple equivalence between them. Nor do I wish to suggest that feminists in the United States somehow 'led the way' when it came to women's sexual liberation. However, I cannot ignore that the first sex shops billing themselves as being 'for women' opened in New York and San Francisco, providing an important locale for the emergence of ideas about 'feminist' sex shopping. Moreover, widely read American feminists made vital contributions to both endorsing and opposing the developing discourse linking liberated female sexuality to consumption. Some geographical shifts in the area under investigation are necessary then, in presenting an unavoidably fragmented collage of 'moments' through which understandings and debates around women's consumer sexualities can nonetheless be seen to emerge. Before taking up the first of these, the following section provides some historical context for both the sexual commodity objects under investigation, and the 1960s sexual milieu in which second wave feminism intervened.

Sexual commodities pre 1970

Both the vibrator and the dildo have much longer, and very different, histories, pre-dating the period under investigation in this chapter. Rachel Maines has examined the history of the electric vibrator, invented by a British physician in the 1880s as a medical device to produce a 'hysterical paroxysm' (or clitoral orgasm) to relieve female patients diagnosed with hysteria (2001, 11). The vibrator was essentially a time saving device for doctors who had previously performed the procedure manually or with the aid of water jets. It was used as a lucrative repeat treatment by physicians until the turn of the century, when the first advertisements for 'soothing' and 'revitalising' domestic models began to appear in a range of popular publications, available for mail order (103-4). Maines contends that the appearance of electric vibrators in pornographic films and magazines from the 1920s made its sexual function explicit, and largely drove the vibrator away from the respectable medical and domestic markets (108). It did reappear in the sexually liberal 1960s as a 'marital aid', reframed as an object that might support pleasurable heterosexual sexual relationships (109).

That the vibrator's history features at least forty years in which it was not perceived, or at least not (openly) acknowledged as a sexual object is, in Maines' view, indicative of the popular and medical model of sex as exclusively heterosexual and male-centric. This model of sex encompassed only basic foreplay, penetration and male orgasm, with clitoral orgasm seen as an irrelevance to the process. Medical or electrical assistance to achieve clitoral orgasm was therefore not explicitly framed as a sexual activity. This provides an interesting context for the championing of the vibrator by early second wave feminists, who perceived the newly 'discovered' clitoral orgasm to be a revolutionary threat to the 'heterosexual institution' (Koedt, 1970).

The dildo has a very different, and much older history. Page DuBois examines depictions of dildos or 'olisbos' on vases from Ancient Greece; with images including dildos 'hanging on walls above prostitutes... being deployed in scenes of group sex, and in scenes of solitary masturbation' (2009, 95). DuBois analyses the appearance of such dildos in fragments of Sappho's poetry and in images of sex between women. This issue has provided a source of contention for classics and feminist scholars alike, with feminist readings ranging from a critique of the phallographic imagination that cannot imagine sexuality between women without the phallus, to understandings of the dildo as gender performance of phallic appropriation (98). Colleen Lamos traces a more recent history, noting the dildo's (re)appearance in popular culture and pornography since the seventeenth century (1995, 101). Havelock Ellis' sexological model of lesbians as gender 'inverts' was supported by his assertion that 'the use of an artificial penis is by no means uncommon' in women's sexual relations with women (cited in Lamos, 1995, 104). Lamos contends that it was the connotation of the dildo as either a male identified practice or as a source of titillation and humour in pornography that led to a disavowal of the dildo by a number of lesbian and anti-pornography feminists in the 1970s and 1980s.

The 1970s and 1980s were a period when both dildos and vibrators (and vibrating dildos) began to be directly promoted and sold to women consumers as explicitly *sexual* commodities on a significant scale. The divergent histories of these two sexual objects, the dildo, as pornographic accessory or mark of gender inversion, and the vibrator, as medical cure or domestic appliance, collide significantly for the first time during the period covered by this chapter.

Sexuality in the 1960s

Intellectual and cultural discourses of sexuality had gone through significant changes in the 1960s. Freud's theory of female sexuality, centred on his definition of female orgasm, had been dominant in medical and popular texts from the 1920s to the 1960s (Gerhard, 2000, 454). Freud asserted that 'mature' female sexual pleasure should be centred in the vagina, and that women who failed to transfer orgasm from the immature pleasures of the clitoris were dysfunctional and frigid (1962). Sexological texts from Alfred Kinsey (1953) and Masters and Johnson (1966) challenged this understanding for the first time by 'discovering' and normalising women's ability to have clitoral orgasms. Masters and Johnson's *Human Sexual Response* was a 'sensation' in the 1960s, showing women's superior capacity for sexual pleasure through multiple orgasms (Gerhard, 2000, 463).

Masters and Johnson's text chimed with the cultural climate of sexual revolution, in which sexual pleasure and free love were seen as a powerful force for undermining the conservative institutions of marriage and family (Bronstein, 2011, 25). Part of this cultural shift included a new understanding of women as 'agents with sexual desires', as the number of sexual partners for both men and women increased, and marriage rates decreased for young people (Gerhard, 2001, 87). This revolution stemmed from a generational conflict, as young people rebelled against their parents' wartime values of 'thrift, self-sacrifice and work' and, particularly for middle class women, marriage and housework (Segal, 1994, 2). Young women's rebellion took the form of 'saying

yes to sex' without shame or secrecy, with women in the UK freed from some of the fear of the consequences of sexual activity due to the free availability of the contraceptive pill, access to legal abortion, and the liberalised divorce legislation of the late 1960s (Segal, 1994).

However, neither the new 1960s sexology nor the sexual revolution wholly fulfilled their liberatory potential for women. By the late 1960s many women were disillusioned when they realised that this had been a revolution 'on male terms' (Bronstein, 2011, 29). For many women, the reality of 'free love' was that they were expected to be sexually available to men, and were seen as a 'prude' if they didn't 'put out' (Hite, 2000, 340). The 1960s representation of the sexually agentic woman was largely a-political, paying little heed to the structural and cultural inequalities that restricted women's freedoms. The 'liberated' voracious sexual woman was too often reduced to a fantasy object of consumption, sold by and to men through *Playboy* magazine and pornography, reflecting little of the material realities of the sexual revolution for women (Bronstein, 2011). Masters and Johnson's text had demonstrated women's capacity for potentially autonomous clitoral pleasure, but they contained the potentially radical implications of their evidence by reproducing heterosexual sex as the only proper place for female sexual pleasure; they represented female sexuality as responsive to a competent male partner, although ideally one newly informed by their sexological findings (Gerhard, 2001). As Jane Gerhard contends, a combination of the sexual climate of the 1960s and the discoveries of the new sexologists practically 'ensured that second-wave feminists' would have to take up women's sexual pleasure as a radically political issue (2001, 74).

Although 1960s counter culture did not liberate women in the way they might have hoped, it did provide opportunities for political organising for those women who joined the many New Left, Civil Rights, and student movements of the 1960s in the US and UK (Segal, 1994). Being part of these movements gave women practical skills in organising, activism and radical publication that they would later use as part of the women's liberation movement, and, more importantly, made it easier for women to perceive themselves to be political, social and 'above all, sexual agents' (24). As Marsha Rowe has written of *Spare Rib*, 'it was a product of the counter culture and a reaction against it' (1982, 13). The 1960s sexual revolution had linked political liberation to that of sex and sexuality, but had left gender inequalities largely unexamined and unchanged. Women's liberation was born out of this contradiction, as women took on the challenge of re-defining the meaning and representation of female sexual pleasures and identities.

'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm'

First distributed at a 1968 Women's Liberation Conference in the USA, Ann Koedt's essay, 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm' (1970), was the first and most widely read feminist text to take up the issue of female orgasm. Koedt began the essay by deconstructing Freud's assertion of the vaginal orgasm as the only 'normal' and

healthy form of sexual pleasure for women. Supporting her claims with Masters and Johnson's research she contended that the clitoris, not the vagina, was the primary location of sexual pleasure for women; but unlike the sexologists she imbued this discovery with new political significance. The medical and psychoanalytic assertion that sexual pleasure must be located in the vagina, and the definition of women who failed to achieve this as 'frigid', had, Koedt argued, structured ideas of 'normal' heterosexual sexual practice as to persistently disregard female pleasure (1970). If heterosexual intercourse positions 'defined as "standard"' were not 'mutually conducive to orgasm', Koedt contended, women needed to demand that 'they no longer be defined as standard' (1970).

Koedt argued that denial of clitoral sexuality had persisted for so long because full acknowledgement and normalisation of it would fundamentally destabilise and threaten not only heterosexual sexual practice but the very institution of heterosexuality. As a source of female sexual pleasure, the clitoris allowed for sexual pleasure to exist autonomously from the patriarchal discourses of heterosexuality and reproduction (Gerhard, 2000, 450). Koedt's essay positioned the clitoris as a potent symbol of female sexual autonomy. Women claiming their clitoral orgasm, Koedt believed, had the potential to become a revolutionary force that could undermine male power and the narrow definitions of women's role as wives, mothers and objects of male desire: 'The recognition of clitoral orgasm as fact would threaten the heterosexual institution' (1970).

A similar, although perhaps even more politically radical essay appeared in the 1970 collection of women's liberation writings *Sisterhood is Powerful*. In 'The Politics of Orgasm', Susan Lydon wrote that the findings of Masters and Johnson were 'revolutionary and liberating' (1970, 222). For Lydon, the normalisation of vaginal orgasm, and the pathologising of women's 'independent' clitoral pleasure, had been central to the patriarchal project of making women 'sexually, as well as economically, socially and politically subservient' (1970, 223). She wrote that the repression of female sexuality was not simply one aspect of male domination, but that suppressing female sexual pleasure 'was crucial to ensure her subjugation' (Lydon, 1970, 224). Unlike Koedt, Lydon directly criticised Masters and Johnson for failing to expand upon the political significance of their findings; she contends that their conclusion, that female sexual pleasure rivals that of men, is 'naïve' and misses the point (228). Instead she calls for women to 'define and enjoy' female sexuality wholly independently from male sexuality, stating that this will represent the 'first step towards her emancipation' (228).

Both Koedt and Lydon are key to the history being traced in this chapter, in that they represent the early connections made between sexual freedom and political emancipation, and the key role that the clitoris played as symbol of that emancipation. Sexual liberation through enjoyment of the quintessentially autonomous clitoral orgasm was understood here to be emblematic and catalytic of women's wider social and political liberation.

'Our Bodies: Ourselves'

The Women's Health Movement was built from small groups of women, known as 'Consciousness Raising (CR)' groups, who met to discuss their experiences of frustration with a medical profession dominated by prescriptive male 'experts'. As Bronstein notes, sexuality was an important concern for early CR groups, as participants spoke about their intimate lives for the first time with other women, and often discovered the vastly common experience of disappointing or unpleasant sexual experiences with men (2011, 42). These groups represented one key mode of feminist knowledge production, whereby feminist theory and knowledge about sexuality was built through the sharing of women's personal experiences and self-discoveries. Shared subjective experiences would form the basis of a collective understanding of women's subordination and ways to change it, neatly expressed in the phrase 'the personal is political' (Segal, 1994, 32). CR groups led to the formation of key movement ideas and to the production of texts that could be more widely distributed and discussed.

Women's Health Movement groups produced texts that empowered women in making choices about their health, and contained detailed information about women's bodies. The most influential of these texts was *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. First published as a booklet by Boston Women's Health Book Collective in 1970, the women's health tome emerged as one of the most widely read and translated feminist texts (Davis, 2007, 5). The British edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* encourages women to reclaim knowledge of their bodies from male dominated medical and sexual cultures (1978). This discovery was to be enabled by two objects: a detailed description of female genitalia instructs women to look closely at their own vulvas in a mirror to identify their own clitoris, labia and so on (29); and the purchase and use of a speculum is recommended to view the cervix internally. The authors emphasise the importance of using a piece of medical technology to claim knowledge about a part of 'our bodies that we have learned to ignore or fear' (29). Similarly, the women's health text *For Ourselves* argues that women have been encouraged to be ignorant about their genitals and encourages readers to take a 'voyage of discovery to your cunt', using touch, smell, taste, looking in a mirror and using a speculum. Here the authors recommend using a speculum with other women in a women's group because 'each woman's is just a little bit different' (Meulenbelt, 1981, 53). In the UK, Onlywomen Health Group instructed *Spare Rib* readers to use speculums to look at 'their own and other women's vaginas and cervixes', explaining that doing so allows women to 'gain knowledge of ourselves', and so challenge a 'male-dominated medical profession' (1981, 52).

The diagrams of female genitalia included in *Our Bodies: Ourselves* were based upon knowledge gained from women's observations of their own and other women's genitals. The anatomical representation signalled a major shift away from the kinds of cross section illustrations of female genitals that had appeared in medical and educational texts from the 1940s to the 1970s, where the clitoris was rarely depicted in any detail if it was depicted at all (Tuana, 2004, 200). The feminist health movement changed this, granting a 'complexity and structure' to the clitoris in detailed illustrations that showed substantial internal structure beyond what was externally visible (2004, 202). What differed most crucially in feminist depictions of the female genitals was a

focus on the significant anatomical changes that occur to the clitoris during arousal (Tuana, 2004). Tuana contends that the new epistemology of the clitoris produced by the Women's Health Movement was fuelled primarily by a 'desire to transform normative heterosexuality's vagina-only attention to pleasure' (2004, 211). As it had been for Koedt and Lydon, the clitoris was a powerful political symbol for the authors of Women's Health texts.

The process of becoming knowledgeable about sexuality and familiar with self-pleasure was not always an easy or straightforward one. As Davis reveals in her examination of the numerous letters written to the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, readers were keen for ever more detailed information and instruction on discovering their bodies (Davis, 2007, 156). The Women's Health Movement acknowledged that, for many women, discovering their bodies and responses would require not only practical advice but sustained work and time spent on the breaking down of internalised barriers. This work, which was seen as necessary to building a self-defined sexuality, demonstrates the way in which female sexuality was rarely seen as an 'essential or natural' truth within women that, having been oppressed, could now be unproblematically and effortlessly revealed (Ryan, 1977, 22). Texts like *Our Bodies: Ourselves* saw self-defined sexuality as a work in progress, an 'on-going, contradictory and open ended process of becoming knowledgeable', in which women's feelings and experiences were the key resource (Davis, 2007, 134).

'Liberating Masturbation'

Sexual liberation through self-pleasure was heavily advocated by the women's health movement. Women are encouraged to enjoy masturbating in *Our Bodies: Ourselves*, and learn how to do so if they have not done so already: 'as women, who have been taught to "wait for a man to turn us on", knowing how to give ourselves sexual pleasure brings us freedom' (1978, 239). Betty Dodson's *Liberating Masturbation* (1972) placed auto-erotic sexuality at the centre of women's liberation. As she put it: 'I had become more convinced than ever that sexual liberation was crucial to women's liberation, and that masturbation was crucial to sexual liberation and the destruction of paralyzing sex roles' (6). An erotic artist living in New York, Dodson was an active member of the women's movement, self-publishing the book in 1972. She appeared at the New York NOW Sexuality Conference, running workshops in which she presented slides of images of the female genitals and demonstrated masturbation techniques including those using a vibrator (1998). Dodson wrote that women had been negatively conditioned when it came to sexuality, and that 'the answer for women lies not in trying to avoid or deny or do away with sex, but in trying to get joy and strength and liberation from it... I am almost obsessed these days with the necessity for women to "go public", that is, to speak out about the importance of masturbation. In my opinion it will be our real Declaration of Independence. It is that revolutionary!' (1972, 1).

Masturbation also became the primary issue for a number of feminist support or therapy groups, often formed particularly for women who had never had an orgasm. Replacing the medical terminology of 'frigidity' by referring to women as 'pre-orgasmic' (Stephens, 1975), these groups focused intensively on issues of sexuality and sexual pleasure. In a *Spare Rib* article, feminist journalist and sex therapist Eleanor Stephens wrote at length about the growing number of pre-orgasmic women's groups run by feminist counsellors in the United States since the early 1970s (1975). The groups, she explains, focus on masturbation as the first step towards women claiming their right to sexual pleasure, believing that 'taking responsibility for our sexuality' can give women a new sense of 'autonomy and power' (14). In the groups, women watched a series of short films on masturbation techniques and were asked to spend time

London N.19.

Celebrate your sexuality

Many women feel out of touch with their sexuality, cannot reach orgasm, but are nervous of seeking help.

In our warm, supportive groups with clear information learn through sharing to achieve more personal satisfaction and sexual fulfilment.

Phone for details of pre-orgasmic & other groups.
01-452 9281

Redwood

Figure 1 1977 listing in *Spare Rib*

masturbating daily (15). Clearly there was an appetite for information on this topic, as subsequent issues of the magazine feature more detailed instructions on masturbation techniques requested from Stephens by letters from readers (1976), and short listings for a growing number of groups around the country which women could join to 'celebrate' and 'discover' their sexuality and orgasmic potential in a 'warm, supportive' women only environment (Fig. 1). Pre orgasmic women's groups are also recommended in the UK edition of the women's health text *For Ourselves*, and details of how to establish or find a local group are included (Meulenbelt, 1981, 100).

The repeated avocation of the mirror and the speculum for viewing the vulva, vagina and cervix demonstrated the importance of material objects to facilitate sexual self-definition in the Women's Health Movement. The counterpart to this was the emergence of the vibrator as a recommended object for discovering politically radical clitoral orgasmic potential. In these 1970s texts vibrators are often recommended as a seemingly politically unproblematic masturbation device, particularly for those women struggling to orgasm. A personal story by Alison Machin in *Spare Rib* describes how her inability to achieve orgasm became a 'major issue' in her life, making her feel inadequate, ashamed and wary of sexual relationships (1974, 16). 'Too embarrassed' to go into a sex shop, a friend bought Machin a vibrator and she was able to orgasm 'at last' (16). She concludes by advising women to get a 'reasonably expensive' vibrator that will 'work better and keep going longer', concluding that it is 'certainly a worthwhile investment' (16). The transparent message of Machin's piece is that purchasing a vibrator is an effective solution to the inability to orgasm.

'What Every Woman Should Know about Vibrators'

Vibrator advertisements appeared in *Spare Rib* throughout the 1970s and 80s. The magazine began featuring adverts for mail order company Pellen Personal Products in 1973, various re-inventions of which appeared weekly well into the 1980s. The first advert, 'Marital Aids', appeared in November 1973 and depicted male and female gender symbols in black on a shocking pink background. The text advised that 90% of marital aids are 'designed for the benefit of women' and included details of how to order a catalogue. This colourful presentation of sexual commodities as enhancements for women's sexual pleasure within marriage did not appear again, bearing no resemblance to the January 1975 advert, 'What Every Woman Should Know about Vibrators'. Occupying half a page and featuring only simple and unembellished dense text, the advert's wording was still rather conservative, suggesting that users could use a vibrator to stimulate the clitoris 'if we dare suggest it, purely for personal pleasure'. The 1976 advert was similarly text heavy, although it had been slightly re-worded and the logo embellished to look more appealing. The advert was clearly still intended to sooth the perceived anxieties of the potential user, reassuring readers in bold text that the products 'do work', providing women have no 'violent prejudice against artificial sexual stimulation', and citing Masters and Johnson's use of a vibrator in helping female participants to achieve orgasm as evidence of their effectiveness. In an alteration from the 1975 advert, the text states that the vibrator can be used for 'extra stimulation during lovemaking', but 'of course, it is just as often used purely for personal pleasure'. This version of the Pellen Personal Products advertisement subsequently appeared in almost every issue of *Spare Rib* over the following 10 years. Interestingly, no image or direct description of the product itself, a 'Harmony Personal Vibrator', appears; reassurances of its use and effectiveness are clearly framed as more important.

The Pellen Personal Products advert's somewhat faltering re-design, from 'marital aids', to 'daring' suggestions of solo vibrator use, to relying on the assurances of sexology, demonstrates the way that both *Spare Rib* and the advertisers that used it were developing their address to the feminist consumer during this period. Joanne Hollows argues that, in the magazine's formative years from 1972 to 1974, the editors were grappling with what a feminist magazine might look like, and how it might differ from a traditional women's magazine (2013). During the same period, she suggests, advertisers were also 'trying to work out what a feminist might want to consume' (272). Janice Winship notes the way in which the design and content of the magazine following this early period show a refusal of 'capitalist consumption in general (although worthy exceptions can be made), and women's identification with it in particular' (1987, 128). Such 'worthy exceptions' include craft and co-operatively produced women's clothing, shoes and jewellery, feminist books, and, of course, vibrators (127). The re-designs of the Pellen Personal Products advert certainly suggest that the company were struggling to form an appropriate address to the feminist sexual consumer. Their swift move away from the focus on vibrator use only to enhance women's pleasure in marriage, and their eventual settlement on the 1976 advert, with its text heavy, reassuring tone and reliance on sexology to show the personal benefits of achieving orgasm for women, speaks volumes about the way that 'worthy' vibrator use was framed within the women's movement.

Mail order through magazines like *Spare Rib* was the primary way for British women to obtain vibrators. Sex shops were rarely recommended by feminist texts; like Machin (1974) women were expected to find sex shops embarrassing and unwelcoming. Whilst Meulenbelt suggests that women might visit a sex shop in the company of female friends, it's perhaps hard to imagine that this practice would have been widespread given the masculinity of these spaces (1981, 99). UK sex shops of this period were small licenced shops predominantly selling pornography and 'marital aids'. The first store in the Ann Summers chain had opened in 1970 in London and the shops expanded throughout the 1970s in the UK (Storr, 2003). The early stores were very different to their contemporary feminised incarnation. Jacqueline Gold, now Chief Executive of Ann Summers, started working for her father in 1979; Gold took a critical view of Ann Summers stores in 1970s London, and was particularly displeased with the erotic video viewing booths present in some stores: 'It was a bit one-sided. I would have been more comfortable if there had been products for women as well... they were very seedy... it certainly didn't turn me on and I wouldn't have gone into the shops on my own' (Gold, 1995, 28).

From a feminist perspective, Ann Summers stores were also viewed critically. Carol Morrell's *Spare Rib* critique of the chain was suspicious of the 'misinformation' about sex promoted by the store's staff and products, particularly those purporting to enhance sexual 'performance' (1973). She concludes that Ann Summers' products equate people to their genitals, obscuring the whole, complex sexual person and eluding the fact that sexual relationships ultimately rely on trust, openness and communication rather than a quick-fix product purchase (11). This anti-commercial view, which provides the impetus for Morrell's piece on Ann Summers, contrasts with the positive endorsements of mail order vibrator purchase that can be found elsewhere in the magazine at this time. Whilst the use of vibrators, particularly to unlock but also to enhance autonomous clitoral orgasm in masturbation was endorsed, this was very much a worthy exception to the more critical view of the commercial 'quick-fix' of the marital aids sold by Ann Summers.

Good Vibrations

In the 1970s vibrators had increasing popularity amongst women in the United States and they were sold in a wide range of consumer outlets (Meulenbelt, 1981, 99). In addition to being sold in porn shops, handheld electric vibrators, or 'personal massagers', were widely available since at least the 1960s in drugstores, department stores, and by mail order including via the Sears catalogue, often with packaging that did not refer to or even actively denied the product's potential sexual use (Blank, 2000). This meant that American women were more able to discreetly purchase vibrators in a socially acceptable way. Despite this, sex therapist Joani Blank found that women still 'expressed distress about how awkward they felt purchasing them', and in 1977 opened Good Vibrations in San Francisco (Blank, 2000, 2). The shop was the second vibrator shop owned by a woman and targeted at women shoppers. The first was Eve's Garden, which began as a mail order business before opening a shop in New York in 1974 'designed expressly to serve women in discovering and embracing their own sexual power' (Williams and Vannucci, 2005). The store's founder Dell Williams was active within the women's movement with strong links to women's health and sexuality

groups and activists including Betty Dodson. Williams' 1974 mission statement for the store clearly sets out its political standpoint:

Eve's Garden is created to empower women to celebrate their sexuality as a positive, nourishing and creative force in their lives. An outgrowth of the Women's Rights Movement, Eve's Garden seeks to erase the sense of shame and guilt experienced by countless women... To that purpose we have created a comfortable, elegant, and educational environment for women to explore the tools of pleasure (Williams, cited in Williams and Vannucci, 2005, 18).

The shop was for women customers only, products were accompanied by leaflets with instructions written by Williams, and sexuality workshops and consciousness raising groups were also held in the space (Williams and Vannucci, 2005, 183). Where Eve's Garden had more direct political links to the women's movement, Joani Blank, owner of Good Vibrations did not define herself as a 'political feminist' (Blank, cited in Queen and Comella, 2008, 219). Yet she did still position the sex shop as a space which celebrates and promotes the values of feminism, promoting self-defined, autonomous female sexuality and advocating women's 'right to whatever kind of sexual activity or sexual identity we wanted' (ibid.). Susie Bright, who worked in Good Vibrations in its early days, described the store as a place where women could learn that they 'didn't need to rely on someone else for their orgasm' (2011, 232). Both Williams and Blank took up the powerful feminist tenets of masturbation, clitoral orgasm, and an informed and self-defined female sexuality, and used them to successfully frame and legitimise a new concept and a new kind of space: the 'sex shop for women', or the 'feminist sex shop'. The opening of these shops represents a key moment in the connections that were being made between sexual consumption and women's liberation. For the first time, visiting a sex shop and making a purchase could conceivably be framed as a political feminist act.

'Refusing to Comply'

Lynne Segal contends that the recommendations of masturbation in the early women's movement often meant that female sexuality was understood 'in the singular': a quality that, once accessed and nurtured, would allow for greater self-expression, quite separate from sex with another person (1994, 34). Masturbation was heralded by Betty Dodson, as 'our primary sex life', potentially a valid form of holistic sexuality in itself (1972, 18). From Koedt and Lyndon, to the Women's Health movement and feminist sex shop pioneers Blank and Williams, sexual autonomy, independence and self-definition were emphasised above all else. However, alongside this was the potentially conflicting idea that masturbation could be something of a 'starting point' from which women could share their sexuality and orgasms with partners. Eleanor Stephens' *Spare Rib* articles, for example, assert that women have the 'right to enter a relationship on an equal basis with men', and that masturbation is the method by which women can begin to claim and assert that right (1976a, 16). The issue of how and with whom self-defined sexual pleasure might be shared was a source of some contention in the 1970s.

Consciousness raising groups often allowed women to support one another through the sometimes difficult process of re-defining their sex lives with male partners, changing sexual practices to accommodate female pleasure and orgasm for the first time. In a 1972 issue of *Womankind*, the American women's liberation magazine, 'Cathy' wrote of the importance of CR groups for women who need to learn about their bodies and consider their own needs, needs that 'social indoctrination' has deemed unimportant. She considers the paradox at the heart of this process: although the 'whole male power structure' rests on men's domination of women, individual men with whom women are in relationships cannot be challenged by a collective movement: 'Each of us has to judge how far we can go in demanding that men pay attention to our sexual needs as we do to theirs, that men give up their ideas of women's place and needs and substitute these misconceptions with the truth'. She concludes that the learning, talking and communication that occurs in women's CR groups can only make us 'less oppressible': 'it's not a solution, but it's a start'. This rather vague and simplistic hope that women's greater self-knowledge and ability to communicate about their sexuality would not only create more equal relationships with men, but also make women 'less oppressible' socially and politically, might suggest why the rhetoric of self-defined sexuality had a tendency to lead to disappointment for some women. As Lynne Segal writes, there was a 'great outpouring' of feminists writing on their 'battles in their relationships with men' in the 1970s (1994, 45). Men's unwillingness to communicate and listen was lamented, women reflected on their frustrations with conflicts and compromises, and others regretted that, whilst they may have been more orgasmic, they were no happier or more satisfied (Segal, 1994, 45-48).

One solution to improving sex with men was offered by a *Spare Rib* issue of 1981, in which Angela Hamblin looked back at ten years of consciousness raising around sexuality in her women's group, focusing in particular on how the heterosexual women in the group had tried to challenge patterns of sexual practice. Hamblin explains that the women found that they had all had negative sexual experiences with men in which they experienced feeling an absence of control, lack of ability to withdraw consent, and overall feeling of 'goal orientation' towards his orgasm (1981, 6). 'Refusing to comply' with this was the first step in taking control of their own sexuality, which in practice meant that many of the women started refusing penetration during sex. Some male partners, convinced that penetration is 'what sex is', left the relationship, whilst others started listening and changing, following their female partners lead in building a relationship based on 'female-centred-sexuality', which Hamblin clearly conceives as antithetical to penetration. Masturbation was proposed as a key way of developing sexual autonomy, and all the women in Hamblin's group reflected that the feminist movement had allowed them to masturbate without shame, or masturbate at all for the first time (7). The article concludes that 'none of us were now prepared to have sex with a man unless it was on our terms' (19).

Hamblin's story points to the impact that the symbolic centrality of the clitoris to 'self-defined' sexuality could have on heterosexual practice; penetration was abandoned, and non-penetrative acts involving clitoral stimulation were placed at the centre of sexual activity⁶. Penetration was a source of anxiety that many recommendations of

⁶ The extent to which this model was adopted by heterosexual feminists is debated (Segal, 1994).

vibrator use struggled to contain. In the UK the dominant vibrator design was a hard plastic phallic shaped object containing batteries⁷. The plastic model featured in the 1977 Baydart advert appears to be fairly typical (fig.2), resembling Alison Machin's description of her vibrator as 'black and ugly with a chrome trim' (1974). This caused some problems for those who advocated vibrators as an unproblematic feminist aid to self-pleasure.

The Pellen Personal Products advert in *Spare Rib* strove to reassure readers that,



Figure 2 1977 vibrator advert

despite the 'phallic symbolism' of the vibrator, it was only designed as such in order to convey its sexual function and could, in fact, be primarily used for clitoral stimulation (1976). Similarly, in *For Ourselves*, the common phallic design of vibrators is judged to be 'stupid', 'since [penises] do almost nothing for the vagina'; as the vibrator should be held 'against your clitoris', it doesn't really matter 'what shape it has' (Meulenbelt, 1981, 99). Machin's endorsement of the vibrator in achieving her first orgasm reflects that she might have been put off by the device's appearance had she not read Masters and Johnson and thus known 'where to look' for her clitoris when using it (1974, 16).

Early feminist texts on sexuality had asserted the importance of the long neglected clitoral orgasm for women and its associated values of autonomy and liberation. At the same time, those texts constructed the vaginal orgasm, and thus penetration, as a practice central to patriarchal oppression and sexual self-denial for women, and never (or rarely) one of sexual pleasure. Masturbation, external stimulation, and clitoral orgasm became 'feminist' sexual behaviours that exerted their own forms of pressure upon women. In both *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, (1978) and the *Hite Report* (1976), women's accounts note that they felt orgasm was a 'right' they deserved, but that there was a growing pressure and expectation to have many clitoral orgasms with ease. This pressure was perceived as coming from male partners, but was also identified by some as originating in their women's groups or the women's movement more generally.

Hamblin's *Spare Rib* article on her women's group's 'refusal to comply' with accepted heterosexual practice also points to the way in which many heterosexual feminists used CR groups to tackle the dual challenge of defining their own sexualities, and remoulding their sexual relationships with men in a way that they perceived to be more egalitarian. Discussions on 'self-defining' sexuality often devolved into sharing ideas and support around how to change a sexual relationship with a man. Part of the anger that fuelled the emergence of lesbian feminism was born from a frustration with the

⁷ In the US vibrators were less likely to have shapes that could be seen as 'phallic'; the Hitachi Magic Wand was the most popular model, designed in a large cylindrical shape with a long handle, with other popular designs resembling handheld domestic objects such as hairdryers with a range of attachments (Blank, 1976; Blank and Widden, 2000).

way that heterosexuality was assumed and lesbianism silenced or ignored in the early women's groups (Bronstein, 2011, 55).

'The Woman Identified Woman'

Distributed by women who seized the stage at the 1970 Second Congress to Unite Women (Bronstein, 2011, 55), 'The Woman Identified Woman' pamphlet critiqued the erasure of lesbianism within the early women's movement, and argued that working on relationships with men was actively counterproductive to the goals of feminism. Wasting energies on 'trying to straighten up each particular relationship with a man, into finding how to get better sex, how to turn his head around', they contended, would leave women 'unable to be committed to the construction of the new patterns which will liberate us' (RadicalLesbians, 1994) The text set out the powerful idea that lesbianism could be a political choice rather than a sexual orientation. Indeed, according to the Leeds based RadicalLesbians group, lesbianism was the only valid option for feminist women committed to the goal of women's liberation. This framing minimised the sexual aspect of lesbianism and instead positioned loving relationships with women as a radical political choice for women that prioritised the needs of other women above those of men.

Resistance to the idea of lesbianism as a feminist political choice came first from women of colour, who did not wish to declare men of colour to be oppressors 'on the same level with white men' (Bronstein, 2011, 56). Moreover, many women who already identified with lesbianism were wary of the lesbian feminist transformation of lesbianism into a purely political choice and the move away from 'lustful, orgasmic' sexuality between women (Segal, 1994, 54). Feminist conferences and events often involved a 'negative atmosphere' between heterosexual and lesbian feminists in this period, with another 1977 London conference necessitating a 'workshop on communication' between the two groups (Segal, 1994, 54). After a sexuality workshop in London, Joanna Ryan described conflict around the issue of whether men were perceived to be 'the enemy'; questioning whether men are to blame for sexual violence or whether the kind of society that produces such violence lies at fault (1977). Despite these disagreements, heterosexual feminists were perhaps less vocal than women of colour and lesbian women in publicly critiquing the lesbian feminist construction of men as the 'enemy'. As Lynne Segal recalls, this was in part because heterosexual women felt 'undermined and confused, if not guilty, by the accusation that we were too "male-identified"' (1994, 58). If early feminists had attempted to 'reform' male heterosexuality, the 1970s saw a turn toward blaming it, and constructing female sexuality as its non-aggressive, non-phallic antithesis (Segal, 1994).

Lesbian feminists launched critiques of 'self-defined' sexuality, questioning whether the parameters for sexual pleasure could or should encompass any or all sexual acts, pleasures and partners; or whether a feminist sexuality should include only those sexual practices that could be deemed compatible with feminist politics. A 1974 conference organised by the New York branch of the liberal National Organisation for Women (NOW) aimed to discuss 'women's sexual self-definition' (Gerhard, 2001, 149), but was met with criticism from lesbian feminists writing in *Off Our Backs*, who saw the discussion as 'too heterosexual, too reformist, too soft on pornography, and

too focused on orgasm' (2001, 150). The critics complained of what they perceived to be the depoliticised 'anything goes' attitude towards sexuality at the conference, writing that participants at the speak out 'were treated to the various joys of group marriages; open marriages; group masturbation; bisexuality; bestiality; sado-masochism; pissing in someone's mouth; celibacy; again and again the vibrator, which was presented as the messiah – everywoman's dream come true (only \$19.95)' (cited in Gerhard, 2001, 150). The *Off Our Backs* critique suggests that the authors perceived certain sex acts, particularly those associated with power play and sexual consumption, to be out of place at a feminist conference.

Lesbian feminist writers often did write about sex and sexuality in a positive way, representing affection and sensuality as qualities inherent to a uniquely female sexuality; emphasising intimacy and connection above pleasure and orgasm, they portrayed lesbian sexuality as 'antiphallic, antirole-playing, and fundamentally egalitarian' (Gerhard, 2001, 152). Lesbian relationships were constructed as equal and politically 'pure', untainted by the 'power plays' of heterosexual sex and relationships (Roy, 1993, 9). Instead, feminist writers celebrated lesbian sexuality as a sensual and loving expression of the creative "life force of women" (Lorde, cited in Stein, 1993, 18) or as the anti-phallic 'subversion of male power' (Rich, cited in Gerhard, 2001, 181). As these descriptions suggest, vaginal penetration was not viewed positively by lesbian feminism; with the use of a dildo decried by some as a 'male-identified practice stemming from false consciousness' (Lamos, 1995, 104).

The experience of this model of lesbian feminist sexuality in practice was undoubtedly pleasurable for some women having sex and relationships with other women, but it also had the potential to cause anxiety for those who harboured desires that did not align with their politics. Women were quoted in *Spare Rib* on their sexual experiences: one liked the 'feeling of equality with a woman' and said she found sex less 'ritualised' and rule bound in comparison to sex with a man (cited in Hamblin, 1981, 8). Another woman however was anxious that she had incorporated the 'disturbing' patriarchal idea of objectifying her female partners, fearing that her 'pornographic fantasies of women as objects of... lust' meant that she was still 'carrying around a male view of what sex "is"' (ibid.). A letter from a reader in a later issue laments that, whilst becoming lesbian is a good start to reversing the way that women have been 'screwed up by heterosexuality', troubling sexual fantasies of 'powerlessness and violence' can still linger (Harlowe, 1982). The author explains that, having felt aroused and then 'let down' by her body when reading about examples of violent pornography, she felt 'dirty' in comparison to her 'pure right-on' lesbian feminist sisters (ibid.). Evidently the portrayal of lustful, possessive sexuality as male identified, phallic and anti-feminist by some lesbian feminists could lead to guilt and anxiety about such non-permissible sexual desires.

Smash the Sex Shop

Where female sexuality was represented by some lesbian feminist texts as holistic, loving and intimate, understandings of male sexuality as irrevocably selfish, violent and abusive came to the fore most persuasively from feminists in the anti-pornography

movement. Anti-porn feminists understood different male sexual behaviours to be linked on a continuum; from the portrayal of women's bodies as sexual objects in pornography at one end, to male violence, rape, and murder of women at the other. In the United States Women Against Pornography (WAP) were willing to make a number of strategic alliances with non-feminists who shared anti-pornography goals (Bronstein, 2011). The first of these was with the New York Mayor's office, which provided financial backing and highly visible premises for WAP on Times Square as part of their project to gentrify and 'clean up' the area (Bronstein, 2011, 206). The group exhibited slide shows and ran guided 'porn tours' of the many local sex businesses, including large sex shops described as sex 'emporiums' or 'supermarkets', brothels, adult bookstores and cinemas and strip clubs (219). These activities, which gained attention from the press in America and Britain, identified sex shops as legitimate targets linked to the porn industry and therefore to male sexual violence more broadly.

The actions of the group were driven by their understandings of sex and sexuality, distributed by WAP members in a number of high profile publications during this period (eg. Brownmiller, 1975; Dworkin, 1979; Morgan, 1980). In these texts male sexuality whatever its form, was seen as 'violent and rapacious', in direct opposition to women's desire for 'intimacy, sensuality and closeness' (Bronstein, 2011, 205). This essential violent male drive was seen as the primary source of women's oppression. Dworkin's influential theories represent some of the most radical anti-phallic and anti-heterosex feminist perspectives. Dworkin believed that male power can be attributed to a violent sexual drive located in the penis, which she saw as the ordinary 'symbol of terror' (Dworkin cited in Segal, 1994, 61). Pornography for Dworkin revealed that male pleasure is 'inextricably tied to victimising, hurting, exploiting' (1979, 51). She contends that male power is the 'raison d'être of pornography', which teaches men to degrade and dehumanise women (25). These understandings of pornography as the primary tool in the oppression of women underpin WAP's relentless pursuance of its eradication.

In the UK the feminist anti-pornography movement was less mainstreamed, as British feminists were not so willing to align themselves to conservative anti-pornography campaigners such as Mary Whitehouse, stating that they were opposed 'to the same trade but for completely different reasons' (Chambers, 1982). Radical anti-pornography perspectives did gain some visibility in the UK through feminist protest and direct action in the early 1980s. On the 11th and 12th of December 1980 a number of direct actions and protests by Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) and other groups took place in at least 8 towns and cities in the UK ('Leeds and Elsewhere', 1981). The national days of action had been planned at a 1980 Sexual Violence conference in Leeds attended by over 500 women⁸. The conference aimed to make connections between all forms of male sexual violence and bring the issue 'back into the mainstream of the women's liberation movement' (25). A statement from the Leeds activist group 'Angry Women' in *Spare Rib* directly connected violent crime

⁸ Leeds was a significant location given the 'Yorkshire Ripper' murders of local women, the press and police response to which had met with fierce criticism from local feminists ('Leeds and Elsewhere', 1981, 24)

against women to pornography, stating that porn is 'woman-hating', promoting sado-masochism and rape, 'divorcing sex from love' and representing women's bodies as objects for men to use and throw away (24).

The direct action taken in December 1980 demonstrated that, like WAP, the British groups identified licensed sex shops with the women hating pornography industry. The most comprehensive range of protests occurred in Leeds, where 'sex and porn shops were picketed', sex shop doors were glued, porn screenings were disrupted by throwing paint at cinema screens, strip club windows were smashed, porn was removed from bookshops, and five women were arrested (25). Comment from *Spare Rib* detailed the scope of the national action and press coverage, concluding that 'the WAVAW actions were among the most effective feminist actions ever seen' (27). Later issues of the magazine detail the continued actions of the group against local sex shops, including picketing, daubing them with graffiti reading 'rapists read porn', and finally setting fire to two shops described by a member of the group as storehouses of 'male defined sexuality' stocking only 'woman hating wares' ('Angry Women Arson', 1981).

Sex shops were also targeted, in a less direct manner, by the Reclaim the Night marches. A 1981 march through Soho was attended by 1,500 women; *Spare Rib* reported disagreement as some women wanted to return for direct action against 'sex shops and porn outlets' that had been protected by police during the march ('Back to Soho', 1981). A letter from a reader in a 1983 issue suggests that 'the best way to put a sex shop out of business' would be to stand outside 'taking photographs of customers'; the author notes that this strategy, which is 'less risky than arson', would be likely still be effective, clearly believing that exposure and humiliation would put off male patrons (Thomas, 1983). There is an important shift here, from *Spare Rib*'s 1970s perception of sex shops as either 'embarrassing' for women or, at worst, promoting 'misinformation' about sexuality, to the 1980s representation of sex shops as woman-hating, and a valid target for sustained direct action. From WAP's 'porn tours' to WAVAW's destruction of sex shops, these spaces came to be viewed at least by anti-pornography feminists as the public face of male violence against women. Visiting a sex shop was connected to committing rape and violence against women by anti-porn feminists who pointed to a spectrum of sexual behaviours as essential to a predatory masculinity. It is hard to imagine an understanding of sex shopping as 'feminist' within this framework.

The Sex Issue

The 1981 'Sex Issue' of *Heresies* featured a number of writers defending and exploring those sexual practices that they contended had been deemed antithetical to feminism by some lesbian feminist and anti-pornography arguments. Such activities included power play, sadomasochism, butch and femme, penetration, sex work and the

enjoyment of pornography⁹. The editorial explained that, whilst there had been a multiplicity of perspectives and occasional conflict between the contributors, there was a consensus that the magazine should focus primarily on 'desire': where it comes from, how it manifests and varies, and what it might say about 'what it means to be a woman' (1981, 2). Willis pointed to the *Heresies* sex issue as a sign of the 'early tentative stirrings of a revived feminist debate on sexuality' (2012, 9).

This revived debate came under the broad tenet of sex radical feminism, also known as sexually libertarian, sex positive, or pro-sex feminism. This movement was made up of a range of individuals including feminist scholars, journalists, sex activists, sex therapists and educators, owners of sex related businesses, and sex workers. Many of these sex radical feminists positioned themselves in opposition to what they saw as the prescriptive feminist agenda promoted by anti-pornography feminism. Carol Queen, an author and sex educator, defines sex positive as the understanding of 'sexuality as a potentially positive force in one's life', set against sex-negativity which is the idea of 'sex as problematic, disruptive, dangerous' (278). The term sex radicalism on the other hand focuses less on a positive/negative opposition and emphasises instead the radical expansion of possibilities of what could be considered feminist sex, as Carole Vance states: 'being a sex radical... is less a matter of what you do, and more a matter of what you are willing to think, entertain and question' (1984, 23).

The terms of this new debate seemed to echo the focus on self-definition and self-discovery evident in the claiming of the clitoris as a symbol of sexual autonomy and the epistemological project of the Women's Health Movement. At the same time there was an intentional move away from any prescription as to which desires or acts might be more 'liberating' than others. This focus on the multiplicity of, and contradictions between, different female sexualities, and a questioning of the category of womanhood to unite them, formed part of a wider shift within feminist thought of the early 1980s. As Jane Gerhard argues, both early women's liberation approaches to self-defined sexuality, and later anti-pornography and lesbian feminist interventions, often obscured the diversity of women's experiences, sexual and otherwise (2001). White middle class women, who were most visible within the early movement, created understandings of 'woman' and female sexuality that did not account for the intersections of race, class and other identities. It was these women's privilege that allowed them to perceive sexuality as the 'primary source of both women's oppression and liberation' (2001, 3). Sex radical framings of sexuality such as the *Heresies* sex issue, in contrast, did not assume a commonality of women's experiences of female sexuality, and the perspectives of third world women and sex workers, for example, were included (1981).

The Barnard conference

⁹ On SM: Pat Califia, 'Feminism and Sadoomasochism', On butch-fem: p.30-34; Joan Nestle, 'Butch-Fem Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s', p.21-24; On (heterosexual) penetration: Helle Thorning, 'The Mother Daughter Relationship and Sexual Ambivalence, p.3-6; On working as a stripper: Seph Weene, 'Venus', p.36-38; On porn: Paula Webster, 'Pornography and Pleasure', p.48-51.

In 1982 Carole Vance and Gayle Rubin, organisers of a conference on sexuality at Barnard college 'The Scholar and the Feminist IX', aimed to discuss the 'positive' aspects of female sexuality, namely desire and pleasure, and widen understandings of how different women experience sexuality differently. The conference hoped to lead a return to what the organisers understood to be the root of the women's movement: 'an analysis of sexuality that saw pleasure as a resource for female empowerment' (Gerhard, 2001, 183). At the same time the conference sought to bring in a more intersectional understanding of sexuality, questioning how women from different race, class and other identities might mobilise for sexual pleasure (Vance, 2011, 52). The conference 'diary' set out the organisers' position, putting the focus firmly on women's pleasure, and stating that the central question of the conference, 'what do women want?', can only be asked 'now that it is we who are asking it' (Vance, 2011, 63, emphasis original).

One group that the planners deliberately sought to exclude were feminists with an anti-pornography agenda, who were not represented on the organising group and programme of speakers, reflecting the belief that the WAP perspective had come to disproportionately dominate American feminist debate (Wilson, 1983). Lesbian feminist and anti-pornography groups reacted strongly to the topic of the conference and their exclusion from it. Protesters picketed outside the conference, wearing t-shirts reading 'for a feminist sexuality' and 'against S/M' (Gerhard, 2001, 188), and handing out leaflets signed by a 'Coalition of Women for a Feminist Sexuality and Against Sado-masochism' made up of WAP and several groups of lesbian activists (Wilson, 1983). In the leaflets the conference was accused of promoting 'anti-feminist' forms of sexuality 'such as sado-masochism... pornography and child abuse' (Wilson, 1983, 36). Individual women who spoke at the conference were targeted by anti-pornography groups who publicly maligned them, contacted their employers, and issued threats (Segal, 1994, 64).

At the conference itself, the standardisation or policing of a politically correct 'feminist' sexual desire was strongly refuted, with participants instead returning to the early second wave ideal of sexual self-determination 'as the only defensible feminist sexual politics' (Gerhard, 2001, 191). The keynote paper by Alice Echols critiqued the lesbian feminist collapsing of lesbian identity into concepts of 'sisterhood' and being 'woman-identified', arguing for the 'right' of lesbians and feminists to 'seek sexual pleasure' (Wilson, 1983, 37). Vance addressed the conference with a plea for feminism to reconsider the importance of the 'variety and significance of women's pleasure' (Segal, 1994, 65). Gayle Rubin's paper concluded with the aspiration 'for all consenting persons to do what they like sexually' without fear of censorship or criminalisation (Wilson, 1983, 38).

Although the conference diary noted that a focus on sexual pleasure would be undermined if it failed to also consider 'the patriarchal structure in which women act' (Vance, 2011, 62), Wilson's socialist feminist critique in *Feminist Review* noted an 'absence' of connections between sexual practices and social structures in much of the discussion at the conference, contending that there was 'a latent consumerism about the whole way in which sex was being talked about' (39). Wilson suggested that the powerful attempts of anti-pornography feminists and their allies to restrict 'liberal

freedoms' around sexuality understandably provoked a rhetoric of libertarianism from the Barnard conference organisers, but that this perspective is somewhat 'insufficient as an analysis of sexuality in our society' (1983, 40).

Wilson's critique points to the individualistic discourse of sexuality that had the potential to emerge from the sex radical reframing of self-defined sexuality. Ellen Willis had a similar critique to make of the 1981 *Heresies* sex issue. Willis focused on Pat Califia's defence of SM in particular, in which Califia claimed that the predilection towards Sadomasochism, and its description of non SM sex as 'vanilla', indicates that sexual proclivities are just 'flavours', a matter of preference and not politics (1981). In her 1981 column Willis contended that this brand of 'I'm OK, you're OK sexual libertarianism' was a logical extension of the principles of self-definition, but one that can 'only take us so far' (2012, 13). She argued that the movement needed to 'look beyond' the right to choose, and ask more difficult questions, such as 'why do we choose what we choose? What would we choose if we had a real choice?' (14). The critiques from both Wilson and Willis suggest that sex radical feminism could easily slip into an 'anything goes', uncritical, libertarian and consumer focused perspective on sexuality.

Sex radical feminism took up the project of sexual self-definition, and reframed it in a number of critical ways. The epistemological project of self-defining sexuality in the early women's movement involved a sustained deconstruction of existing bodies of knowledge, and the building of new knowledge based upon women's shared perspectives and experiences. Sex radical feminism also drew upon the idea of self-definition, but was primarily driven by the perceived need for a counter-movement against feminist prohibitions of sexuality, not male defined ones. Lesbian feminist and anti-pornography feminism had, in the view of the sex radical movement, restricted sexual practice to an unacceptably narrow range of politically credible acts and pleasures. The messy reality of sexual desire, they argued, would never fit easily into the restrictive mould of anti-phallic, egalitarian, sensual 'feminist' sex. Instead sex radicals positively championed all those pleasures and practises that anti-pornography feminists had deemed anti-feminist; multiple partners, bisexuality, power play, leather, S/M, and penetrative pleasures such as vaginal orgasms, dildos, strap-ons and fisting were all actively celebrated.

'Toys for Us'

Susie Bright emerged as the most visible popular figure of the new sex positive 'public erotic culture for lesbians' in the 1980s (Stein, 1993, 14). As one of the co-founders of *On Our Backs* in 1984, a lesbian pornographic magazine whose title played on that of the US feminist magazine *Off Our Backs*, Bright strove to present herself and her fellow sex radical San Franciscans as a new generation of renegade sexual pioneers fighting back against the prescriptiveness of their 'bad feminist mothers' (Stein, 1993, 19). As Stein argues, Bright's position often oversimplified lesbian feminism's construction of egalitarian, sensual sex, provocatively stating that feminism was responsible for the popular understanding that 'lesbians don't have sex' at all (Bright, cited in Stein, 1993, 18). This was a deliberate appeal to the target audience, represented by the magazine as a new generation of sexually confident and assertive

young lesbians; and it was a successful one, as *On Our Backs* quickly became the most widely circulated lesbian publication in the US (Stein, 1993). *On Our Backs* deliberately sought controversy, and the editors were not disappointed, as many feminist book stores refused to stock the publication, and those stores that did sell the magazine could be met with vandalism and boycotts from feminist authors (Bright, 2011, 261; Bright, 1998, 58; Comella and Queen, 2008, 277).

Susie Bright's *On Our Backs* column, 'Toys for Us', which in the early editions often took the form of a kind of sexual 'problem page', set out her sex radical position. Bright combined an assertive and unapologetic sexually liberal persona with ideas around female sexuality familiar from the early women's movement. She has since written that *On Our Backs* was a 'political statement', and not just titillation, with the editors aiming to repeat the self-defining and consciousness raising achievements of the women's health movement, now with a specific focus on lesbian sex and sexuality (Bright cited in Stein, 1993, 21). Bright's first column began by reasserting principles that self-consciously re-iterated feminism's early call for self-defined sexuality: 'find your clit, learn to create your orgasm... don't let anyone, especially any man, tell you how and when to get off' (1998, 12). This refusal to not 'let anyone' tell you how to find sexual pleasure was crucially different to that of early feminism however, defining itself against and emerging from the years of feminist debate around sexuality. Sexual self-definition was expanded by Bright to frame her defiant rebellion against lesbian feminist and anti-pornographic definitions of lesbian desire, advocating the pleasures of a multiplicity of penetrative sexual practices in particular. 'To those uninitiated' to the pleasures of fisting, she writes, 'I invite you to study this column thoroughly. Don't be ashamed of your sexual illiteracy, just remedy it' (1998, 65).

As the name of the column suggests, sex toys including vibrators, dildos and strap ons were regularly recommended by Bright, who drew upon her time at San Francisco's Good Vibrations store to make recommendations. The assertion that lesbians could and should enjoy penetration, and dildos in particular, was a direct counter to feminism's earlier concern with, or outright condemnation of, the 'phallic symbolism' of the sex toy. In a memorable column Bright contends that the 'political, social, and emotional connotations' of dildos, and their supposed resemblance to the 'infamous' penis, have had many 'unhappy lesbians in a stranglehold' (1998, 19). One such unhappy lesbian couple's letter is cited, in which the author worries that her and her partner's desire for 'sensation in our vaginas' must be a 'hangover from our heterosexual past'. Bright responds by stating that 'penetration is only as heterosexual as kissing' and 'fucking knows no gender' (ibid.). In a later column a similar problem is shared, with Bright again responding that 'a dildo is *not* a penis' (1998, 30). The dildo was re-framed by *On Our Backs* as a positive and pleasurable sexual object for lesbian women.

Bright's position on female sexuality was a popular and marketable version of sex radical feminism. The underlying message in her writing is that a woman's sexual desire and pleasure should shape her feminist politics, and not the other way around. In one column Bright responds to a letter purporting to be from a 'butch dyke' anxious about her desire to wear her dildo and asking 'how do I incorporate this into my feminist ideology?' (Bright, 1998, 29). Bright replies that 'the real question is: how can feminist

ideology incorporate *your* desires?’ (30, emphasis in original). This belief in the radical potential of pleasure, and the absolute refusal to suppress, deny or police how women ‘get off’, was at the centre of sex radical feminism. Bright and *On Our Backs* re-framed sexual consumption as an act of empowerment and freedom for the modern lesbian women. Moreover, Bright cannily promoted herself, or more precisely her sexually radical persona, as a desirable commodity. As one of the first ‘sexperts’ – and unlike the collectives and groups of the 1970s Women’s Health Movement, for example – Bright built an individual career and notoriety based on her own brand of sexual knowledge and freedom.

‘A subversive business’

Bright was not alone in recommending the pleasures of the dildo; the 1980s saw a new popularity of dildos and strap-ons in lesbian sexual representations including pornographic stories and photographs, sex guides and mail order catalogues, and a concurrent ‘substantial increase’ in their sale (Lamos, 1995, 105). This was particularly true for lesbian women, as mail orders for harnesses and dildos ‘skyrocketed’, now understood by many as a pleasurable and positive lesbian sexual practice (Stein, 1993, 32). The address to a modern lesbian consumer was an explicit intention of Bright and her co-founder of *On Our Backs*, Debi Sundahl, who aimed to treat lesbians ‘like they had money’: ‘Lesbians have never been treated with respect as consumers; no one’s ever come to our community with anything sexual we want’ (cited in Bright, 2011, 240). The new importance of the lesbian consumer was reflected in the increased variety of dildo design, in particular a move away from the phallos-realistic representations that had dominated in the ‘adult’ market of the 1970s (Blank, 2000). In 1987 US lesbian sex writer JoAnn Loulan commended the range of ‘colors and shapes’ represented in the many ‘dildos that no longer look like penises’ (cited in Lamos, 1995, 105). In an *On Our Backs* column Bright recalled pleading with sex toy manufacturers who sold to Good Vibrations in the late 1970s: ‘could you make these joy sticks in some other color than D.O.A Caucasian?’ (1998, 119). By the end of the 1980s Bright noted the availability of vibrators in colours from ‘magenta to aqua’, a shift that she attributes to the ‘female voice’ calling for greater colour and imagination in the sex market (ibid.).

As I have shown, women did purchase vibrators throughout the 1970s, and before, via mail order or in the first women oriented sex shops or, if they dared, by visiting male dominated licensed sex shops or adult stores. This form of consumption differed from that of the 1980s in a number of ways. In the United States the range and scope of sexual products and stores aimed at female consumers continued to increase. Sex toy parties for women were on the rise in both the UK (Gold, 1995) and US (Bright, 1998), bringing sex shopping directly to groups of women in their homes (Storr, 2003). Sex toys were becoming available in a greater range of colours, shapes, and materials, partly due to women’s increasing involvement as sex toy designers and buyers (Blank, 2000; Bright, 1998; Williams and Vannucci, 2005). If a female friendly sex shop or party was not available, Bright’s attitude to women shopping in adult stores was typically sexually assertive: ‘the male customers in the store are more afraid of you than you are of them... It’s an awesome sense of power’ (Bright, 2011, 72). Pornography was also reclaimed by some as something potentially pleasurable to buy,

watch, make and perform in, and not only as a source of oppression for women (Williams, 1993). Good Vibrations started selling porn in 1989, with Bright curating a collection of woman produced and oriented material (Queen and Comella, 2008, 291).

Most crucially however, the 1980s saw a new address to and construction of the female sexual consumer. In the 1970s women's sexual purchases almost took the form of 'poaching' from a market that was either explicitly directed at men, as licenced sex shops and adult stores were, or was tentatively forming a somewhat confused address to the feminist consumer, as the reassurances of the worthy *Spare Rib* vibrator advertisements show. The empowered female consumer, who confidently chooses, purchases and uses sexual commodities designed and marketed explicitly for her sexual pleasure, was very much a 1980s invention.

A 1982 *Spare Rib* article gives some insight into the way that sex shops aimed at women drew on sex radical feminism to inform their construction of the empowered sexual consumer. Sherri Krynski documents the rise of a new type of business in the United States, 'erotica shops' that market a 'sensuous experience' to women (6). Stating that there are now six or seven such business in the US, alongside a number of home party sales companies, the article focuses on San Francisco shops 'Good Vibrations' and 'For Yourself', and the home party company 'Pleasure Party'. Noting the predominantly female clientele of all three companies, Krynski observes that 'it would be difficult to confuse the erotica shop atmosphere with that of a male-oriented pornography store', with openly displayed products and feminist sex literature replacing explicit magazines and video booths (6). She notes a variety of vibrator designs, from phallic shapes, to a product 'designed by a woman' resembling a finger and thumb, and mains operated models with a choice of attachments (6). Concluding that there is little that would 'cause controversy within the feminist community' about the stores, she does find areas of disagreement with the sex shop owners over their feminist position on sexuality (6).

A sex shop owner is quoted, describing how these female oriented erotic shops 'accommodate a woman's version of a woman's sexuality', a goal that she believes the anti-pornography movement has hindered, as it has created the message that certain sexual fantasies are 'bad' and should be repressed, replicating feelings of guilt and shame about sexuality (7). Krynski comes to the defence of anti-pornography feminism, explaining her belief that the overwhelmingly negative and damaging representations of female sexuality emanating from male dominated culture need to be deconstructed and rejected by feminism before a more positive form of female sexuality can emerge. Before this goal is achieved, Kyrnski contends that the purchase of a vibrator could just as easily liberate a woman as it could aid her in reproducing male fantasies of sexuality. The self-defined feminist owner of 'Pleasure Party' counters that a women shopping for sexual commodities are 'reclaiming power' simply through the act of consuming something sexual:

Like it or not, we live in a consumer society. The acceptable way to please yourself is to buy something. If a women spends money on her own enjoyment, if she buys a vibrator, or even some bath lotion, she is saying "I am worth it, I deserve this". She is learning to please herself rather than someone or something else. Really, this is a very subversive business' (7)

This account neatly summarises the differing perspectives between anti-pornography feminists, as Krynski identifies herself to be, and the popularised version of sex radical or sex positive feminism extolled by the business owner. It also shows the way that sex radical feminism's understanding of the revolutionary power of sexual self-definition so easily lends itself to an apolitical consumerist narrative of sexuality: a woman's act of simply buying something (anything) for herself is an act of liberation.

Whilst this shift in female sexual consumption was instigated and given legitimacy by sex radicalism, the move to a new kind of consumption was of course not only occurring in the sex shop market. The 1980s saw the rise of the 'lifestyle' consumer in a range of spheres. Gardner and Sheppard argue that, as retail became more central to the British economy in the 1970s and 80s, shopping became understood as a pleasurable leisure activity in itself (1989). Exploring changes in homeware retail, they trace a shift from the promotion of individual products to the sale through shops such as Habitat of 'an aspirational and affordable image of domestic living' (1989, 77). They cite the use of appealingly arranged room 'sets' in Habitat stores as an example of this sale of a desirable home lifestyle, with the products themselves secondary to the idea of their lives and selves that the consumer might purchase. Sex shops in the 1980s similarly shifted towards this model, constructing a female consumer whose daring sexual purchase is itself an act of subversion and empowerment. The changing retail strategies in this period, along with the sex radical reframing of sexual consumption and commerce as potentially empowering and agentic, provided a strong foundation for the sexual lifestyle consumerism that would be aggressively targeted at women in the postfeminist 1990s.

Conclusion: Feminism to Postfeminism

Through examining a series of texts, actions, events and debates within feminism, this chapter has presented a story of the emerging, shifting, and contested discourse linking sexual commodities to sexual liberation. When feminists in the early 1970s claimed the clitoris as a radical symbol of independent pleasure, and heralded masturbation as key to self-discovery and sexual freedom, they made an important connection to a material consumer object: the vibrator. Early 'feminist' sex shops cemented this connection between sexual self-definition and sex shopping. Over the following years of debate sexual commodities were problematized due to their phallic symbolism and links to pornography and violent male fantasy. In the 1980s both the vibrator and dildo were repositioned within sex radicalism as objects representing rebellion against sexual proscription and political correctness. As retail culture simultaneously shifted to the promotion of aspirational lifestyles in the 1980s, the first representations and endorsements of the empowered female sexual consumer begin to emerge. Although I do not wish to suggest that sexual empowerment through sexual consumption was widely accepted or even acknowledged by all feminists, the series of instances detailed in this chapter do point to the emergence of both the material conditions and discursive framework that have come to underpin contemporary endorsements of sex shopping for women.

Postfeminist culture both evokes and denies the principles of feminism, extolling the values of choice, empowerment and freedom for women whilst at the same time

crucially depoliticising them in order that they support rather than challenge a heteronormative, capitalist and neo-liberal status quo. Postfeminist sexual consumer culture draws upon decades of feminist thought about female sexuality, appealing to women as sexual agents and offering them sexual choices in ways that are only intelligible in the historical and cultural context of the achievements of women's liberation. However, sexual pleasure, orgasm, and knowledge about one's body and desires are promoted by contemporary sexual culture as an individual *consumer* good, and not as a basis for collective political liberation. Whilst this culture is absolutely built upon decades of feminist discourse in which connections were forged between sexual liberation and sexual consumption, the current sexual consumer landscape is not one that most feminists would have anticipated, or would endorse. Susie Bright refuses to sanction the depoliticised and heteronormative postfeminist 1990s and 2000s iteration of the sex shopper: 'I don't give a shit if anyone purchases anything for a personal sexual revolution – you can't buy your way into it' (Bright, 2011, 269).

Postfeminist Sexuality and Consumer Sex

'According to the erotica shops, sex aids, particularly *female* sex toys, are selling as fast as Big Macs. While they'll never replace the "real thing", say the managers, they put women in control of their own sexuality'. Tracey Cox, *Hot Sex* (1999)

'Look! Oh, it's so cute! Oh I thought it would be all scary and weird, but it isn't! It's pink, for girls!'.
Charlotte, *Sex and the City* (1998)

The last two decades have seen a makeover of sex toys for women. A new wave of sexual objects have been marketed aggressively and extensively towards heterosexual female consumers in particular, who are incited to buy them without shame as a mark of being sexually 'in control'. From the 1990s one of the most desirable of these commodities has been the Rabbit vibrator with its iconic vibrating 'bunny ears'. Featured on *Sex and the City* in 1998, the 'cute', 'pink' Rabbit signalled an era of women's sexual consumption as feminine and fashionable (Attwood, 2005, 393), at the same time as it represented a confident and 'empowered' claiming of female sexual desire. As a sexual commodity the Rabbit has reached an unprecedented level of popularity and cultural ubiquity, symbolising women's fun, stylish and agentic sexual consumption. Over the same period, sex shops aimed at women and couples have rapidly grown in number and diversified their market reach (Smith, 2007; Coulmont and Hubbard, 2010).



Figure 3: The 'Rabbit' in *Sex and the City*

This era of female sexual consumption both draws upon and negates feminist framings of self-defined sexuality. The characters in *Sex and the City* see the clitoris as an emblem of women's autonomous sexual pleasure, demand orgasm as their 'right', and masturbate without shame. But these goals, so significant to many second wave feminists, are emptied of their political status and become exclusively an issue of individual choice, in particular the right of individual white middle class women to 'choose' how to enact their (hetero)sexuality through lifestyle and consumption (Henry, 2004). Whilst sexual consumption has come to represent agentic sexual freedom, fears about sexual commodities replacing the 'real thing' must be

carefully managed. Popular sex advice in books and magazines echo feminist women's health texts in advising women to masturbate and get to know their bodies and sexual responses, but this is in the service of becoming a 'sexpert' or 'sex goddess', and in order to acquire and

keep a male partner. Self-defined female sexuality has taken on individualised, heterosexist meanings in an era of postfeminism and neoliberalism, representing what Angela McRobbie has termed a 'double entanglement' with feminism and feminist constructions of female sexuality (2009).

This chapter examines postfeminist constructions of female sexuality and sexual consumption in a neoliberal age. I begin by briefly tracing the emergence of a neoliberal, self-regulating subject and its particular address to women through postfeminism. This address both calls upon and refutes feminism, creating an apolitical narrative of choice and freedom that serves an individualistic agenda. Through an examination of sex advice for women in popular books and magazines, I argue that women are enjoined to participate in technologies of the sexual self that allow them to become sexually knowledgeable and to work on sexuality and sexual relationships as part of the neoliberal postfeminist project of the self. These qualities can be worked on in large part through the consumption and manipulation of appropriate sexual commodities, and I trace the emergence of mass market feminine, heterosexual consumption of sexual accessories in the 1990s and 2000s to explore this. Finally, I address the question of women's agency and lived experience – arguing that whilst women do feel compelled to work on the project of the sexual self in this postfeminist climate, they also at the same time negotiate postfeminist culture in ways that can be ambivalent and contradictory.

Neoliberalism and the self

Critics agree that neoliberalism has become powerful and widespread over at least the last four decades, coming to dominate the political landscape in the 1980s, and that neoliberal ideas now underpin not only economics and politics but also the realms of ideology, culture, selfhood and everyday life (Harvey, 2005; Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2004, 1-2; Brown, 2003). In popular political terms neoliberalism is understood as the creation of a 'radically free market' achieved through a range of social policies including economic de-regulation and minimal state intervention that allow business to maximise profit (Brown, 2003, 3). Wendy Brown demonstrates that neoliberalism can be more fully understood as a 'political rationality' that shapes economic policy but also spreads its influence far 'beyond the market' (4), so that 'market values' are extended to 'all institutions and social action' (7). The market then, becomes a primary regulating principle for understanding and constructing the individual: with subjects cast as 'entrepreneurs' within their own lives, making choices based on 'rational deliberation about costs, benefits, and consequences' (15).

The primary orientation by which we are now enjoined to encounter the world is that of the consumer, with our interactions with others taking the form of transactions in which we stand to lose or gain depending on our choices (Massey, 2013). Responsibility is devolved fully onto individuals, undermining political organisation for change, as individuals must work on making the best choices and improving themselves, rather than campaigning collectively for the structures that limit such

'choices' themselves to change (Brown, 2003, 15). Being entirely responsible for their own choices, individuals must bear the full consequences of those choices, however materially constrained they may in actuality be. This construction of 'freedom' is precisely what controls and constrains in neoliberal culture, as the consequences of freedom are moralised and must be borne by the individual (17). 'Choice' then, is the 'cherished principle' of neoliberalism (Braun, 2009, 235), and individuals are compelled to become the kind of subjects that make the right choices (McRobbie, 2009).

Nikolas Rose has explored further the way that a neoliberal rationality of individual choice shapes the private self (1989). Rose argues that this rationality acts as a form of governance upon our deepest sense of self, our pleasures, desires and relationships, creating a 'symmetry' between the life choices of subjects and the 'political values of consumption, profitability, efficiency and social order' (10-11). A language of self-confession, and an industry of 'experts' in self-management have emerged in order to facilitate this process. Rose draws upon Foucault's notion of 'technologies of the self', arguing that a new language and field of expertise offers a range of criteria, methods, and ways of speaking that allow us to act upon our 'bodies, souls, thoughts, and conduct in order to achieve happiness, wisdom, health, and fulfilment' in ways that align with neoliberal values (11).

Foucault's understanding of how power operates at the level of the subject has proved useful for critics of neoliberalism. As a political rationality neoliberalism exercises a form of panoptic power where subjects are 'caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers' (1995, 201). In his later work Foucault elaborates upon the productive elements of self-regulation, demonstrating the historical emergence of a range of technologies that allow individuals to become intelligible subjects (2011). Such technologies include ways of articulating, analysing, monitoring and understanding the self, and encompass the interrelated obligations of self-care and self-knowledge: 'one cannot take care of oneself without knowing oneself' (2011, 43). Crucially, he contends that such self-care and self-knowledge can only be achieved through the approval and assistance of others: 'we need to appeal to someone to help us to form our opinion of ourselves and to establish an appropriate relationship to self' (44). Individuals must take up these technologies in order to become intelligible, both to themselves and others, as a subject (McNay, 1992, 49). As McNay contends, these ideas are particularly useful for feminism in that they show the *active* nature of self-fashioning, whilst also demonstrating how autonomy is not pre-discursive but is instead permitted and determined by the social context (4).

Evans and Riley develop Foucault's technologies of the self in relation to contemporary ideas of 'sexiness' in neoliberal consumer culture (2015). They argue that women are powerfully 'hailed' by the 'wider social discourses that shape the way we can understand the world: a body of meanings that opens up and closes down ways for us to understand ourselves' (2015, 40). Technologies of the self, then, are the 'practices that allow people to take up a subject position and make it their own...

those moments where we work on ourselves to make ourselves' (40). The taking up of such practices of self-work appears freely chosen and deeply meaningful to the individual, obscuring the way in which people are incited to take up a particular privileged set of discourses of personhood, and to disavow others (42). Their research suggests that 'Foucault's notion of a technology of the self might be developed by gender researchers to make sense of both the broader cultural contexts that have enabled a sexualisation of culture, and the subjective embodiment of these feelings of sexiness' (2015, 62).

I contend that women in particular are incited by neoliberal culture to engage in a range of technologies of the sexual self. We are inculcated to participate in practices and ways of speaking, facilitated by 'sexperts' and a language of sexual self-confession, self-inspection and self-improvement, in order to achieve sexual happiness and fulfilment. Women are taught to become sexual entrepreneurs as well as sexual consumers, to make the right sexual choices in ways that align closely with the neoliberal values of consumption, self-improvement and productivity. This project of the sexual self explicitly draws upon elements of the feminist projects of sexual self-definition and sex radicalism that I explored in the previous chapter, whilst wholly disavowing much of their politically radical potential. The effectiveness of this new de-politicised construction of female sexual selfhood, and its complex entanglement with feminism, can be explained by the ubiquity of a 'postfeminist sensibility' within neoliberal culture (Gill, 2007b). The values promoted by neoliberalism and postfeminism are not only strikingly similar, but, as Gill has argued, neoliberalism's particular address to (young, heterosexual, white, Western, slim) women through postfeminism might in fact demonstrate that such women are the primary and ideal neoliberal subjects (2007b).

Postfeminist sensibility

A number of critics have outlined the rise of postfeminism since the 1980s. Postfeminism is not simply a backlash against feminism, as Charlotte Brunsdon observes in her analysis of 1980s and 1990s popular culture representations of women that are both 'dependent on, but transcendent or dismissive of, the impulses and images of 1970s feminism' (1997, 85). These early postfeminist representations combined an emphasis on femininity, consumption and traditional heterosexual femininity with themes of female independence and agency. Postfeminist culture in the 21st century can be broadly defined as an individualistic emphasis on women's freedom, empowerment and independence, made visible through consumer and lifestyle choices (Tasker and Negra, 2007; Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 2009). Rosalind Gill usefully defines postfeminism as a 'sensibility' that characterises a range of media texts and cultural forms, and she outlines a number of features that recur within this sensibility (2007b, 148).

Postfeminism situates femininity primarily in the feminine 'sexy body', Gill argues, with the female body seen simultaneously as 'a source of power' and at the same time in need of constant regulation and work (2007, 149). The erotic presentation of the

sexual body (most often female) is highly visible in popular culture (150). Cultures of sexual self-exposure and confession contribute to highly lucrative fields of popular and consumer culture, as pleasure and desire are sold alongside sexual self-improvement and transformation through a range of commodities and texts (McNair, 2002). The exposure and commodification of the sexual female self and body in postfeminist culture is presented as agentic and empowered (Tasker and Negra, 2007). Gill notes the move from objectification to subjectification, with women presented as 'active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so' (2007, 151).

Choice and empowerment are central to a postfeminist sensibility, underpinned by a 'grammar of individualism' that frames all aspects of women's lives as wholly personal and private rather than political (Gill, 2007b). This privatisation works to obscure social difference in terms of gender, and between women themselves; the subject of postfeminism is 'white and middle class by default' (Tasker and Negra, 2007, 2). Notions of free female choice are claimed as integral to a Western construction of freedom, and set favourably against repeated representations of non-Western oppression and restriction of women and sexuality (McRobbie, 2009, 1; Braun, 2009, 235). This renders invisible the way in which Western female 'liberation' through a consumer lifestyle is so often reliant on the labour and exploitation of girls and women producing consumables under global capitalism (McRobbie, 2007), not to mention the use of immigrant or working class female domestic labour by middle class white women in Western countries (Cox, 2006).

Gill also points to the intensification and expansion of regimes of self-surveillance and discipline that form a postfeminist sensibility, in which women must 'remodel' not only their exterior appearance but also their interior psychological selves (2007b, 155). Women are under pressure to be capable, independent and self-reliant, which translates into a never complete process of monitoring, analysis, planning and improving the self (McRobbie, 2007, 723). A 'makeover paradigm' incites people, but women in particular, to believe that their selves and lives are in need of radical improvement with the help of 'relationship, design or lifestyle experts' and 'appropriately modified consumption habits' (Gill, 2007b, 156). Postfeminism also romanticises, eroticises and re-essentialises gender difference; gender and sexual equality is dispensed with and 'authentic' masculinity and femininity can be recovered from the confines of a censorious 'political correctness' represented by feminism (158). Women are free to choose, but postfeminism consistently represents conservative and heterosexist norms as 'the ultimate "best choices" in women's lives' (Negra, 2009, 4).

This conservatism is made appealing through the postfeminist address to consumers and audiences as 'knowing and sophisticated', with irony, nostalgia and humour used to present sexist or homophobic beliefs 'ironically' (Gill, 2007, 159). Retro imagery is used to knowingly present pre-feminist femininity and gender roles as appealing, with women encouraged to throw off the unpleasant restrictions of feminism and return, with a sigh of relief, to traditional heterosexual femininity. Postfeminist culture can do

this so effectively precisely because aspects of feminism are explicitly taken into account (McRobbie, 2009). A postfeminist sensibility constructs and incorporates aspects of feminism rather than wholly reversing or denying them, so that feminism is 'simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated' (Gill, 2007b, 161). So female independence, freedom and choice are celebrated at the same time as pre-feminist ideals, particularly those related to traditional heterosexuality and gender roles, are seductively repackaged as postfeminist freedoms and choices.

McRobbie argues that young women in particular are highly visible as capable, empowered and freely choosing subjects, mobilised in the media as symbols of economic productiveness and capacity as both workers and consumers (2007, 720). That women can access this freedom is presented as proof of feminism's achievements but also of its redundancy, as a need for feminism is consigned to history. McRobbie argues then that postfeminism can be theorised as 'double entanglement':

This comprises the coexistence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life... with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity... it also encompasses the existence of feminism as at some level transformed into a form of Gramscian common sense, whilst also fiercely repudiated, indeed almost hated. The 'taken into accountedness' permits all the more thorough dismantling of feminist politics and the discrediting of the occasionally voiced need for its renewal (2009, 12).

Postfeminism then, is not merely backlash or reaction against feminism, but has incorporated particular elements of feminism precisely so that feminist politics can be disavowed and neoliberal values and structures can go unchallenged. This is not enforced on women, but is enacted through their willing participation and consent, as women are incentivised in a number of ways to participate in postfeminist culture. McRobbie describes this as a form of 'exchange' by which young women are offered a 'notional form of equality' in the fields of education, employment, consumer culture and civil society as a substitution for feminist politics and what it might offer (2009, 2). The overt exercise of patriarchal power has been subsumed and obscured within a framework of freedom and choice. The true cost of postfeminism is that the ever pressing need to make the right individual choices and to regulate, know and care for the self in the right way provides a largely effective distraction, cover and counter-argument to refute any claim that there might be a need for feminism.

The ubiquity and influence of postfeminist values can only be understood within the context of their 'powerful resonance' with neoliberalism. Gill demonstrates that both rationalities are built upon a notion of individualism that has obscured any social or political factors that may constrain or influence the individual, and that the subject of neoliberalism as 'autonomous, calculating, self-regulating' aligns closely with the 'active, freely choosing, self-reinventing' postfeminist subject (2007b, 164). This suggests that postfeminism is not only entangled with feminism, but that it is also

constituted and legitimated through the pervasiveness of neoliberalism (164). Gill believes that this connection is significant, arguing that it is women more than men who are called upon to participate in the technologies of the self offered by neoliberal culture, and asking: 'could it be that neoliberalism is always already gendered, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects?' (164).

Postfeminist sex advice

What, then are the technologies of the sexual self by which women become intelligible sexual individuals in postfeminist neoliberal culture? I turn here to some texts from the vast range of sex advice literature in popular books and women's magazines, characterised by a postfeminist sensibility. The advice offered in such texts demonstrates the range of processes, practices and language that are available to women constructing and speaking their sexuality in postfeminism. The sexuality constructed in this neoliberal, postfeminist context is deeply entwined with the logic of the market. Sex must be productive and effective, both in terms of increased intimacy and easier and better orgasms; a good sex life requires continual planning, work, examination and improvement. *Cosmopolitan* has a section of the magazine dedicated to 'Love, Sex and Success', making clear the importance of efficiency and achievement to relationships and sexuality. Tyler also notes the way in which contemporary ideas of sexuality have become permeated with the managerial techniques associated with business and bureaucracy, such as productivity and effectiveness (2004). Women must become adept at what Gill has called 'intimate entrepreneurship' (2009, 352), constantly seeking out the knowledge and techniques required to bring greater value and efficiency to their sexual selves and relationships.

The postfeminist construction of female sexuality in these texts forms is entangled with the feminist concepts of female sexuality that I explored in the previous chapter. Ideas of sexual self-definition are taken for granted, and women are portrayed as actively and willingly choosing their sexual desires and activities. But the 'best choices' presented to women in these texts are consistently normative, embracing traditional gender roles and heterosexual monogamy. Self-pleasure is also repeatedly advocated and masturbation advice and techniques are detailed, often closely resembling those in feminist texts such as the endorsement of vibrator use. However, self-pleasure is reframed individualistically as a form of self-improvement in the service of becoming 'better in bed' in order to get and keep a man. Forms of self-examination featured in feminist texts are featured more rarely in postfeminist sex literature; the speculum is noticeably absent. Self-examination of the 'inner' self is a far more powerful feature of contemporary sex advice, with women continually encouraged to investigate and improve their sexual desires, knowledge, practices, in short, to 'makeover' their sexual selves. The idea that sexual freedom is 'liberating' and 'empowering' is absolutely central to these postfeminist texts, and consuming sexual products represents one technique by which this empowerment might be achieved and embodied. Yet the forms of liberation available here are individualistic, and no credence is given to the idea that wider structural forces may have an impact on individual freedom, let alone

the idea that such structures might be tackled by collective political action. The question of sexual emancipation is wholly devolved to the realm of the person, and success or failure in the project of the sexual self is entirely one's own responsibility.

Sex advice for women has become big business over the last two decades. It is increasingly commodified not only in the form of books but also through a range of synergies with other spheres. Celebrity 'sexperts' are able to build lucrative careers across books, magazine columns, websites, television appearances and sexual product ranges. Tracey Cox, whose bestselling and widely re-published debut book *Hot Sex* (1999) I examine here, has had notable success and longevity in her cross platform 'sexpert' career, with numerous books, television appearances and a line of sex toys attached to her name (traceycox.com). Petra Boynton notes that media sex gurus are required to be young and conventionally attractive, and are expected to offer advice that constructs a sexually confident postfeminist sexual persona, usually in ways that will successfully promote the sexpert's latest product (2009). This makes it increasingly difficult, she argues, to find sex advice from and for women that is not deeply sexualised and commodified (2009, 114). Boynton also notes the vast swathes of sex advice available online, much of which is offered only as a 'cover for commercial ventures' such as libido enhancing pharmaceuticals (124). Sex shops also play an important role in the sex advice market, offering advice on their websites and in books sold in store, with the advice given having the added benefit of endorsing purchase of the other products sold there. Ann Summers has published numerous sex advice texts, showing both the ideological and market synergies between sex advice and sex shopping; here I am examine the 'Best Sex Ever' guide (Kelly, 2009).

Finally, I look at a range of sex advice offered in *Cosmopolitan* UK from 2011-2013. *Cosmo* is perhaps the women's magazine most well-known for a sexually candid approach, celebrating an 'active', 'emancipated', 'fun', 'fearless' version of 'desirable feminine sexuality'¹⁰ (Farvid and Braun, 2006). Like the other texts I consider, *Cosmo*'s sex advice is deeply imbued with the postfeminist values of choice, presenting normative sexual desire and practice as the 'best choice', and framed by a neoliberal rationality of the market within which women must continually work to improve their sexual selves. All these texts are undercut by the assumption that finding and keeping a heterosexual monogamous relationship is the reader's desired goal, and that (guaranteed, frequent, high quality, easily attained) female orgasms are the taken for granted marker of 'good sex' for women. *Cosmo* readers are assured that, with the application of sexual knowledge and techniques, they will be able to 'hitch a ride to O-TOWN every time' (Benjamin, 2011, emphasis original). Sex is always presented as something to be worked upon and made better in the magazine.

It should be noted that women can interpret the 'advice' in sex books and magazines in a variety of complex ways, and that they frequently offer critiques of such

¹⁰ There is some consistency to *Cosmo*'s individualistic and liberationist tone (see Winship, 1987, 106-14), although it has become more explicitly sexual in a postfeminist age.

representations or respond to them unpredictably (Farvid and Braun, 2006; Boynton, 1999). Whilst sex advice does teach a variety of sexual technologies of the self by which women are instructed to improve their sexual knowledge and performance, readers may well be sceptical and resistant to this message. In the analysis here I am concerned with examining the way that female sexuality is discursively constructed in postfeminist sex advice, and I deal with women's complex possible responses to such a culture in further detail in the final part of this chapter.

Intimate entrepreneurship

The very logic of sex advice texts takes for granted that the 'best sex ever' doesn't come naturally, it requires a range of different kinds of work. Sex is an 'acquired skill' and women need to do their 'homework to become an expert' (Cox, 1999, 3). As Gill has argued, the repertoire of 'intimate entrepreneurship' in women's magazines uses a range of discursive techniques to equate sex with work and incite women to perfect their professional and entrepreneurial sexual skills (2009, 352). Building a 'good working knowledge' of sex is 'easier said than done', and requires the specialist knowledge of 'sexperts' (Cox, 1999, xi). *Cosmo* calls upon the 'expert' advice of a range of sex therapists, psychologists and educators, demonstrating that 'good sex' involves specialist knowledge and techniques. With the absorption of knowledge and the practice of sexual skills, readers are promised better connection and intimacy with their sexual partners, and more easily attained and satisfying orgasms. Sexual knowledge is a valuable commodity in this formulation, one that women must work to absorb and apply.

Sex advice texts represent sex as requiring a detailed and onerous level of planning and preparation, all of which must seemingly be done by women. So women ought to 'plan carefully' when choosing which lingerie to wear, considering the 'practicalities' of removing their clothing (Kelly, 2009, 8). They should surprise their partners by arranging the environment to 'suggest sex' by running a candlelit bath or laying a 'riding crop' on silk sheets; note the assumption that their male partner will be arriving home from elsewhere, work presumably (7). Women must also prepare their bodies through a range of body work practices such as full pubic waxing, painful as 'hell' but 'worth it' (330), and doing daily 'sexercise' to work out their genital muscles and guarantee 'stronger orgasms' (94). Once sex is underway, women must continue to carefully monitor the way their body appears; the missionary position is recommended because 'we lie on our backs, the flab spreads out and we look extra thin. Bonus!' (Cox, 1999, 62).

Alongside recommending the usual techniques such as role-play, fantasy and strip tease, *Cosmo* also offers a somewhat overwhelming range of lifestyle elements that women should work on in order to improve their sexual relationships and desire. A piece on 'rebooting' your sex life recommends that women examine how issues such as work, stress, moving house, having a baby or putting on weight can be 'tipping points' that damage a sexual relationship, and how to work on overcoming them

(Goddard, 2012). Another article encourages readers to start thinking about the everyday routines that may be causing their sex drives to wane and their sex lives to become repetitive; habits that need to be altered include having lie ins, drinking too much alcohol, watching too much television, not taking enough exercise, and eating at the wrong time of day (Grumman, 2012). The 'Cosmo Sex diet' is a diet plan that promises readers that they can eat themselves 'into a sexy mood, have tons of orgasms and lose weight' (Gask, 2012). Improving sex fits neatly alongside the other regimes of self, body and lifestyle improvement and makeover on offer in the magazine.

Having the best ever sex also involves carefully managing a repertoire of feminised emotional labour. Whilst these texts predominantly assume a 'liberated' postfeminist reader who knows what her sexual desires are and acts upon them, they continually emphasise that women must communicate those desires to partners sensitively and without threatening or damaging their masculinity. Women are encouraged to explore non-verbal communication where possible by lighting candles, guiding their partner's hand to touch them, or moaning (Kelly, 2009). If you must verbally express desire, management of timing, expression, tone and phrasing need to be considered. *Cosmo* recommends using 'positive language', starting suggestions with 'I'd love it if you –' (Crompton, 2012). The Ann Summers sex guide similarly explains:

Say it out loud to yourself first, and imagine how you'd feel if you were on the receiving end of the words. We're all vulnerable to criticism when it comes to sex, and keeping your voice soft and sensitive and choosing your words wisely can make the difference between an upset, offended lover and one who's only too eager to do whatever it takes to get you off' (Kelly, 2009, 16).

Women must perfect their 'emotion work' in sexual communication (Frith, 2013, 503), speaking their desires in order to have all important good sex, whilst packaging those desires as 'soft', 'sensitive' and feminine order to protect male partners from hurt and preserve the stability of the relationship. Women have a right to pleasure, but not at the cost of their partner's masculinity which is constructed here as fragile and in need of protection.

Heterosexuality and sexual difference

The mainstream sex advice I am examining here not only assumes the heterosexuality of its readers, it enforces the desirability and naturalness of heterosexuality through a construction of sexual gender difference as biological, unavoidable and, most importantly, deeply erotic. This is quite a feat given that men and women's desires are often constructed as inherently different and incompatible, with women wanting more kissing and men wanting to receive more oral sex (Kelly, 2009, 10), and women desperate for more foreplay whilst men want to get straight to penetration (Cox, 1999,

28). The feminist debate around clitoral orgasm resurfaces, reframed as an unfortunate biological 'design fault':

It's God's fault that couples have so many problems with intercourse. If he really wanted women to enjoy it, he would have put the clitoris inside the vagina. I mean, what was he thinking? The only organ in the body designed exclusively for sexual pleasure and it's stuck right up there in a penile no man's land... This simple design fault has caused no end of problems (Cox, 1999, 60).

Penetrative sex means that orgasm is 'guaranteed' for men, whilst for women 'it's a different story' (61). This acceptance that male and female desire and anatomy is fundamentally different and incompatible forms the foundation of much of the practical sex advice on positions and techniques – which strive for some form of compromise by which both partners can achieve orgasm. A number of critics have noted the prevalence of a discourse of heterosexual reciprocity in a postfeminist era (Frith, 2013; Braun et al., 2003). Reciprocity serves as a depoliticised reframing of feminist interventions into heterosexuality, so that male and female partners are recognised as having 'equal' rights to pleasure. Yet as Braun et al. have demonstrated, reciprocity is frequently mobilised as a seemingly egalitarian justification for sustaining unequal gender power relations, often involving processes of pressure, obligation and coercion that disempower women (2003).

The 'compromise' offered by sex advice rests upon this discourse of reciprocity, so women are permitted to take pleasure from sex, but not too much pleasure, as their enjoyment must never be at the expense of their partner's. The advice purports to provide women with techniques in order to 'make up for' supposed biological discrepancies between their own and their partner's desire. A *Cosmo* article gives women advice on adapting to 'his favourite sex style' in order to make it 'work for both of you' (Crompton, 2012). If the man in question is a 'sprinter' who prefers quick sex, women are advised to prepare beforehand by dressing in lingerie and touching themselves, and come up with a repertoire of effective fantasies to visualise that will have them 'crossing the finish line neck and neck with him'. The fact that women 'need clitoral stimulation' is worked into positions in which the clitoris can be accessed (Kelly, 2009, 26), but these positions are often represented as detrimental to male pleasure as they limit opportunities for penetrative thrusting. Women must compensate for this by using their breasts to provide a 'visual show at eye level' (64) or squeezing their pelvic muscles so that their partner doesn't feel too 'neglected' (60) or 'frustrated' (64).

The description of 'mutually enjoyable' positions and techniques in sex advice texts often deeply eroticise unequal gender power relations. So the missionary position is 'powerfully erotic, with the woman vulnerable and the man able to exercise his full sexual power' (Kelly, 2009, 54), and a 'deep penetration' position is 'visually stimulating' as 'she can watch him in a position of power and domination above her' and he 'gets the highly charged erotic thrill of seeing her spread open beneath him' (57). Positions in which women are seen to be more 'in control' are also eroticised: the

'woman on top position means that she retains the power... which can be a huge aphrodisiac in itself' (46); 'you on top, you in control – its deliciously *liberated*, not to mention a hell of a turn-on for both of you' (Cox, 1999, 64). These descriptions celebrate female power as a form of gender role reversal; they also call upon female sexual control and liberation in ways that simultaneously evoke and revoke feminist framings of self-defined sexuality.

Entangled with feminism

Postfeminist sex advice draws upon and takes for granted many aspects of the feminism outlined in the previous chapter, but it also fundamentally divests them of a political remit by positioning female sexuality within a neoliberal, individualistic framework. Postfeminist sex advice texts, like those from the Women's Health Movement, emphasise the importance of gaining and applying knowledge about one's sexuality and sexual desires. However, sexual knowledge is a commodity and asset in a postfeminist framework, and not a tool for collective liberation: it is a required element in a repertoire of sexual entrepreneurship that is deeply imbued with the logic of the market. As I have shown, the knowledge that must be acquired involves building a portfolio of emotional and physical skills and techniques that ensure 'good sex', and allow women to accommodate a naturalised and accepted system of differential gender power relations. The techniques of self-examination and self-pleasure that formed the basis of early feminist ideas of sexual self-definition have similarly endured, but are also reframed within a postfeminist agenda.

As shown in the previous chapter, examining and understanding the female genitals and the body's response to arousal was a regularly recommended technique in feminist texts, particularly those from the women's health movement. This technique is largely invisible in postfeminist sex advice, although Tracey Cox does describe the female anatomy in detail, advising women to look at themselves in a mirror and then encourage their partners to look at their genitals in order to identify the labia, clitoris, and so on (1999, 6). Cox claims that, whilst this may make you feel 'uncomfortable', if 'you're seriously interested in good sex, it's a must'. This advice fits into a neoliberal framing whereby knowledge is an asset to be gained and used to get the payoff of 'good sex', and is not a political act of claiming self-defined knowledge about the body. However, even Cox's detailed description is an exception within the postfeminist sex advice genre, in which 'self-examination' more commonly takes the form of examining the inner self and not the body.

Sex advice often requires women to look deep inside their psychological selves in order to discover their true desires and how to act upon them. The popular multiple choice questionnaire magazine format is used to help readers identify their 'pleasure-spot personality', linking the type of orgasm and stimulation women prefer to their inner selves (Azodi and Knoll, 2013). Gill has noted the trope of sexual self-transformation in women's magazines, in which women must work on 'making over one's interior or psychic life' in order to improve their sex lives (2009, 357). Techniques of

psychological self-examination can be found alongside practical tips for improving orgasms in *Cosmo*:

Women who are more in tune with their feelings have more orgasms. To boost your emotional awareness (and big Os), spend quality time reflecting on what you feel and *why* you feel that way. Writing a list also helps you achieve that difficult-to-reach clarity. The more at ease you are with your thoughts, the more relaxed you'll be in the bedroom (Green, 2012).

Self-pleasure is perhaps the most enduring trope from feminist to postfeminist sex texts, with contemporary descriptions and recommendations of masturbation sometimes closely echoing those of the women's health and women's liberation movements. The understanding of masturbation as an act of claiming independent and autonomous sexual pleasure 'for yourself' has proved resilient, with sex texts stating that 'being able to make yourself come is hugely empowering... masturbation is sex with someone you love, so love yourself – all over' (Kelly, 2009 18); 'by spending time pleasuring yourself, you'll feel more confident in your body and your desires' (Macbeth, 2012); and 'masturbation is a sure way (often the only way) to discover what turns you on sexually' (Cox, 1999, 2).

Tracey Cox states that some women may find masturbating taboo and reassures readers that 'good girls *do* do it' (1999, 2), encouraging those who find it difficult to start viewing it as a 'treat': 'one way of doing this is to use it as a reward – start masturbating after good things have happened to you. It's fat-free (unlike that bar of chocolate), great for your health (unlike a drink or cigarette) and won't cost you a cent (shopaholics take note)' (1999, 11). Similarly, *Cosmo* reassures readers that, unlike sweet treats and online shopping, 'there's no such thing as too much of *this* good thing' (Green, 2012), and suggests masturbation can 'can burn as many as 150 calories in one session' (Macbeth, 2012). The comparison with familiar feminised pursuits such as shopping and chocolate, and the disciplinary lifestyle regimes of exercise and diet, place masturbation firmly within the familiar women's magazine realms of self-indulgence and self-improvement. Masturbation is framed as a respectable and feminine 'treat', fitting neatly into a postfeminist project of the self. Once again, the payoff for perfecting this skill is 'better' sex: 'touch yourself until you know what feels good – then you can really start to experiment in the bedroom' (Benjamin, 2011); 'how will you ever have great sex with somebody else if you don't know what your body needs?' (Kelly, 2009, 18); 'unless you know how to excite yourself, you've zero chance of telling your partner how to' (Cox, 1999, 2). *Hot Sex* includes a section on 'how masturbating can make you a better lover' with tips on ways to make masturbation 'work for you' (25). *Cosmo* similarly represents masturbation as being ultimately oriented towards improving sex with a partner, warning readers not to masturbate regularly without some form of penetration as this could 'make an orgasm during sex tricky', and suggesting that women 'use a dildo to simulate the feeling of a penis inside you during masturbation. Practise and you'll find orgasming during sex is easier' (Green, 2012).

These postfeminist representations of self-pleasure clearly demonstrate a form of 'double entanglement' with feminism, as key elements of the feminist project of female sexuality are taken into account even as they are depoliticised and reframed within a neoliberal discourse. The feminist understanding of masturbation as a foundational act in claiming a self-defined, liberated and independent sexuality for oneself is celebrated here; that women can and should give themselves sexual pleasure appears to have become an established discourse. Yet in postfeminism self-pleasure is stripped of its radical political potential, as instead of undermining the male-centrism of heterosexual practices and institutions self-pleasure is redirected into maintaining them – allowing women to 'treat' themselves as part of a project of individualistic self-improvement, and to work on becoming a 'better lover' in order to get and keep a man. Postfeminism also draws upon the sex radical feminism of the 1980s, presenting sexually active, informed and confident femininity as daring, desirable and empowering, cherishing the principles of sexual choice and freedom. At the same time these texts continually represent white, youthful, slim and attractive, middle class, heterosexual and monogamous couples as the only viable liberated sexual subjects. As in sex radicalism, the ability to consume and use the right kinds of sexual products is understood as emblematic of active sexual subject hood. Yet postfeminist sex advice, whilst appearing to echo the 'anything goes' tenets of sex positive feminism, uses numerous strategies to present and contain the radical potential of the vibrator and dildo.

The Rabbit: a Postfeminist Vibrator

As I have argued, feminism forged a series of often contested links between sexual liberation and sexual commodities, setting the scene for the individualistic postfeminist 'makeover' of the vibrator in the 1990s and 2000s. The cultural icon which heralded and defined this fashionable makeover was the Rabbit vibrator, sold by various companies under different names including Rampant Rabbit, Jessica Rabbit, Rabbit Pearl or Jack Rabbit. Originally created by Japanese company Vibratex in 1984, the Rabbit is a dual toy that combines a rotating phallic shaft with vibrating 'bunny ears' (Adult Sex Store). The toy gained modest popularity in US and UK sex shops over the decade following its release, and was the bestselling product at New York adult novelty store Pleasure Chest when television researchers for *Sex and the City* visited in 1998 (Henry, 2004). The Rabbit's appearance on the hit television show for women was what granted it iconic status, with a massive boom in sales and imitation products following the broadcast (Arthurs, 2003, 94; Comella, 2003) and subsequent re-appearances in women's magazines and other popular cultural texts meaning that it remains perhaps the most recognisable vibrator brand and design for women (Perks, 2006).

The Rabbit's design, marketing, and the nature of its debut in the popular imagination suggest a number of factors that have been integral to the postfeminist re-presentation of sexual consumption. Firstly, the Rabbit promises sexual pleasure from both penetration and clitoral stimulation in ways that are entangled with pre-existing feminist

debates about the site of female climax. This postfeminist intervention into the orgasm debate has powerfully shifted the emphasis towards orgasm as a commodified addition to a multiply sited, individualised repertoire of sexual entrepreneurship. In addition, the toy's emergence in *Sex and the City* framed it as a stylish and desirable commodity signifying modern female independence, whilst at the same time the show's narrative struggled to contain the toy's perceived co-existing meaning as a potential threat to masculinity and heterosexuality.

As I have shown, the location of the female orgasm has been an issue of contentious debate; with Koedt's attack on the Freudian 'myth' of the vaginal orgasm (1970) placing the clitoris and clitoral orgasm as central to female autonomy and self-defined sexuality for feminists. Pleasure in penetration was more controversial for some feminists until the interventions of sex radicalism in the 1980s; with lesbian sex writers reclaiming the dildo from its associations with heterosexual sex by attempting to sever the symbolic link between dildo and penis (Bright, 1998). The issue of where and how women come has remained an area of dispute throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries not only within feminism but also in the fields of science and medicine, and mainstream sex advice and literature (Boynton, 2012). The Rabbit's entry into this debate is particularly interesting as it is an object that combines a penetrative dildo and a vibrating clitoral stimulator. As such, it was framed neatly by the popular 1990s postfeminist rhetoric of women doing and having it all (Negra, 1990). The Rabbit promises to allow women to stop deciding between vaginal or clitoral orgasms and instead have both at the same time, or, as an Ann Summers' representative explains, have the ultimate orgasm: 'Rabbits give something called a blended orgasm where the woman has two orgasms in one go – she is having an external and an internal orgasm' (Selli, cited in Perks, 2006).

Through this rhetoric of the ultimate orgasm, the Rabbit is a potent marker of the postfeminist neoliberal construction of ever 'better' sex, represented as more, better, and more productive, efficient orgasms. The Rabbit and its concomitant imaginary of a woman who transcends the orgasm debate by 'blending' her orgasm neatly avoids the political significance of female pleasure; a significance that was first highlighted by feminists who recognised that the cultural primacy of the vaginal orgasm represented the negation of female pleasure in normative heterosexual practice. In postfeminism this critique is obscured and the focus is redirected onto a discourse of the individual achievement of an 'ultimate' orgasm aided by a sexual commodity. The legacy of the Rabbit in the sex toy market has been an enduring emphasis on achieving this ultimate orgasm, whether clitoral, vaginal – or 'g-spot' as it is now more commonly named – 'blended', multiple or all of the above. Issues of *Cosmo* from recent years reproduce this discourse through advice on how to use sex toys and other techniques to achieve multiple orgasms, the 'ultimate prize in Orgasmville' (Green, 2012), and blended orgasms: 'the Holy Grail of climax, combining a C-spot and a G-spot orgasm at the same time' (Azodi and Knoll, 2013). The ability to achieve these multiple forms of pleasure is a key part of the postfeminist repertoire of intimate entrepreneurship.

The g-spot is a particularly potent indicator of the way in which medical and media 'debates' about the site of orgasm add to a required repertoire of sexual pleasure for women, and also serve commercial interests. Petra Boynton has noted that papers have been published at regular intervals in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine* in recent years claiming to either prove or disprove the existence of the g-spot, successfully retaining a media spotlight for this 'problem' (2012). Boynton demonstrates that the research uses partial samples to draw simplified conclusions about the existence or otherwise of the g-spot in all women, with some research being undertaken by practitioners who stand to benefit from the growing field of female genital cosmetic surgery which includes procedures such as injections to 'enhance' the area where the g-spot is supposedly located (2012; Braun, 2009). This manufactured debate serves to both obscure the diversity and complexity of female sexual pleasure and lend support to the multiple areas of consumption that profit from the pressure upon women to add to and improve their orgasm repertoire, including the sex toy market. The sale of sex toys that are marketed to stimulate the g-spot, clitoris or both is clearly boosted by this debate, and reinforces the idea of a female orgasm as a multiply sited skill repertoire, going a long way to explaining why the debate about the location of female orgasm remains so 'elusive' and entrenched (Tuana, 2004, 217).

This individualised requirement of women to learn how to have more and better kinds of orgasm sidesteps the political implications of the orgasm debate that were highlighted by feminism. At the same time postfeminist sex discourses must carefully contain a perceived threat to heterosexuality and masculinity that sex toys, particularly penetrative ones, are seen to represent. The emergence of the Rabbit in *Sex and the City* encapsulates some of the ways in which this threat has been discursively managed.

A number of critics have noticed the particular postfeminist milieu that was captured and further popularised by the late 1990s and 2000s hit television and movie series *Sex and the City* (McRobbie, 2009, Henry, 2004, Arthurs, 2003). The show, which follows the friendships and love lives of four New York women, is, according to McRobbie, far from 'anti-feminist' and instead explicitly takes a number of elements of feminism into account (2009, 21). So women's freedom to define their careers, romantic and sex lives is taken for granted, and characters are shown confidently claiming their right to equal sexual pleasure with men (Arthurs, 2003). This version of freedom is of course incredibly limited, reducing female agency to the ability of Western wealthy heterosexual white women to make often strikingly conventional consumer and lifestyle choices (Henry, 2004). This neo-conventionalism reflects the sense, echoed in many postfeminist narratives, that contemporary women can take equality for granted and now 'somehow want to reclaim their femininity', with the implication that dry, serious feminism has temporarily robbed women of traditional pleasures such as 'romance, gossip and obsessive concerns about how to catch a husband' (McRobbie, 2009, 21).

This complex negotiation of sexual freedom and conventional heterosexuality is striking in the 1998 episode 'The Turtle and the Hare' in which Charlotte, the most sexually conservative of the quartet, is persuaded by her friends to purchase a Rabbit vibrator. Throughout the episode the commodity is framed simultaneously as a desirable fashionable object leading to more and better orgasms, at the same time as a potential usurper of the primacy of heterosexual sex. The commodity is first discussed around a restaurant table in the following exchange:

Miranda: In 50 years, men are going to be obsolete anyway.... you don't even need them to have sex with anymore, as I've just very pleasantly discovered.

Samantha: Uh-oh. Sounds like somebody just got their first vibrator.

Miranda: Not first. Ultimate. And I think I'm in love.

Charlotte: Oh, please, stop! This is so sad. I'm not going to replace a man with some battery-operated device.

Miranda: You say that, but you haven't met 'the Rabbit' [...]

Charlotte: A vibrator does not call you on your birthday, send flowers the next day, and you cannot take a vibrator home to meet your mother.

Miranda: I know where my next orgasm is coming from. Who here can say as much?

On its introduction to the show the Rabbit is explicitly framed as a potential replacement for a man, with Miranda, the show's most liberal character, happy to endorse it, whilst conventional Charlotte is suspicious. In the following scene three of the women visit an adult novelty store and Charlotte is instantly converted by the sight of the 'cute' 'pink' bunny vibrator 'for girls'. Later in the episode however, she confides that she is worried she could be enjoying her new purchase too much:

I'm scared if I keep using it, I won't be able to enjoy sex with a man again... Have you ever been with a man and he's doing everything and it feels good but somehow you just can't manage... Well, it's weird, 'cause with the Rabbit it's like every time, 'boom!' And one time, I came for like five minutes... no man ever did that...

Charlotte decides to try to stop using the Rabbit, but after she repeatedly cancels arrangements to spend time alone with the sex toy her friends stage a 'Rabbit intervention' and she agrees to give up. Carrie's voiceover concludes the narrative: 'with a little help from her friends, Charlotte decided that she wasn't going to settle for herself'.

As Arthurs has argued, the style of female consumption in *Sex and the City* proved to be a central appeal of the show, with the characters' consumer choices not merely representing 'a series of commodities to be bought' but rather an 'integrated lifestyle to be emulated' by viewers, reinforced through magazine features and online content

(2003, 90). This episode contributed to a vast increase in the frequency and acceptability of sex toy purchase by women (Comella, 2003) and was referred to by a number of the women interviewed for this research as a key moment at which sex toy purchase for women gained greater cultural and social acceptability. The Rabbit is certainly framed as a desirable and stylish feminine accessory in the episode, but this is tempered by a narrative containment of the vibrator's threat to heterosexual sex and relationships. The sex toy is promoted as an aid to more effective, frequent, satisfying and longer orgasms, better than heterosexual sex can provide. But to enjoy this pleasure as a holistic sexual experience – to enjoy 'too much' solo sexual pleasure – is constructed as problematic, and the characters must intervene to stop their friend 'settling' for herself, and get her back to looking for a long term male partner.

Sex advice literature also does this work, presenting sex toys as appealing commodities at the same time as warning women not to enjoy them 'too much', in order to retain the superiority and authenticity of 'real' heterosexual sex. One might expect that a sex guide produced by Ann Summers would endorse sex toy consumption, and to some extent it does: 'Think you're having great sex? If you've never introduced toys into your lovemaking, you're about to find out the difference between great and best ever' (Kelly, 2009, 82). Vibrators are represented as the key to unlocking more and better orgasms. They fit into a narrative of heterosexual reciprocity and compromise, with advice suggesting that women use vibrating clitoral stimulation during sex in order to compensate for an accepted anatomic and pleasure discrepancy between the genders. But the Ann Summers guide also warns: 'you could get dependent on sex toys... make sure you save the vibrator for an occasional treat' (20). The idea that vibrators could be troublingly 'addictive' and must be used cautiously is a persistent one, allowing sexual commodities to be positioned as desirable and threatening at the same time. Tracey Cox toes a similar line, warning readers not to 'use a vibrator to masturbate every single time' despite the convenience it offers by making most women 'climax within minutes' because 'it doesn't teach you any of the sexual skills you can use readily with a partner' (1999, 15). Sex with a partner is positioned as more authentic, and sex toys, whilst desirable for the convenient, frequent, high quality orgasms they offer, must be rationed carefully lest they threaten 'real' sex.

At the same time, discourses of fragile masculinity, and women's responsibility to protect male partners and their relationships through emotion work, resurface in advice about sex toys: 'Men can be a little bit jealous and suspicious of sex toys. Make sure you incorporate it into mutual stimulation and pleasure. It's important he realises this is an addition to the pleasure he already gives you' (Kelly, 2006, 86). *Cosmo* warns readers to 'tread carefully' when introducing sex toys to a male partner because 'men feel threatened by something bigger than him – and able to vibrate!'; women are advised to communicate that the toy is an extra 'prop' and 'not a replacement', and ensure to 'shower him with praise' for his superior performance (Hart, 2011). Readers

are repeatedly issued the same caution, never to let sexual commodities usurp the 'real thing' (Cox, 1999).

All of this serves to capture the inherent contradiction of sex toy consumption and use within postfeminist neoliberal culture. Sexual commodities are an extension of the market into sex and sexuality, making perfect sense given that postfeminist sexuality is already constructed through an entrepreneurial, consumer and transactional discourse. Sexual consumption is one of the many technologies of the sexual self in which women are incited to participate in neoliberal culture. Whilst the commodities are positioned as fun, feminine and fashionable, and promise more and better orgasms, the common sense marker of 'good sex' in postfeminist sexual discourse, they are also seen to pose a threat to the primacy of heterosexual sex as the location of female sexual pleasure and desire. The discourse of sexual consumption must then be managed in ways that secure and reinforce the primacy of the penis over the sex toy, and position sex in a heterosexual relationship as ultimately the better and more holistically satisfying 'choice'.

Taste and sexual consumption

In the years since the Rabbit's emergence into the sex toy market in the late 1990s sex shops and online sex businesses aimed at women in the UK have rapidly expanded and diversified. Ann Summers now design and market their own range of Rabbit toys with names such as 'the throbbing one', 'the thrusting one' and 'just the ears' (Ann Summers, 2013). The chain also used the Rabbit as the fun and 'cheeky' symbol of their 2011 rebrand, unveiling a giant bunny statue at the centre of their new flagship London store (*Marketing Week*, 2011). Ann Summers has almost tripled in size over the last ten years, and remains largely unchallenged as the UK market leader (*Retail Week*, 2002; *Retail Week*, 2013).

Whilst the Rabbit does retain its dominance, a number of shifts in sex toy design, marketing and sale trends have also taken place over this period. The most identifiable of these is the emphasis on sophisticated style and design which has taken precedence in some sectors over the 'cute', fun, youthful femininity of the Rabbit. This change has been led by the number of relatively small but influential elite or designer sex toy ranges and stores that have emerged since the early part of this century. London stores Coco de Mer and Myla, both opening in 2001, presented themselves as erotic, sensual and stylish purveyors of 'sex life accessories' such as silk lingerie, leather bondage items, and vibrators that could also function as aesthetic sculptural objects (*Retail Week*, 2002). As Clarissa Smith has argued, these boutique stores engaged with broadsheet and glossy magazine press in order to legitimate sex shopping as a respectable, middle-class, tasteful form of consumption (2007).

Alongside boutique stores, sex toy brands such as Swedish 'luxury intimate lifestyle company' Lelo (Kirkova, 2013) produce expensive and artistic designs to appeal to consumers alongside other luxury commodities. As a *Times* article enthuses: 'They're

small, they're classy, they feel nice - and they don't look out of place alongside an iPhone in a Burberry handbag' (Ives, 2009). The emphasis on an aspirational designer appearance and luxury feel to the material and design of sex toys has come to influence the market beyond the confines of exclusive Covent Garden boutiques. Ann Summers' recent rebranding has involved an effort to make the stores appear more like an 'intimate boudoir', and affordable sex toys imitate a designer aesthetic, as Bonny Hall from the leading online sex toy retailer Lovehoney states: 'sex toys must look good. Women love sleek designs, and colour-wise we prefer pinks and purples. They have to feel great against the skin too, so materials are crucial' (Benjamin, 2011).

This expansion of the luxury sex shopping market allows sexual consumption to operate as a form of distinction, whereby it is used to produce and reinforce taste, class and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Making tasteful choices allows for a construction of respectability, positioning the self as tasteful and knowledgeable through a distancing from signifiers of lesser, 'tacky', 'slaggy' forms of femininity (Skeggs, 1997, 3). These differentiations of sexual respectability, taste and knowledge have emerged within the field of sexual consumption only within recent years as it has rapidly expanded. Sleek, sophisticated design, quality materials and erotic boutiques promise consumers a respectable distancing from cheap, unattractive and badly made sexual commodities and their associations with sexual ignorance and 'bad' sex. As I have argued, sexual consumption represents one technology of the sexual self through which women construct an intelligible sexuality within postfeminist, neoliberal culture. Sexual knowledge is a valuable commodity within this framework as it must be acquired and then applied for the payoff of 'good sex'. The operation of taste distinctions within the field of sexual consumption effectively confers sexual knowledge and 'good sex' upon those who make desirable and sophisticated consumer choices, and denies these qualities to an othered and denigrated, implicitly working class, femininity.

The question of agency

So far in this chapter I have explored the emergence and construction of the current cultural discourse of female sexuality. I have argued that postfeminism is deeply entwined with neoliberalism and that the logic of the market shapes the emergence of 'choosing subjects', encountering the world as consumers who must learn to make the right choices. Women participate in a range of technologies of the sexual self, including gathering sexual knowledge through consuming sex advice literature and participating in sexual consumption, in order to become intelligible sexual subjects. Sex advice literature conceals conservative and traditional understandings of heterosexual sex within a narrative of entrepreneurship, 'choice', reciprocity and 'good sex' – which has come simply to mean more and better female orgasms. Postfeminist endorsements of sexual consumption set up female orgasm as a multiply sited repertoire that women must become skilled in, relocating what was a politically

charged debate into a privatised realm. This discourse walks a contradictory path between representing sexual commodities as desirable facilitators of better orgasms, and potential usurpers of the primacy of heterosexual intercourse, or 'real' sex, that must be carefully managed and contained. In recent years, taste distinctions have emerged within the field of sexual consumption that allow women to construct respectable sexual selves through the othering of denigrated femininities.

However restrictive these constructions of sexuality may appear, women do negotiate the pleasures and pressures represented by postfeminist sexual culture in a variety of complex and potentially resistant ways. In this final section of the chapter I give an overview of the literature and establish my position in relation to a number of scholars who have looked at women's lived experiences of postfeminist sexual culture.

The technologies of the sexual self by which women are invited to speak and act upon their sexualities and become sexual beings in postfeminist culture are undoubtedly powerful and persuasive. Their power can be explained not only by the manner in which they are appealingly packaged in a neoliberal rhetoric of individual empowerment and choice, but also by the postfeminist 'settlement' by which women are offered notional forms of equality in return for repudiating a collective feminist politics (McRobbie, 2009), by the lack of other visible routes by which to become a sexual subject, and the potential social penalties enacted upon those that do not make the 'right' sexual choices. As I have argued, the values of sexual empowerment and sexual consumption are mobilised by popular postfeminist discourse in ways that frequently reproduce conservative sexual values of heterosexuality, monogamy, essential gender difference and male superiority. Organising a sexual life and creating a sexual self are barely intelligible unless they are done through the consumption of 'sexual resources both material and symbolic' in contemporary culture (Wilson-Kovacs, 2009, 147). As Holland and Attwood have contended, we live in a climate in which 'active' female sexuality holds cultural currency, but with little historical precedent for how this might be manifested, particularly given that feminism is so repudiated (2009). Within such a culture the paraphernalia of consumer culture – lingerie, sex toys, the strip club and pole, the image of the 'sexy' female body – may be the only things that can 'stand in' for 'women's sexuality and give them a means of articulating it' (178).

A number of critics have addressed the complexity of women's lived experiences and negotiations of postfeminist sexual commodity culture. Much of the debate on this topic has centred around the degree of 'agency' (Duits and van Zoonen, 2006 and 2007, Gill, 2007a) or 'empowerment' (Lamb and Peterson, 2012, Gill, 2012) that women, and in particular young women or pre-teen and teenage girls, can be said to have when speaking and performing their sexualities using the language and images available to them. As Lamb and Peterson note, the nature of these academic debates has been to restrict feminist scholars into appearing to speak from polarised and oppositional positions on this issue (2012). So Gill, responding to Duits and van Zoonen's claim that girls and young women should be viewed as 'capable and responsible agents'

(2006, 115), contends that their argument gives 'no sense' of the powerful contextual factors that act as constrictions to girls' choices in postfeminist culture (2007a, 73). In doing so Gill elides the nuance of their argument, failing to acknowledge that they do recognise cultural constraint, as they point out in their reply (Duits and van Zoonen, 2007).

This polarisation is partly to do with the conventions of academic debate, but it also has to do with the fact that ideas of 'agency' and 'empowerment' are not perhaps the most useful categories through which to consider women's response to and experience of sexualised postfeminist culture. Lamb and Peterson attempt to overcome this by arguing that young women are not either simply 'empowered' or 'disempowered' in their sexual choices and practices but instead can be both at the same time or at different times and in different contexts (2012). The key problem with this, and with the agency debate, is that both agency and empowerment are, as I have shown, already deeply commodified values loaded with cultural meanings produced by neoliberal, postfeminist discourse. Such values then cannot meaningfully be disassociated from this powerful cultural context and used as a category of assessment to judge the experiences of girls and women (Gill, 2012; Evans and Riley, 2015). Whilst feminist scholars must remain critical of the discourses that constrain women, our role is not to ascribe categories of empowerment or disempowerment upon their perceived sexual behaviours, particularly when such categories have little meaning outside of the very postfeminist culture that imbues them with value. To do so may be to miss some of the nuance by which women can perform and experience so called 'empowering' sexual practices (Holland and Attwood, 2009).

As Evans and Riley rightly contend, debates on the lived experience of postfeminism have reached a point of 'stagnation' (2015, 17) due to their undue focus on the ascribing or otherwise of empowerment and agency (37). Evans and Riley instead use Foucault's 'technologies of the self', as I have here, suggesting that this represents a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between 'macro' and 'micro' levels of power. The ways we are hailed and incited to work upon and understand ourselves operate within and through the structures of neoliberal capitalism. Technologies of the self, then:

allow us to both identify the limitations of postfeminist consumer culture and to explore how discourses associated with this culture may hold within them the potential for unpredictable subversions, slippages, and resistances. It also allows a theoretical space for critically analysing the sense making of individual women, while locating that sense making within the broader technologies of subjectivity, thus avoiding making women the 'problem' of sexualisation (39)

This approach makes sense: by understanding that women are strongly hailed to 'take up' particular forms of self-work, self-knowledge and self-care through technologies of the self, we move away from the simplifications inherent to questions of 'agency' and,

more importantly, make visible the potential for resistance within those unpredictable processes of 'taking up'. However, in their analysis of two focus groups of women, Evans and Riley do not make space for the exploration of such 'unpredictable subversions'. This is not necessarily a failing of their research, which does not frame the possibility of resistance as its central question. And yet it does suggest that, whilst technologies of the self are a potent framework for understanding how the self is worked upon and made in neoliberalism, the question of precisely how and in what way 'slippages' in this process may occur bears further theoretical attention. As I have established, women's negotiations of sexual consumer culture are central to the enquiry of this thesis. This is reflected in the 'level' to which my research attends – that of the experiential and the everyday. In order to understand the potential for resistance I am shifting attention, then, to the more 'micro' level of everyday life which, I contend, is the space in which the contradictions inherent to negotiating postfeminist and neoliberal sexual culture become visible.

Negotiating postfeminist sexual culture

A number of critics have noted the way in which women understand femininity to be more complex than media and consumer representations suggest (Holland and Attwood, 2009, 177; Boynton, 1999; Budgeon, 2003). In analysing women's experiences of pole dancing fitness classes, Holland and Attwood conclude that such sexualised popular practices can be open to new definitions and identities alongside their existing media narratives, and that women draw upon elements of femininity and 'rework and combine them with other signs... in order to connote new and more positive ways of being a woman' (Holland and Attwood, 2009, 177). This approach calls to mind a de Certeau 'bricolage', by which women 'make-do' with the cultural meanings that are available to them (1998).

In de Certeau's formulation there are countless ways of 'making do' and 'making with' power (1998). These multiple 'transverse tactics' (29) operate within existing structures, adapting and exceeding them in ways that do not fully undermine or resist those structures. The tactics of making do are 'without any illusion' that things will change, making them distinct from strategies of political resistance. There is a duality within de Certeau's theorisation in that subjects operate both within and partly outside of power simultaneously, making his a particularly useful approach for analysing the position of women in postfeminist neoliberal culture. Women can be critical of media representations of femininity, and also aware of and ambivalent about the way in which their own relationship to their bodies is mediated through such representations (Budgeon, 2003, 40). Gill has examined the process of 'decoding' that young women are able to apply to media representations, often with some confidence, but notes that such a critical approach often appears to co-exist with negative self-image, and a frustration with oneself for being influenced by something one knows to be 'fake' (Gill, 2012, 740). Following this observation Gill has cautioned against being overly celebratory of young women's practices of critique or making-do, concerned that this places all the responsibility on young women to be critical about the media and moves

the critique away from problematic media representations (2012). In particular she is sceptical of the calls that have been heard in both popular and academic debate for more in depth 'media training' for young people, arguing that this can fall into the trap of emphasising 'the requirement for girls and young women to work on the self, to perfect the ways they engage with media, to become ever more responsible neoliberal subjects', turning the focus away from problematic media messages (Gill, 2012, 741).

Angela McRobbie has also noted the potential slide into complacency about postfeminist culture that she perceives in an analysis of women's resistant practices. In her early work McRobbie suggested a model of young women's everyday subversive strategies and practices of resistance or 'making do' with postfeminist culture, drawing upon de Certeau (1991). In her recent work she notes that she has become unconvinced of this approach, as it has a tendency to serve a 'cultural populist' agenda where critics defend women's capacity to 'subvert the world of consumer culture', and do not pay sufficient of attention to the dynamics of power and constraint (2009, 2). She asks: 'If this could be done with what capitalism made available, then there seemed no real reason to challenge the principle upon which capitalism was based... What need might there be for a feminist politics at all, if women could simply subvert the meanings of the goods and the values of the dominant cultural world around them?' (3).

Does a reading that gives credit to women's practices of critique, resistance or making-do have to necessarily inhabit the de-politicised position that McRobbie, and to some extent Gill, suggest? It would indeed be wrong to overstate such practices and imply that they will somehow fully throw off the constraints of postfeminist sexual culture either on an individual or collective level. Yet I contend that a recognition of women's everyday micro practices of resistance is in fact an integral part of a feminist critique of postfeminist culture, and not a placatory version of, or antithesis to, that critique. For women's ability to decode, resist, make-do or express ambivalence precisely demonstrates the contradictions within the sexual subjectivity offered by postfeminism. They suggest that contemporary femininity is a profoundly 'dilemmatic' space, one that is fraught with contradiction and is often impossible to inhabit (Griffin et al., 2013), such that there will almost always be some lack of cohesion in the lived experience and practice and performance of postfeminist subjectivity. Butler has shown that any attempt to construct a 'coherent sexual identity' within a gender binary is 'bound to fail' (1999, 38). If, as Foucault contends, power is not a quality that is held by individuals but is a system or network of relations, then resistance is contained within the structure of that very network (1978, 95). There are a 'plurality of resistances' inscribed within the field of power as its 'irreducible opposite' (96). Such resistances may go on to form the basis of larger social movements, but more often they will be 'mobile and transitory', shifting about, fracturing and (re)forming the bodies and minds of individuals and groups (96).

These mobile moments of resistance through which women negotiate sexual consumer culture form a key component of the following chapters. As should be clear

from the analysis above, sex shopping occupies a shifting and complex position in contemporary postfeminist culture, as it balances discourses of 'empowered', independent, active female sexuality with neo-conventional normative discourses of monogamy and heterosexuality. The participants in this research take part in postfeminist sexual consumer culture in ways that combine feelings and processes of pleasure, accommodation, anxiety, pressure, ambivalence and critique in multiple contradictory ways that are integral to a feminist critique of that culture. My analysis involves not ascribing values of agency or lack of agency onto women but instead working from the 'ground up' in order to understand how participants might construct sexual identities and pleasurable sexual lives in and through a 'dilemmatic' consumer construction of female sexuality (Gill, 2012, 743). By making this 'paradox' itself the focus of the thesis, I can support women's accounts whilst at the same time engaging critically with the structures and discourses that position them (Gill, 2007a, 78). That women have little option but to articulate and perform the sexual self through neoliberal feminist discourse, yet at the same time rarely do so without some degree of negotiation and contradiction is key in demonstrating the costs, harms and failures of postfeminist sexual culture, acknowledging women's resourcefulness in negotiating that culture, and emphasising the need for a collective feminist politics.

Constructing (Sexual) Knowledge: Research Methodology

This chapter aims to make transparent the thesis methodology, detailing the practical, ethical and methodological choices and challenges that were faced over the course of doing the research. This qualitative research project involved producing and constructing knowledge about sexual consumption between myself and the research participants through both talking about and doing sex shopping. The first section of the chapter outlines the decisions made regarding sampling, reflects on the social distribution of participants, outlines the key ethical concerns, and considers the various implications of the two methods employed: one-to-one semi-structured interviews and accompanied sex shopping trips. In the second section I return to some of the themes explored in the previous chapter, analysing how discourses and values of sexual knowledge, 'openness', confidence and experience were negotiated by myself and the participants in a range of complex ways. Like the women who participated in the research, I am embedded within postfeminist sexual consumer culture whilst at the same time, as a researcher, taking a critical approach to that culture. I explore the implications that my positionality has had on the kind of knowledge about sexual consumer culture produced through this research.

Doing feminist research

Maynard traces the way in which 1970s feminist scholarship criticised the 'objective' positivist gaze of sociology and advocated qualitative methods, and in depth semi structured or unstructured interviewing in particular, as being more appropriate than quantitative methods 'to the kinds of knowledge that feminists wished to make available, as well as being more in keeping with the politics of doing research as a feminist' (1994, 11). Ann Oakley employs the idea of 'sisterhood' to claim that interviews between women are reciprocal and non-hierarchical (1981). This essentialist view has since been widely challenged by critics who emphasise that the interview space is not free from the many inequalities between women, and that power negotiations will take place between researcher and researched (Maynard, 1994). Cotterill asserts that we cannot simply assume that the researcher has more power in the research encounter, arguing that the interaction between two women in an interview setting is individual and unpredictable, with feelings of control and vulnerability often shifting between participants in the course of the interview itself (1992). However, the qualitative interview method remains valuable for feminist research as its focus is on exploring experience from women's perspective, emphasising the importance of 'listening to, recording and understanding women's own descriptions and accounts' (Maynard, 1994, 12). Respecting women's accounts and experiences of sexual consumer culture from their own perspective is a central principle underpinning this research.

An emphasis on women's experiences should not lead us to infer that there is such a thing as 'raw' experience, as 'people's accounts of their lives are culturally embedded'

and the researcher is also involved in the framing and co-production of any account given (23). I do not understand my research data to represent revelations of the participants' 'true' feelings about sex shopping: like all knowledge the accounts produced in interview are constructed and 'not "out there" for the researcher to "capture"' (Tsaousi, 2011, 111). As social interactions the interviews and shopping trips are fluid co-constructions of 'situated knowledge' between myself as researcher and the participant (Rose, 1997). Gray points to the reflexive turn in qualitative research to recognising that the researcher is part of the world they are researching, not an impartial observer of it (2003). Stanley and Wise argue that 'the researcher is also a subject in her research and that her personal history is part of the process through which 'understanding' and 'conclusions' are reached' (16). As I reflect later in this chapter, I, like my participants, am embedded within sexual consumer culture, and my personal relationship to sex shopping has shaped my motivations, choices and experience in doing this research. This shared experience was particularly important in the context of feminist research that must be mindful of 'power relations and how to avoid constructing the researched as object or other' (Skeggs, 1997, 23).

As a feminist researcher it is my obligation not only to represent and respect women's accounts and experiences but also to analyse them by making connections that may not be visible from the 'experiential level alone' (Maynard, 1994, 23). Although I am positioned within sexual consumer culture I must also acknowledge that, as the researcher who ultimately interprets the data I collect, I am located differently to my respondents. As the one who has the power to represent and interpret the interview, it is my responsibility to 'place the respondent's views in a wider context whilst refraining from undermining or denying the respondents' ability to speak about and define themselves and their lives' (Cotterill, 1992, 604). In my analysis I take a feminist position that Rosalind Gill calls 'critical respect' towards the meanings and explanations of women's lives produced in interviews (2007). Critical respect involves recognising and supporting women's accounts, but not doing so 'mutely'. Gill argues that the researcher must also critically question the wider power structures which position both herself and her participants, contending that not to do so would in fact be *disrespectful*. This chapter explores how both researcher and participant are positioned in relation to the postfeminist construction of sexuality and sexual consumption.

Aims and sampling

The aim of the project was to find out how women in the UK talk, feel, think about and experience sexual consumer culture in their everyday lives. As such, the project was intended to be qualitative from the outset; and one-to-one semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method largely because, as I have noted, they are particularly useful for constructing in depth accounts. I interviewed a total of twenty two women from a range of UK locations and backgrounds. As sex shopping is also constructed through embodied and spatially situated practices I felt it was important that I gather information about *doing* sex shopping, as well as talking about it, and the

interviews were supplemented with accompanied shopping trips. As this required a greater time commitment from participants I made this element of the research optional for interviewees; a total of seven interview participants chose to take part in a shopping trip. I discuss the experience and implications of these two methods further below.

Participants were recruited through a number of methods. I began with 'snowball' sampling using offline and online networks to seek participants (Noy, 2008). I had flyers printed giving some basic information about the research and my contact details, and asked friends and acquaintances to pass them on to their networks, making use of my existing friendship circles, fellow students and a Brighton book group. I also used Twitter and Facebook to distribute an online link to information about the study. This link was forwarded or re-tweeted by other members of my online networks. I found Twitter to be particularly useful for this as there was some interest in my research from existing online networks that are already well established such as feminist, 'kink', erotica and sex blogging communities. As a result, some of my participants were women I had already met socially, others were friends, connections or acquaintances of people I know either offline or online, and others were members of online networks to which my call for participants was circulated.

As Kath Browne has argued, snowball recruitment can mean that the researcher is more likely to be contacted and trusted by the potential participant, and that interview conversation may be more open and 'natural' as a result (2005). I often found that a rapport was easily established, particularly with those women I had met previously in a social setting. The limitation of snowball sampling, as Browne notes, is that it inevitably leads to a degree of 'sameness' between the cultural identity of the researcher and that of the interviewees, whether in terms of markers of identity such as age, sexuality, class, race or ethnicity, or simply in terms of geographical location (2005). Indeed, the majority of my participants at the outset were in their twenties, white, heterosexual, middle class and living in the South of England. I adjusted to a more 'purposive' snowball sampling method as fieldwork progressed, actively targeting particular groups of women that were not yet represented in the sample (Argury and Quandt, 1998). I requested that Twitter accounts for well-known sex shop brands, and online networks for lesbian and transwomen 'retweet' a call for participation; London sex shop Sh! Women's Erotic Emporium kindly agreed to distribute flyers for in store and in customers' bags; and I asked friends to target particular acquaintances, such as women who live in the North of England, when using the snowball method. This allowed me to diversify my sample significantly.

Participants

The call for participants was intended to be inclusive, seeking women who have 'any experience or opinion' about shops selling erotic products such as lingerie and sex

toys. As one might expect, the majority of participants had a moderate amount of experience of shopping in sex shops and using the products they sell, with some women being either very regular sex shoppers or infrequent sex shoppers; only one woman, Penny, had never visited a sex shop before. The flyer asked for participants who identify as women, but the final sample is largely cisgendered¹¹, with Rayan and Margaret both identifying as genderqueer and preferring she/her pronouns. At the start of the interview I gave participants a short form to fill out detailing basic personal information and asking them to choose a pseudonym. Although I asked questions about identity I chose not to give standardised multiple choice answers so that participants could respond (or not respond) in their own words. The responses from some of the questions are shown on the table below:

Pseudonym	Age	Location	Sexuality	Ethnicity
Agatha	20s	Manchester	Heterosexual	White
Alice	20s	Coventry	Lesbian	White
Beatrice	20s	Brighton	Queer/Bi	White
Beth	30s	Newcastle	Queer	White
Claire	20s	Brighton	Bisexual	White
Clara	40s	Hove	Heterosexual	White
Florence	20s	Brighton	Heterosexual	White
Jade	20s	Southampton	Lesbian	White
Jane	30s	Hampshire	Heterosexual (lean toward BDSM)	White
Jennifer	50s	York	Heterosexual / Bisexual	White
Jillian	20s	Essex	Queer/fluid	White
Karin	30s	Leeds	Heterosexual	White
Katie	30s	London	Heterosexual	White
Margaret	20s	Brighton	Bisexual/ Queer/ Pansexual	White
Ness	20s	Norfolk	Bisexual poly	White
Penny	30s	Brighton	Heterosexual	White
Rayan	20s	Cheshire	Genderqueer	White/Asian
Sam	20s	London	Bisexual	White
Shelly	50s	London	Mainly straight	White
Simone	40s	Brighton	Heterosexual	[Did not answer]
Tallulah	30s	Brighton	Heterosexual	African British
Trudy	20s	Brighton	I have sex with people of all genders / Polyamorous	White

¹¹ Cisgender describes those who identify as the gender they were assigned at birth.

With a small number of exceptions, the sample is youthful – with the majority in their twenties and thirties – white, and living in the South of England. These markers of ‘sameness’ between myself and the participants are due to both the nature of the snowball method, and the time and financial restrictions of my self-funded PhD. I was able to take one funded trip to Manchester, York and Leeds where I interviewed Agatha, Jennifer and Karin respectively, and all other participants met me in either Brighton or London. As the table above shows, sexuality was one area in which a greater degree of diversity was represented: the sample is made up of nine heterosexual women, two lesbian women, two bisexual women, and nine women who define their sexuality across or outside of these categories. As I have noted, my earliest respondents were all heterosexual, and my subsequent purposive sampling techniques were very successful with regard to sexuality. I also suspect that there may be an element of crossover between women who describe their sexualities in a way that refuses straightforward categorisation, and women who have experience with discussing and are willing to discuss their sexual consumption and sexual behaviour with an acquaintance or near stranger.

I also used the form to gather information about class, asking participants to state their occupation and posing the question: ‘how would you describe your class identity?’ The responses are detailed below as they were written on the form.

Pseudonym	Occupation	Class identity
Agatha	Administration	Working / lower middle
Alice	Bookseller	Middle
Beatrice	Student / sales assistant	Middle
Beth	Technical support	Middle
Claire	Costumier	Somewhere between working and middle class - ?
Clara	Education	Middle
Florence	Education	Middle
Jade	Student	Middle
Jane	Writer/blogger/editor	Middle
Jennifer	Secretary and romance writer	Middle
Jillian	Writer	Middle
Karin	Administrator	Middle
Katie	Business owner	Middle
Margaret	Unemployed / student / volunteer	I’m middle class. That’s a fairly recent thing in my families (previous generations were working class)
Ness	Sex toy consultant	Poor but people see me as middle class but I’m actually lower class.
Penny	Tutor and PhD student	Middle

Rayan	Student	Middle class / underclass - disabled
Sam	Tutor and PhD student	Born working class but ascended to lower middle through education... I guess!
Shelly	Nurse Manager	Middle
Simone	Student	Working class
Tallulah	Self-employed fitness instructor	Working class
Trudy	Book editor	Not sure

Given my own middle class position, the existing social networks I exploited to recruit participants have meant that the majority of the participants, thirteen in total, described themselves as middle class. However, a number of those women made some form of comment whilst filling in the form indicating that they didn't like the question or found it hard to answer. Simone and Tallulah describe themselves as working class, Trudy was not sure, and the remaining six respondents gave a longer answer indicating that they see themselves as somewhere in-between, reluctant to fully identify as either working or middle class whether due to their finances, family background or, in Rayan's case, disability. As Skeggs has shown, class is an 'emotional politics' for women in particular, as working class women have been historically and culturally linked to denigrated 'dirty' and 'dangerous' femininities (1997, 74). Skeggs finds that class identifications are less often characterised by straightforward recognition and more often by disavowal, denial and dis-identification. Class forms a 'structuring absence' in women's accounts of their identities, instead operating in a 'dialogic manner' through the measuring of the self against others and in the construction of subjectivities through 'class informed performances' (74-75). As I argue throughout the thesis, choices of sexual consumer products are used by women as a way to construct and perform respectable and tasteful sexual identities and to othered denigrated 'tacky' or 'slutty' forms of femininity. Naming class identity remains difficult if not impossible for some, but class is absolutely central to any creation of sexual subjectivity.

Ethics

The project was granted ethical approval by the Cluster-based Research Ethics Committee (C-REC) for Social Sciences and Arts at Sussex in July 2012. When potential participants contacted me I ensured that they were able to give informed consent by replying with an information sheet giving details of the aims of the project, what to expect when taking part, and how to withdraw at any stage should they wish. A small number of women who had contacted me never replied following this information, but those that did were asked to indicate whether they wished to take part in just the interview, or the interview and shopping trip, and we made arrangements to meet that were convenient for them. Upon meeting me participants reviewed the

information again and were able to ask any questions before signing the consent form. Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and subsequently transcribed. I took detailed field notes as soon as possible following the interviews and shopping trips. To protect anonymity all data was subsequently stored on a password protected hard drive, participants are referred to by their chosen pseudonyms in all notes, transcripts and file names and signed consent forms have been stored separately. The personal information given on the forms described above, along with the locations and names of the sex shops participants spoke about and/or visited with me have not been anonymised. Information about sex shops has been retained because I contend that location and store identity is highly relevant to the experience of sex shopping in the UK. Participants were made aware that names of locations and shops would not be anonymised before consenting to take part.

The sexual, intimate nature of sex shopping as a topic meant that the project was classed as 'high risk' for the discussion of sensitive subjects. I was initially wary of the way in which the ethical review process necessitated a high risk classification. I was concerned not to reproduce the topic of active or auto-erotic female sexuality as 'risky' or 'sensitive'. A central contention of my thesis is that the consumption of sex toys and lingerie for women has become an acceptable and appropriately feminine shopping activity which can legitimately take place on the British high street. Indeed, as I explored in the previous chapter, intimate entrepreneurship and technologies of the sexual self, including sexual consumption, have become requirements within postfeminist constructions of feminine sexuality, exerting their own anxieties and pressures upon women. I suspected that many women would already have a degree of familiarity with talking about themselves as active sexual consumers.

However, despite these reservations I had to acknowledge that the interview and accompanied shopping would primarily centre on the discussion of topics that can have the potential to be uncomfortable or embarrassing to talk about. As Frith argues, talking about sex can be 'difficult and taboo' for some individuals, and has the potential to be 'excruciating' with a sex researcher; meaning that the creation of a 'comfortable environment in which participants feel relaxed enough to provide full and frank accounts of their sexual activities' is the 'sex researcher's priority' (2000, 281). The 'high risk' classification was useful then, in that it necessitated a consideration of how the research design could safeguard against the risk of participants' discomfort.

Snowball recruitment meant that the call for participation reached the participant through a shared network or acquaintance, framing the research through a mutual relationship that already involves a degree of trust. That participants were self-selecting meant that they willingly identified themselves as women who have experience of, or are willing to talk about sex shopping at the outset. The information sheet stated that the participant would not be expected to discuss anything that they do not wish to. I endeavoured to acknowledge the sensitivity of the topic and protect participants from discomfort through my interview technique. My opening questions focused on 'safer' elements of the topic, such as the participant's opinion of different

shops, shop layouts and products, and their experiences of browsing and shopping in the stores or online. The process of moving on to more personal topics such as the sexual use of the products was gradual and responsive to the participant. With almost all participants this was fairly seamless, as I was able to connect 'safe' topics to more intimate ones through follow up questions.

I also took a reflexive, or 'dialogic' approach in interviews, where the researcher is willing to share information about herself and highlights points of shared experience or opinion (Etherington, 2004). For example, when talking to Jane about the price of sex toys:

J: I used to get quite carried away with buying stuff and then thinking, hmm, did I really need that? Yeah, over time it does tend to accumulate what you spent.

R: Yeah I know! I have a similar thing, yeah. What's the most you've ever spent then?

Or when Clara was describing her Rabbit sex toy:

C: I quite liked the ears because they were good when they vibrated. You know the one I had had beads in it as well, that sort of rotated around.

R: Oh yeah, I think I had the same one, yeah. Ok, alright so have you had kind of smaller things as well?

As Etherington notes, the researcher must be cautious with this technique lest they allow their own voice to dominate (2004). I often held back where I could have commented in more detail had I been having an 'ordinary' conversation with an interviewee. Conversation before and after the interview, and shopping trips in particular, often involved a more equal dialogue in which I would share my preferences for shops and products in greater detail. That I was willing to share something of myself as a sexual consumer helped to establish a rapport and a sense of shared experience between myself and the interviewee.

Whilst it was important to take these precautions to protect participants from embarrassment I did find that far from finding this an uncomfortable topic, many participants appeared to relish the opportunity to talk about sex in an interview. A number of interviewees made comments such as 'it's been very interesting talking about it' (Florence), 'I feel quite good... it's good to get to talk to someone about it' (Agatha), 'I feel like I've been able to be really frank' (Penny). Outside of the field work talking to friends and other researchers about doing this project has on a number of occasions involved spontaneous and voluntary disclosures about experiences with shopping in sex shops or using sexual products. Both Denes (2013) and Comella and Sender (2013) propose that this is a common experience among sex researchers, suggesting that there are a lack of opportunities to discuss sexuality and sexual practice in everyday life and that meeting a sex researcher whether in a social or

research context can provide an enjoyable 'opportunity to discuss an otherwise taboo topic' (Denes, 2013, 2497).

In practice, there was only one occasion on which I felt aware that I had failed to protect a participant from discomfort or embarrassment. Jade is a PhD student who contacted me after seeing my request for participants on Twitter. Her research is in a different field, but also involves interviewing participants, and her email explained that she wanted to help me in my project as she knew how hard finding participants could be. My notes on our meeting recall that I sensed Jade was uncomfortable from the outset, and that I tried to put her more at ease by moving location from our initial overcrowded meeting place to a quieter coffee shop, and making small talk with her for longer than I usually would before starting the interview. This was not successful:

I started the interview with my usual question about her experiences of sex shopping. Jade was visibly uncomfortable, and this continued to varying degrees throughout. She clearly found it hard to express herself about sex and sexual topics. She was almost visibly squirming and not very expressive at points, particularly when I asked her a question about sexual experiences. On occasion she totally shut down in response to a question, trailing off and saying she didn't know. I tried to 'back off', asking questions mainly about the shops and products and not about how she used them so much... I found the interview uncomfortable. I felt I was pushing Jade to speak about things that she didn't want to speak about, and that I was making her physically and emotionally uncomfortable through my questioning, which did not make me feel happy with myself... After I turned the recorder off Jade apologised for being so awkward and said she had known she would be. I reassured her it was fine and it's hardly a natural situation talking to a stranger about this topic.

As the extract shows, this was not a particularly pleasant experience for Jade or myself. My attempts to establish a rapport before the interview and 'back off' with my questions during our conversation did not significantly ease her discomfort, leading to feelings of guilt and confusion for me. In the final part of my interview notes I questioned why she chose to take part and wondered if she had known how hard she would find discussing this topic with me. I argue in the second half of this chapter that participants' motivations for taking part in the research were more complex than I had anticipated, and often appeared to me to be connected to their perception of their sexual selves as knowledgeable and 'open'. Although this may have been the case with Jade, and this is a question I return to, it is also true that I cannot really know why she opted to take part in the research, nor fully understand why she (and I) found the interview so difficult. This experience serves to demonstrate to me that, despite careful planning and efforts, the researcher cannot fully control the research environment, which is after all a two way interaction. We cannot assume that everything about the research encounter will be transparently understandable or 'knowable' to the researcher (Rose, 1997).

Interviewing 'in place'

Another element of the research that often felt out of my control was the location of the interview. As Sin argues, the space in which the research encounter takes place acts 'as a structured and structuring force on the construction of... identities and knowledge' (2003, 306). This applies to the choosing of an interview location by the participant and/or researcher, which can demonstrate how both parties wish to present themselves, and the way that place shapes the terms of the conversation in ways that, as Sin notes, can shift even over the course of the interview itself. I opted to ask the participant to choose a location which was most convenient and comfortable for them, suggesting I would be happy to travel to their home or a public place of their choice. In addition, participants living in Brighton whom I had previously met socially were also offered the option of interviewing at my home in Brighton. Whilst only two interviewees asked me to come to their homes, all seven that I invited to interview at my home chose that option.

Unsurprisingly, the interviews in my home with those women I had already socialised with were by far the most comfortable and 'natural' feeling from both my perspective and my perception of the interviewee, as we were in a comfortable and private environment and our relationship was already built upon some familiarity and trust. The interviews in participants' homes, although we had not met before, involved a similar easy rapport. As Sin notes, a participant's willingness and comfort in presenting their home to the gaze of a researcher involves a certain degree of social and cultural capital (2003). Both Jennifer and Sam used the opportunity of my being in their home to reveal something of their sexual selves. After the interview Sam selected books and DVDs about sex and pornography from her well stocked shelves, asking me if I had seen or read them and recommending that I did. Jennifer invited me for lunch, ensured that I admired her professional nude self-portraits displayed in the bathroom, and, most memorably, revealed a large tray containing a sample of her sizable sex toy collection halfway through the recorded interview and gave me a detailed explanation of each item. Both women used the interview space in their home to display their knowledge, confidence and experience with sex and sex shopping.

Of the remaining thirteen women, ten were interviewed in a town centre coffee shop and three in a town centre bar in the daytime or early evening. In around half these cases the participant suggested the location, and the rest indicated a coffee shop or bar would be preferable but left the final choice of location up to me. I found this choice difficult as I often had to rely on internet searches to find information about areas of cities that were unfamiliar to me. Even when I knew the area, as in Brighton, the choice of location could yield unpredictable results either on arrival or over the course of the interview. With Rayan and Jade, we relocated from the initial meeting place as it was overcrowded; with Ness the loud music in the busy coffee shop provided a useful cover for our conversation but was less advantageous when transcribing; with Clara I was very aware of the families with younger children who were seated near us in the cafe; and with Agatha a couple sat on the other end of our table, interrupting the interview

as we had to move our coats and bags. The proximity of other people in these public places was a particular issue given the topic of sex and sex shopping.

Talking sex

In the interviews that were recorded in public places the interviewee and I often use euphemistic rather than direct language to talk about sexual acts and products. For example, Agatha was describing how a friend asked for her help in choosing a vibrator:

A: When my friend was trying to figure out what she wanted to buy... she was like I'm going to buy one, and she sent me loads of links and stuff and she was like I'm going to do it...

R: And what kind of things was she sending you?

A: It was links, kind of just standard like, it wasn't anything particularly crazy...

R: Was she, so did you sort have any opinions about them?

A: Um, the not the giant ones generally, I was like, I don't know what you like but that looks a bit too big [laughs]. Um, and she was like I'm going to get this one and I was like yeah that looks like a suitable size.

This part of our conversation took place after a couple had sat fairly close to us in the crowded bar, and it is clear to me that both Agatha and I were choosing language that did not refer to what we were discussing directly. Indeed, when participants did use direct language I was often left feeling uncomfortable and conscious of surrounding people, such as in the following exchange when I asked Jillian if she thought the appearance of sex toys was an important factor:

J: Um, you don't think of the aesthetically pleasing when you're fucking yourself with a dildo, so [laughs]

R: [laughs] Right ok, so you're more thinking about the sensation then – and then when you're buying it, are you thinking more about how it looks and stuff like that?

J: Yeah.

Jillian's explicit description in a public place provoked feelings of awkwardness and self-consciousness for me. In my response I do not mirror her use of direct terms and instead return to a more euphemistic description. As Robinson et al. note, the mirroring of participant's vocabulary by a researcher can help establish a feeling of shared understanding and trust (2007); Jillian and I were at odds in our use of language here. There was not a particularly easy rapport in this interview; my laughter in response to her comment was of embarrassment and nervousness. Delph-Janiurek argues that sameness and difference is constructed between researcher and researched in their

talk and interaction (2001). He highlights laughter as a particularly important marker of social similarity or disparity, demonstrating that awkward or embarrassed laughter can distance researcher and researched and cause barriers to be raised. In contrast, the extract from my interview with Florence, a woman whom I already knew and I interviewed at my home, shows the way that shared language and laughter can work together to build rapport and trust:

F: Like, I don't think 'oo there's a sex toy in my cabinet I've got to use it', I tend to think 'oh I'm feeling pretty randy, there's a sex toy in my cabinet, I might use it'

R: Yeah yeah, so is that when it would come out then, if you were feeling particularly like – randy? [laughs]

F: [laughs] I couldn't think of a better word! Riled up!

R: [laughs] Yeah!

F: Yeah, I think so, that's when it would come out.

Florence's use of the word 'randy' is mirrored in my follow up question, and my pause, questioning tone and laughter produce a feeling of sameness as we laugh together at the rather outdated and comic slang term. Our laughter and Florence's comment that she 'couldn't think of a better word' also reflects the lack of language to adequately describe female arousal. Both Frith (2000) and Robinson et al. (2007) have noted the difficulties of finding the language to talk about sex and sexuality with women in interview. There is a paucity of terms for sexual acts and experiences, so that women often resort to euphemistic or slang words that are 'inadequate for describing the emotional context of their experiences' (Robinson et al., 2007, 184). This difficulty in expressing the female (hetero)sexual self is not a mere 'communication' problem but a reflection of the contradictory and inadequate discourse of female sexuality (ibid.). The various negotiations of sex talk between myself and Agatha, Jillian and Florence detailed above represent the sometimes fraught nature of finding the right language to talk about sex between women.

Whilst at times I found talking about sex and sex shopping difficult with Jillian in the interview, our subsequent shopping trip was far easier, as my field notes recall:

The shopping trip was better, we both seemed more relaxed. Perhaps this was because the recorder was off, or because we had a chance to have a more everyday sort of chat whilst walking to the shops from the café.

Accompanied shopping trips allowed for a different kind of talk, one that was 'on the move' as the participant and I walked to and around the shops, and one that was placed within the context of a purposeful excursion and a mutual interaction.

Accompanied sex shopping

The decision to supplement interviews with accompanied sex shopping trips originated in a desire to 'do' sex shopping as part of the research. One of the key concerns of the thesis is the way in which the geographies of sex shops in terms of both location and layout structure the potential meanings and performances of sexual consumption. As someone who has been shopping in sex shops since my late teens, much of my knowledge of and relationship to the practice is built upon my experience of being in these shops either alone or with female friends. Accompanied shopping trips with my participants were modelled on these kinds of everyday experiences, as the information sheet for respondents explained: 'Think of it like an ordinary shopping trip: so we might point out, pick up, discuss or try on various products; talk to the shop staff; discuss the product range, pricing, layout or general identity of the store(s); possibly make a purchase, and so on'. The accompanied shopping trip was an optional element of taking part in the research as I was aware that there was a more significant time and travel commitment involved, and that some women might find visiting a sex shop embarrassing or uncomfortable, particularly with someone they do not know well. That only seven women opted to take part is indicative of these limitations.

The accompanied shopping method has been sparingly deployed in the field of retail geography. It features in the research by Chua in Singapore (1992) and in the large scale study by Jackson et al. (1998) on London shopping centres. In the London study accompanied shopping was used as one of a wide range of research methods, including surveys, focus groups and ethnography with the residents of a specific street. 'Participant observation' of the street's residents took place both in their homes and through the researcher 'going shopping with people' (Jackson et al., 1998, 65). Miller's (1998) analysis of the same London data shows that, as with Chua's study (1992), a male researcher accompanied a female shopper and observed her shopping practices whilst not himself becoming particularly involved beyond talking to and observing the shopper. Rachel Colls' thesis on UK women shopping for clothes provides a closer template for my approach (2003). She explains that for the purpose of her research 'going shopping does not just mean following women into clothes shops and watching what they do as they look at, touch, try on and purchase clothing but also involves showing each other clothes, trying on clothes in adjacent cubicles, chatting, having cup(s) of tea and stopping for lunch' (70). This more informal, mutual and sociable form of shopping trip, built upon the everyday interaction of women shopping together, also describes my approach in this thesis. Walking, talking and browsing through shops together structured a different kind of interaction than that of the interview.

Jon Anderson has described how 'talking whilst walking' was a key part of his research with radical environmentalists (2004). Anderson's experience demonstrates that doing qualitative research whilst walking has two benefits; first, walking side by side can shift the interrogative question and answer dynamics of the face to face interview, facilitating 'unstructured dialogue' and enhancing the construction of collaborative knowledge (259). As I have argued, shopping trips were more collaborative and dialogic than interviews. I was taking part in the shopping and not simply observing,

so I often expressed my own sex shopping experiences and preferences, asked questions of the staff in shops, and on two occasions made a purchase. Second, Anderson argues that walking through a space can construct knowledge about that space that cannot be accessed through talking: it can prompt memories and knowledge to be recalled, and make researchers aware of the often unspoken 'routines, habits and practices' through which participants interact with the space (257). On shopping trips our talk took cues from the space and objects around us, and not from a list of topics or questions. Being in the space also showed me participants' unspoken embodied, tactile relationship to sex shopping and sexual consumer objects; such as when Jillian encouraged me to feel the buzz of different vibrators by pressing them to my nose, and Karin demonstrated the stretch and feel of different lingerie materials in Ann Summers.

These trips represented a shopping experience that neither myself nor the participant would otherwise have had. In most cases this involved the participant showing me around a favourite store that I had not visited before, providing them an opportunity to share their knowledge and experience. Jillian was the first woman to accompany me on a shopping trip:

In Harmony the experience of shopping with Jillian was very much one of being 'shown around' the shop. She has clearly visited the store a number of times and was familiar with the layout. As we turned to each new section/display she would introduce its contents to me and point out particular items. She also frequently name-dropped brands, companies or designers and showed her familiarity with different materials and designs.

Similarly, Jane took me to her favourite sex shop, the Coco de Mer boutique in Covent Garden. Her particular area of interest is implements for spanking, with which I was less familiar, and a number of moments on our trip involved her explaining these implements to me and demonstrating how they would feel by using them on her hand or my hand:

As soon as she got to a display she would pick up items and turn them over in her hands, slapping her other hand with any implement to get an idea of the feel of it... There was a small table display of wooden spanking toys... She showed me that the large dark wood paddle would actually be less painful for her than the smaller ones and I was surprised.

By contrast my shopping trip with Penny, which was the final one of my fieldwork, was her first ever experience of shopping in a sex shop. We had met previously at a social event and, as she explained in the interview, she chose to take part in the research because her impression of me as an 'intelligent woman' made her reconsider her ideas about sex shopping, an activity she had previously though was only for 'male perverts'. She explained that she wouldn't have wanted to visit a sex shop without me. Shopping with Penny was different to those encounters described above. In this case she saw

me as the 'expert' and wanted someone to show her what sex shops were like and advise her on what to purchase. The first shop we visited was Ann Summers, where I felt Penny perceived me as more knowledgeable even than the staff member who advised us:

The assistant asked if there was anything either of us were interested in and Penny and the assistant spoke about anal toys. The assistant recommended a few things but I disliked all of them for various reasons. For example she showed a butt plug that I know does not have a wide enough base, and an anal play kit that contained jelly and hard plastic toys that I thought were tacky and unsafe... I probably made my opinion felt through small comments or questions and lack of enthusiasm – mentioning that I thought we should see the selection in the other shop first which Penny agreed with and we thanked the assistant. I wonder if Penny might have purchased some of the items the assistant recommended had I not been there, but my 'expertise' superseded that of the shop assistant for her.

There is a clear contrast then between my first shopping trip with Jillian, where I noted with surprise her extensive knowledge of materials and designs; to my last with Penny, where I had become the 'expert', judging the adequacy of the products according to a similar criteria. These women came to the study with different priorities and levels of experience, but shopping is a two-way collaboration, and these differing encounters are also related to the way in which my own relationship to sex shopping shifted significantly over the course of the fieldwork.

Sex shopper / researcher

As I have noted, feminist work on social research methods has highlighted the importance of researcher reflexivity. There is no such thing as a disinterested or detached knower; doing research necessitates reflection on the researcher's standpoint and how it has shaped the knowledge produced. However, as Rose contends, accounts of reflexivity must take care to avoid producing an idea of a fixed self that can be transparently and unproblematically revealed to the introspective gaze of the reflexive researcher (1997). Recent work on methodologies has argued that 'reflexivity' often tends to focus on the researcher's thinking and identity in relation to the research, and argues that alongside these aspects the sometimes more uncertain and ambivalent impact of the researcher's emotions (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009) and embodiment (Throsby and Gimlin, 2010; Colls, 2003) needs to be considered. The lived experience of doing research is multifaceted and messy, an ongoing process of thoughts, actions, feelings and sensations that cannot be easily and neatly packaged into a written account. Whilst it is essential that I consider my position within the research I must at the same time acknowledge that some silences and unknowns will inevitably remain (Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010).

I first started visiting sex shops in my late teens either alone or with friends, and have been a regular visitor ever since, consuming a range of products as finances have allowed. My position as a sexual consumer means that I am very much part of the culture I am studying. Gill has noted that too often in academic writing the researcher's identity is 'acknowledged' whilst its significance remains unconsidered (2010, 5). What are the implications of being immersed within the culture one is researching and critiquing? Throsby and Gimlin describe how their research on women's body image and the ideal of 'thinness' has been complicated by the fact that both have throughout the research pursued the desire to 'be thin' in a number of ways (2010). They contend that this seeming contradiction enhances their feminist methodology: 'acknowledging that researchers' own bodily wishes and practices are shaped by the same processes that mould that of our respondents, better enables us to walk the fine, but crucial, line of remaining respectful of participants' desires whilst simultaneously criticising ideologies pertaining to bodily size' (Throsby and Gimlin, 2010, 106).

This approach fits within the analytical framework of 'critical respect' (Gill, 2007), whereby women's accounts and experiences are heard and respected whilst at the same time being placed within the wider context of power structures and regimes; here the feminist critique is directed at such structures and not the individual women who made choices constrained within them. As I have noted, a central motivation in researching this topic was to place the complex voices and experiences of female consumers alongside the critiques of the limited representations available within sex shopping culture (Attwood, 2005; Smith, 2007). Although an analysis of sex shops and products would largely be right to point out that sexual consumer culture is deeply limited by narrow gender representations and a normative reproduction of female sexuality, as a consumer I felt that the many pleasures of sex shopping were somehow not accounted for by an analysis and critique from the 'outside'.

Although being part of the culture one is studying does enable a respectful yet critical feminist approach, writing about this position does not come without difficulty. There is a fine line to tread here; I don't want to risk losing focus on, or 'upstaging', the voices of my participants (Throsby and Gimlin, 107) and without the protection of anonymity that my participants possess I am also cautious about revealing too much about an intimate topic. As Cupples argues, researchers are often, perhaps understandably, reluctant to acknowledge the relationship between their own sexuality and their research (2002). She contends however that paying attention to this relationship can yield powerful insights and represents one way of 'understanding the multiple repositionings of self that take place during the course of fieldwork and a way of acknowledging our positionality as embodied researchers' (383).

Indeed, my position in relation to the research was and is a shifting one, as my own identity as a sexual consumer changed significantly across the fieldwork period. Doing this research involved an almost daily engagement with sex shopping, whether that was talking or thinking about sex shops and products, visiting online retailers, reading blogs and Twitter updates to find out about the latest developments and connect with

networks, and visiting the shops themselves either alone or on accompanied shopping trips with participants. Perhaps inevitably, by the end of the fieldwork my personal collection of products had grown significantly and played a more central role in my sex life. I had moved from being a semi-regular sex shopper to a very regular one. Moreover, I became a discerning and knowledgeable consumer, able to reel off an exhaustive list of brand names and products, familiar with the minute differences between different editions of sex toys, and disdainful of products deemed by online reviews to be badly designed or unsafe. Having such knowledge, and deploying it by making the 'right' purchase, became central to my experience and enjoyment of sexual consumption. My experience of sex shopping with friends also shifted; encounters like the shopping trip with Penny described above, where my knowledge was drawn upon as though I were a kind of 'personal shopper' advising on the best purchase also occurred after my interviews with Florence, Alice and Beatrice, and with other friends and acquaintances who did not directly participate in the research. Indeed, knowledge became a key area of negotiation between myself and participants. In the following sections I trace some of those moments where the interrelated ideas of sexual knowledge, experience and confidence were addressed. These moments demonstrate some of the contradictory pressures and pleasures that come with performing postfeminist values of active, 'empowered' female sexuality.

'Openness' and taking part in the research

Sexual confidence or 'openness' was a key factor shaping the kinds of women who participated in the research. 'Being open' about sex was usually constructed as a desirable quality that some women possessed more than others, signifying positivity, comfort and confidence in expressing one's sexuality. When using snowball sampling, friends would often think aloud about whom among the women they knew might take part in the research, making suggestions according to how confident, open or happy to talk about sex friends and acquaintances were perceived to be.

There then appeared to be a range of motivations at play amongst the self-selecting participants. Strassberg and Lowe's research has demonstrated that those who volunteer for sexuality research often report a more positive attitude toward sexuality than those who do not volunteer, and also have less feelings of sexual guilt and more sexual knowledge and experience (1995). Whilst I do not assume these attributes to be as fixed or unproblematic as those researchers do, it is the case that a number of women who took part in the research would describe themselves as comfortable and open when discussing sex. My field notes recall that before the interview Shelly 'described herself as open and happy to talk about anything' and that after I had finished recording our conversation Karin said she had enjoyed herself because 'she was very open and used to talking about these things'.

Two interviews involved a more detailed discussion of confidence or 'openness'. Both in their 20s, Agatha and Jade spoke about how they perceived themselves as more

positive and confident about their sexuality in recent years. Jade explained how this was related to her recent coming out as lesbian:

When I was a teenager... going to Ann Summers like, it seemed quite alien to me, like, I didn't know a great deal about it. To be honest when I was growing up and when I was a teenager and things sex wasn't really something I discussed with my friends. But I think, I don't know, maybe partly because I wasn't out to my friends then, and nobody knew I was gay, and, so I just wasn't interested in talking about that, because if they were talking about boys then, I didn't ever show an interest in that so then they just sort of stopped talking to me about that, cause obviously I'm not going to get into an in depth conversation, and they just thought that was how was, they didn't realise the actual reason for it. So I never really discussed it with my friends, so I guess the idea that you can use toys and things, that was probably something I discovered on my own and never really spoke to anyone about, especially when I was younger. So, I think, maybe I found it a bit intimidating, because I had to process that side of myself, like, yeah, I don't know it seemed, I don't know it seemed almost a bizarre concept to be honest, like, but then I got older and obviously I could see the benefits of it I guess. And like, and then coming into a long term relationship with somebody felt like that was something like, oh actually I am interested, let's look at that kind of thing. And so, like yeah so obviously my thinking has gone a long way from initial kind of, that's not something I ever want to think about, to like, yeah.

R: Do you think that was at all related to coming out?

J: Yeah, like, I dunno, think so. I came out, not that long ago, like, um, I was 22, just turned 22, I'm almost 24 now, so really not that long ago. Um, and yeah so, yeah I guess sex was, because I was in denial and found it quite difficult to come to terms with it and everything was so, um, so that was something I put to the back of my mind. And so by virtue of that I never thought about sex or, I just didn't think about it, I just put it to the back of my mind because I couldn't deal with it, it was too painful to deal with, and so, yeah. I so I just separated myself from it kind of thing, and yeah like never discussed it with my friends and like, which probably made it more difficult because I didn't understand these feelings I was having, yeah.

Here Jade relates a process of accepting or coming to terms with her sexuality, narrating a transition from denial and silence to coming out, being able to talk about her sexuality and being able to express her sexual interests. This process of self-acceptance is linked to sexual consumption as she describes finding sex shops and products 'bizarre' and 'alien' in her younger years where now she is interested and wants to 'look at that kind of thing'. Her idea of her present self as more able to express and talk about her sexuality may have been related to, and re-produced or perhaps

challenged by, her decision to take part in the interview which, as I have already explored, she appeared to find uncomfortable.

Agatha was another interviewee who expressed a narrative of sexual self-acceptance:

I was, to be honest like, up to a point probably about 2 or 3 years ago I was quite prudish and thought like, had quite a bad attitude towards sex I think, um, cause my mum was really prudish and she didn't really tell me much about anything that I might need to know. So I think the first [visit to a sex shop] was like going in Ann Summers or something when I was 14 maybe, because it was like funny or whatever. I don't think any of my friends, or I didn't buy anything at that age but it was kind of curiosity I think. Um, and because I was still quite like shy and stuff, I found it a bit overwhelming and a bit weird to be honest ...

I haven't really been in that many [sex shops] to be honest, like I say it's only been recently the past couple of years that I've started to be able to get comfortable with myself like that, so it's just something that I kind of stay away from, and don't really pursue.

R: So what was the - was there a reason a couple of years ago?

A: Um, just like changed my attitude. I think I had this attitude that I didn't like myself, I wasn't comfortable with myself, I really wanted a boyfriend, for no reason other than just having a boyfriend 'cause all my friends had one. Um, I wasn't particularly into sex as I saw it as a way of kind of getting a boyfriend [laughs] which is stupid really. Um, but yeah I don't think I was really um happy with myself so it wasn't something that I would have thought of going into.

R: And so what's changed then?

A: Kind of realising that my reaction towards sex and stuff, not doing it because I was wanting to get with someone, and just doing it for the right reasons just to enjoy myself.

As a heterosexual woman Agatha's narrative focuses on her previous lack of knowledge about sex and her use of sex to 'get a boyfriend' rather than to enjoy herself. Again her transition to greater sexual self-acceptance was related to both talking about sex and sexual consumption, as later in the interview Agatha explained that she had started to talk more about sex with her friends in recent years, and that she had become interested in online sex shopping. She also explicitly linked her new perception of herself as sexually confident to her decision to take part in my research, as our brief exchange just before I finished the recording shows:

A: It seems like I've just given you the history of my sexuality or something, I feel quite good yeah! [laughs] It's good to get to talk to someone about it.

R: Yeah everyone says that, it's weird.

A: Yeah but it's cool, it's really cool, I think it's how it should be.

My notes also recall that after the interview Agatha 'told me how she had received a message from our mutual friend asking if she wanted to get involved and she hadn't been sure, but she was really glad she had'. Taking part in the interview appeared to play a part in re-producing and affirming her relatively recent awareness of herself as more comfortable and happy to talk about her sexuality.

As I argued in the previous chapter, a postfeminist discourse of female sexuality privileges the sexually confident, active woman who knows what she wants and is able to express it (albeit in a soft, unthreatening manner). This construction of female sexuality requires women to work upon the project of the sexual selves through a range of techniques including consumption, sensitive communication of desire, and self-investigation. Jade and Agatha both relate a narrative of coming to terms with and accepting their sexual selves, moving from denial, shame and ignorance to greater sexual confidence and self-knowledge. Talking about sex with friends and sexual partners, fostering a new interest in sex shopping, and even taking part in an interview for my research can all be seen as technologies of the sexual self by which this new sexual knowledge and confidence is being produced and articulated.

Whilst I do not wish to deny the positivity of this experience and narrative for Jade and Agatha, I do want to highlight the way in which sexual self-acceptance through technologies of the self is positioned as an individual problem and responsibility here. The need to become knowledgeable, confident and open about sex exerts pressure as a form of individual self-regulation and governance of the sexual self.

The pressure that the requirement to become sexually knowledgeable exerts was also visible amongst another set of participants. One reason why a number of women took part in the research was due to the snowball sampling method; they were a friend of a friend or an acquaintance who wanted to help me or do me a favour. In these cases the women in question were often not regular sex shoppers, and this involved an interesting negotiation of sexual knowledge and experience. A number of infrequent sex shoppers took part in the research, and some apologised for their lack of experience and knowledge about sex shopping during the interview. In these cases I would reassure them that all accounts were interesting and valuable to me, but there was still an expectation that the most 'interesting' subject for my research would be a more experienced and knowledgeable consumer. Tallulah was one such participant, a friend of a friend who took part in an interview. Having stated early on that she had never had much of an interest in 'vibrators or dildos', she made two further comments suggesting that she thought she wasn't very interesting for my research. When I asked if she had visited a sex shop with a partner she couldn't remember and apologised saying 'sorry I'm not the most interesting interview!'; and as we were finishing the interview I asked if she had anything else to say and she responded, 'not really, I wish

I could be more juicy for you! I guess my experiences aren't that massive when it comes to sex toys, or sex shopping things'.

Similarly Claire, a friend who took part in an interview, was anxious that she might not have enough to say, as I noted: 'Claire was quite apprehensive before the interview in our email conversation as she was worried she'd be expected to just "talk". She said that she would need questions and prompting. She was concerned that she wasn't really the 'expert' on this topic and made a couple of comments about that during the interview itself'. Such comments included 'I might not be the most interesting subject in the world because I haven't bought anything particularly outrageous' and 'I might be a bit vanilla for this, I might be a bit boring for this conversation'. As these comments show, Claire linked being 'interesting' to having a wide range of sexual desires and experiences including those outside the norm that are 'outrageous' rather than 'vanilla' or 'boring'. Although this was an area of concern for her, Claire herself made connections to and was critical of the cultural pressures she felt more generally when it came to expressing her sexuality. In this part of the interview she began by talking about the increase in the number of sex shops available in recent years and whether this was a 'good thing':

And there is a lot of kind of, by thrusting it so into the mainstream it does allow you to compare yourself to everyone else on every level, and comparing yourself to the rest of the world sexually is quite daunting I suppose... yeah sex shops are part of that pressure I think, definitely. Y'know marketed as, how to be a good modern woman. Even back to the point of *Sex and the City* and not needing a man and y'know the pressure to - to sort of like be that kind of woman and just be really confident and just stride in - y'know, to other people around you not just in your sex life. Just to even go in one of those places without going red, and just be like 'I'm a really confident, feisty, brilliant woman and I don't give a fuck' [laughs]. Like that's a pressure in itself.

The connection between being an experienced, knowledgeable and adventurous sex shopper and being 'interesting' and not 'boring' can be directly linked to the wider narrative of postfeminist sexuality. Claire is aware of and critical of this discourse although it also mediates her construction of her own sexuality and of my research. Despite reassurances it was hard for me to counteract the expectation that my research would draw boundaries between 'interesting' and 'boring' interview subjects in a way that reflects the values of postfeminist sexual culture and the pressure to become an agentic and confident female sexual subject.

'Expert' sex shoppers and subcultural capital

In considering the negotiation of sexual knowledge in my research I turn to one final significant group: 'expert' sex shoppers. I became aware of this sub-group early into the field work after my interview and accompanied shop with Jillian who, as I have

noted, derived pleasure in sex shopping primarily from having a very detailed knowledge of shops, products, materials and designers. Jillian explained the importance of knowledge in her interview:

J: That's an important thing about sex shops, you need to have a lot of knowledge about what you're selling. You need to be able to advise the customers. Cause, there are a lot of dos and don'ts when it comes to toys, as I have learned since I started sex blogging, so –

R: Right ok, what are the dos and don'ts?

J: the biggest don't with a sex toy is uh, if you buy anything made of jelly, cause jelly will hurt you.

R: Yeah.

J: And it will break, and it will not feel nice inside you. So, jelly's a no-no.

R: Yeah, what about, what are the 'dos' do you think?

J: The dos – silicone, silicone and glass and wood, but, also be careful with wood cause they might treat it with a certain thing.

R: Mmm hmm, so you've kind of learnt all this stuff. Have you, where have you learnt that kind of stuff from?

J: Uh, I know a lot of sex toy reviewers – they have sex toy review blogs where they explain all of these dos and don'ts. But you also need to know the good ones, not the ones that go [high voice] 'oo this is my battery operated boyfriend'.

R: [laughs]

J: That's just, that's just, wrong [laughs]

R: Right ok, so how can you tell if it's a good one?

J: Mmm- a good sex toy reviewer? If this person is honest, and gives the right stats and the right, and an honest opinion and just doesn't fluff it up.

Jillian's pleasure in choosing, buying and using sex toys is situated in her thoroughly researched knowledge about them. She uses that knowledge to discern what she believes to be the good from the bad amongst sex shop staff, online reviewers and bloggers, and of course the shops and products themselves. As a sex blogger and writer of erotic fiction Jillian is also professionally invested in having extensive sexual consumer knowledge. I subsequently interviewed two further bloggers, Jane and Ness, online sex toy business owner Katie, and erotic fiction writers Karin and Jennifer, all of whom could be broadly grouped under the same category.

Whilst I explore some of the implications and experiences of 'expert' sex shopping throughout the analysis in the following three chapters, I include this group here in order to make some observations regarding the negotiation of knowledge between myself and this group of participants. As I have reflected, my experience of sex shopping shifted over the course of the fieldwork so that I became more aligned with these expert shoppers, deriving pleasure from accumulating knowledge and deploying it by making the 'right' consumer choices. I too was professionally invested in knowledge about sexual consumption as a researcher. This positioning meant that meeting with 'expert' interviewees was particularly enjoyable as it provided the opportunity to exchange such knowledge in an environment where it was perceived to be valuable. These interviewees also showed a great deal of interest in my research, questioning me about my research method and focus, and recommending I research particular products, websites, shops or consumer concerns and practices. These interactions are examples of the exchange of what Sarah Thornton has called 'subcultural capital' within a niche taste culture of which these participants and I were both part (1997).

Thornton develops Bourdieu's (1984) model of cultural and social capital in her analysis of 1980s and 1990s club cultures, arguing that 'subcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder' (1997, 202). In the case of club culture Thornton demonstrates that subcultural capital can be objectified through possessing the right look and having a carefully chosen record collection, and embodied through slang and dance moves that demonstrate being 'in the know' (203). In the case of sex shopping subcultural capital is objectified primarily through an extensive and well-chosen collection of sex toys and other sexual products, and embodied through the expression and deployment of a knowledgeable, informed opinion. As most interaction between those within this subculture takes place online, subcultural capital is usually exchanged through words and images on blogs and other social media. Ness spoke in her interview about how she owns 'hundreds of sex toys'; bloggers' extensive collections are displayed in popular posts featuring images and descriptions of their collections, with toys they dislike and rarely use being equally important markers of capital alongside favourites and recommendations.

One area of knowledge that is important to embody within expert sex shopping subcultures relates to sex toy materials. As the extract from Jillian's interview above shows, not using or recommending sex toys deemed to be unsafe and unappealing is an important marker of subcultural capital for sex bloggers. Plastic toys containing 'phalates' – often referred to as 'jelly' toys – are particularly frowned upon. Ness, a prolific sex toy blogger and consultant to sex toy designers also discussed this:

N: Um, never go on a website just like testing phalate toys. Cause I have a theory that may seem partly crazy, but sometimes when you use toys with phalates, it can lower your oestrogen levels. I have used hundreds of phalate toys and I have unreal low levels of oestrogen and my doctors don't know why exactly other than possibly using phalate toys that much.

R: Really?

N: So someone who uses them as much as me, it could cause it. I mean now I refuse to use them, but because I had tested so many and so many types and stuff I think it could have actually affected me.

R: Really? Yeah I've heard about that, and so have you done some research about that?

N: Yeah. Um, I know about most allergies or bad chemicals in sex toys, leather allergies, and everything.

Ness demonstrates her knowledge of materials through her own experience and research. I also make clear that I am aware of and interested in finding out more about this issue. I found that I too became extremely suspicious of 'jelly' products and the sex shop staff and bloggers who would recommend them over the course of the research.

Another way in which subcultural capital is embodied is through a 'no nonsense' orientation towards sexual consumer products. So Jillian is wary of sex toy bloggers who 'fluff up' their descriptions, Ness uses her website to try and 'normalise' sex toys and make them 'more real', and Jane spoke about how she would spend around an hour researching a sex toy purchase, thinking about 'plusses and minuses you know, how expensive is it? What's the delivery like? What are the responses that it's been getting online? Is it body safe?' Both the emphasis on safe materials and the no nonsense, pragmatic orientation towards sex toys demonstrate a way in which members of this subculture differentiate themselves from 'mainstream' sex shopping culture. As Thornton contends, the social logic of subcultural capital 'reveals itself most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it emphatically isn't' (208). For this subculture of sex shoppers, the 'mainstream' is characterised by a giggly, girly, embarrassed or, as Jillian put it, 'fluffy' approach to sex shopping and a concomitant ignorance of the 'right' products and materials. As Jane explained after we visited London sex shop Sh!, she didn't want shops and products to be made 'safe' and acceptable by the use of soft, feminine colours and materials. Sex shopping cultural capital is conferred through the othering of a 'mainstream' approach to sex shopping that represents another form of denigrated femininity. This indicates that subcultural capital often 'correlates with and legitimises unequal statuses' rather than resisting them (Thornton, 1997, 207).

In research interactions with this group I entered into an exchange of subcultural capital. I was the 'relevant beholder' who validated these women's objectifications and embodiments of subcultural capital. I also strove to be 'in the know' and demonstrate that I too had the 'right' sex toys in my collection, knowledge about materials, and pragmatic orientation towards sex shopping in order that my own status would be conferred. That I was researching a thesis on sex shopping allowed me to embody a knowledgeable and 'no nonsense' attitude towards sex shopping and legitimate sex

shopping as an important area of academic enquiry. However, it has remained my responsibility as a researcher to avoid 'over identifying with and being an uncritical celebrant of the subculture' (Thornton, 1997, 214). It is important that I remain critical of the othering practices that can take place within this sex shopping subculture towards those denigrated femininities associated with the idea of 'mainstream' sex shoppers. I further explore the hierarchy of femininities implicit in the opposition of knowledgeable, pragmatic shoppers to 'fluffy', girly shoppers in the following chapter on sex shops.

This chapter has explored the choices I made in undertaking this research, examining the possibilities and limitations of the sampling method and modes of data collection, interviews and shopping trips. I have reflected on my own position within the research and argued that talking about and doing sex shopping necessitates a negotiation of the values of sexual confidence and knowledge as they are constructed within postfeminist, neoliberal culture. In the following three chapters, I turn to the material produced in interviews and shopping trips in order to analyse women's engagement with sexual consumer culture on three key levels: spaces/shops, bodies/lingerie, and objects/sex toys.

Sexual Spaces: Going Sex Shopping

This chapter deals with sex shops as spaces where consumer sexualities are represented, experienced and performed. It draws upon data from interviews, in which participants spoke about their experiences of using sex shops, and also upon notes from accompanied shopping trips in which researcher and participant experienced the shop space(s) together. Also included are observations about the different kinds of shop spaces, locations and layouts currently available to UK sex shoppers, drawn from my own experiences and information found in press coverage and legislative regulation. Sites of sexual consumption are understood here as ‘spaces of encounter’ that are, following Hubbard’s (2002) analysis, simultaneously ‘representational’ and ‘experiential’. The location, layout and anticipated use of each space along with the images, text and products encountered within them come together to represent ‘sex’, sexual pleasure and sexualities in various, often normative ways; and they are at the same time spaces of experience where gender, class, sexuality and other intersecting identities are perceived, performed or contested through the interaction of bodies with the environment. As the material from interviews and shopping trips reveals, acts of sex shopping are frequently understood as acts of ‘being sexual’ or performing a sexual identity in a particular way. Performing sex shopping successfully – respectably, knowledgeably, confidently – and in the appropriate place, is therefore framed as integral to having the ‘right’ orientation towards sex and one’s sexual self. In this way sex shopping forms a key part of a disciplinary regime of the neoliberal sexual self, so that the failure to practice sex shopping respectably, knowledgeably and confidently indicates a problematic and shameful attitude to sex and sexuality.

What then, is the ‘right’ way to sex shop and the right place to do it, and how does this come to be understood? The data reveals the complex relational network through which shoppers understand and experience different sex shop spaces; and demonstrates that it is primarily through distinctions and comparisons that each space gains its meaning, and its value in a hierarchy of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ modes of sexual consumption. The contemporary consumer is met with a range of options for sexual consumption; from the accessible high street chain Ann Summers, independent erotic boutiques, traditional licensed outlets, shops targeting LGB shoppers, and a range of online shops, from the internet superstore Lovehoney to specialist sites. Insights from the field of consumer geographies are key in contextualising the ways in which shopping spaces are relationally constructed.

Spaces of encounter

Studies of consumer spaces can be situated within the wider field of cultural geography concerned with the representation and production of identities in urban spaces. Beatriz Colomina argues that the built environment ‘must be thought of as a system of representation’ and the body as ‘a product of such systems of representation rather than the means by which we encounter them’ (1992, iv). As a system of

representation urban space is a powerful site for the re-inscription of power structures relating to gender and sexuality (Valentine, 1997, 284). Elizabeth Grosz contends that the representational production of the body occurs in a system imbued with social and cultural power that consists not only of the physical arrangement of urban space but also in the 'cultural saturation' of images and media surrounding the body within an urban environment (1995, 249). Consumer spaces immerse the subject in representation, saturated as they are with imagery from products, advertising and display. Analyses of sites of intense consumption such as the mall contend that spaces 'can be studied for the cultural presuppositions and power relations which they impose by presupposition' (Sheilds, 2003, 3). However, as Juliana Mansvelt has noted, such readings of shopping environments risk reading such spaces as static and deterministic, constructing shoppers as passive subjects and only acknowledging the dominant or intended meanings of the space (2005).

The study of London shopping centres by Jackson et al. emphasised the processural and negotiated elements of 'shopping as practiced' (1998). Moments of shopping should not be understood in a vacuum and instead can be contextualised within 'a process that goes on before and after individual, isolated and momentary acts of purchase' (Jackson and Thrift, 1995: 205). By seeing shopping as 'practiced' it can be understood as an ongoing process enacted and experienced by individuals and groups in different ways, allowing for the meanings and uses of shopping spaces to be potentially reconstituted through practice over time (Gregson et al., 2002). Importantly, as Gregson et al. demonstrate (2002), particular shops and moments of consumption are not encountered in isolation but as part of a relational landscape constructed through shoppers' talk and experiences. Within this framework buying a lingerie set in a high street Ann Summers, for example, can usefully be understood in relation not only to the whole trajectory of the production, purchase and use of that product, but also in relation to other kinds of purchase in that shop, another sex shop, or online, and indeed to other kinds of shopping such as that for 'practical' underwear or even an everyday supermarket visit. Moments of sex shopping can and should be framed within a relational network of other consumption spaces and experiences.

Highlighting the relational nature of shopping spaces is not a case of simply pointing out consumer preferences; these distinctions play a crucial role in the construction of intersecting gender, sexual, race, class and other identities. Hubbard suggests that encounters between people and sexualised spaces and places construct a typography of 'good' and 'bad' sexualities based upon distinctions between those encounters that are 'variously represented as pleasurable, desirable, strange or disgusting' (2002, 367). This is an affective geography, where feelings of desire or disgust push the subject towards or away from identification with particular representational spaces: 'these emotionally charged real-and-imagined encounters make the sexualized spaces of the city feel either strange and Other or familiar and part of the Self' (375). As the data examined in this chapter reveals, those sex shop spaces that are encountered as 'welcoming', 'friendly', or 'comfortable' are set against those that are

'tacky' or 'seedy', or even 'dangerous', in ways that produce the shopper's sexuality as 'good' and the sexual practices and identities associated with the 'bad' spaces as other. Consumer 'choice' about how and where to shop is therefore highly regulated by the neoliberal framework of the postfeminist sexual self outlined in Chapter Two. The accounts in this chapter show women making shopping 'choices', explaining those choices through a process of distinction, and performing them in ways that align with the 'right' kind of orientation towards sexual consumption: confident, knowledgeable and tasteful. However, these hierarchies are often more complex than they might appear, and some shoppers' accounts show the ways in which 'non normative' shopping preferences are also justified through distinction: so that some women prefer the environment of sex shops aimed at gay men to the heteronormativity of shops 'for women' (even though they don't plan to buy anything in them); or they are drawn to the ambivalent, even abject, pleasures of the 'seedy' 'backstreet' sex shop through curiosity, laughter, shock or disgust.

Given that the experiences of the majority of research participants situated Ann Summers as a primary site for UK women's sex shopping, I begin with a detailed exploration of the practice of shopping in this highly visible and accessible high street 'sex shop'. I then go on to examine the various connections and comparisons that are drawn between and amongst Ann Summers and other kinds of sex shopping experiences. It is through this relational network of sex shops and shopping that gender, class and other identity distinctions are produced, represented, performed, and potentially contested.

Ann Summers

All of the women who participated in the research had some degree of experience of shopping in Ann Summers. A successful high street chain with branches across the country, the store relies upon its accessibility, visibility and normalisation within many women's shopping routines. As its owner Jacqueline Gold states, 'popping into Ann Summers is just part of a regular shopping trip' (cited in Smith, 2007, 170). The location, aesthetic and layout of Ann Summers stores emphasise similarity and continuity with other high street fashion retailers for women. The store fronts and interiors employ a colour palette of pinks and black; chart pop music is played; and window displays and walls are inundated with images and mannequins representing young, slim white women posing in lingerie and costumes. As Evans et al. have also found (2010a), the 'high street' values of Ann Summers are a key factor in making customers feel 'safe' and 'comfortable' in the stores. Penny, who visited a number of sex shops for the first time as part of this research, said that she would feel 'comfortable' visiting Ann Summers again because 'it's very busy, there's men and women, it's not like a pokey little place, and it's on the high street, it's not hidden away somewhere'.

Due to its accessibility Ann Summers is commonly the first 'sex shop' that many women encounter, often at a relatively young age. Particularly for those women in their

20s and 30s who participated in this research, a first visit to Ann Summers during their teenage years was often vividly remembered, with the extracts below representing only a sample of similar accounts:

So I think the first time was like going in Ann Summers or something when I was 14 maybe, because it was like funny or whatever. I don't think any of my friends or I, we didn't buy anything at that age but it was kind of curiosity I think... I don't really like the idea of Ann Summers now, but I kind of thought it was something that people were doing and we had a look round (Agatha).

I remember that they opened a new Ann Summers store in Oxford and I was always a bit embarrassed when we walked past it to be honest, like sort of awkward teenage stage I guess, and, then, one day I was like, shopping like, by myself I thought, oh, I'm just going to go in and like, see, what it's like in there. So I don't know how old I was I was probably kind of uh, seventeen or sixteen, and I wanted to go in by myself because I wanted to have a look round when no one else was there to like, so I could just look at what I wanted kind of thing, and I was a bit embarrassed so I thought I'd be better off by myself so I could just leave if I was uncomfortable, because I did feel awkward about it which seem silly now, but I was. Um, and, yeah I don't know I just kind of like went in and just, I spent quite a lot of time in there actually, just like looking at everything, I think I found it quite interesting (Jade).

The first time I think I was probably older than some people, I was like sort of 16 ish I reckon. And I hadn't been in to an Ann Summers before, then I went in with [a friend] and it was kind of, they went in a lot more so it was normal. Um, but I used to go past... And then yeah, that would be the first time I kind of went in and we were just going around giggling (Claire).

I suppose my main experience of sex, high street sex shops would be your bog standard kind of Ann Summers thing. So, and walking past them after school and that kind of stuff, and there always being something really tatty in the window... and I suppose I started going in them with friends as a kind of a joke, like you go in and have a bit of a nose about, not necessarily because you're seriously thinking about purchasing something (Alice).

Whilst there is some degree of diversity to these experiences, they appear to be united by memories of teenage curiosity and discovery about sex. They suggest that visiting Ann Summers is understood as something teenage girls feel they should do (or want to do) in order to fit in both with their peers and with 'being sexual' more generally. The visibility of this performance is regularly associated with feelings of embarrassment and shame, despite the apparent normalisation of the chain as a high street shop:

I think you need confidence to look in there, and then go from just looking at it, looking at sex toys, to then going to buy them... if you buy anything, something, everyone knows what you're buying and it kind of makes a statement about who you are, and what your sex life is like. Even if it's just a one off, I think maybe there's some judgement by the people there as to what you're buying (Florence).

But then there's that thing about me actually going into a shop and like, yeah, me and my friend last night were talking about and we were saying like, she feels awkward about going in shops too. And it's just like, you know, people would stamp us into like types, and you'll be buying something and just, like, 'this is going to go into my vagina'. That's weird for us, we're kind of straight girls [laughs]... it is ridiculous, I mean Ann Summers is a busy shop, there's a market for it, but still, what would they think about you? You don't want to be that kind of girl, I guess that still sticks in my head (Agatha).

I didn't go into the shop for a long time because I felt, um, people would look at me going in there. So, until I was confident enough and though oh what the hell, I don't care... So you've got to be a confident enough person I think to not worry about people in the street seeing you going into somewhere that sells sex stuff. Um, so yes it still has that stigma of, of, a sex shop (Jennifer).

Here Jennifer suggests that it was precisely the visibility of the chain that made her feel wary of paying it a visit. Whilst its high street location means that Ann Summers is highly visible, accessible and even expected as a site for young women's shopping, its visibility also means that entering a shop is positioned as an act of being sexual and of having sexual 'confidence' or knowledge that some women do not wish to (publicly) perform. Interestingly however, these feelings of embarrassment were often located in the past by research participants: Jennifer says she is now 'confident' and thinks 'what the hell'; Alice and Claire both recalled 'giggling' and embarrassment when visiting Ann Summers as teenagers but asserted that they would not behave like this now, with Claire saying that 'I've given up worrying so much about what people think'. Alice attributed her teenage behaviour to her remembered discomfort with sexuality: 'I think my experience of sex shopping has changed sort of in the past few years, so my early experience of it being kind of a little bit, I suppose it's to do with how comfortable you are with yourself sexually, that, changes it from something that's kind of quite titillating and embarrassing, and therefore you kind of have to deal with it with humour, to something that's a little but more like, "I'm here to make a purchase, this is a transaction, thanks", that kind of thing'. Agatha describes still feeling embarrassed or ashamed about visiting Ann Summers but clearly locates this as a problem; her discomfort is 'ridiculous' but it still 'sticks in my head'.

As I explored in the previous chapter, being 'comfortable', knowledgeable, confident and 'open' about one's sexual self was regularly conflated by participants with being a happy and regular sex shop customer. In these accounts any discomfort with doing or talking about sex shopping quickly becomes framed as a mark of an uncomfortable and problematic relationship to sex and sexuality more broadly. Whilst narratives of discomfort and embarrassment with visiting sex stores are not uncommon, they are repeatedly located in the past and/or framed as an individual problem that must be worked upon in order to fit into a narrative 'journey' from sexual shame to sexual confidence and knowledge. Sexual consumption then is wholly elided with a healthy, happy orientation towards sex.

Online shopping plays an important role within this regulatory framework. Sex shopping on the internet was described by some as convenient, easy to fit around busy work/family schedules, and an effective solution for those living in locations where 'women friendly' sex shops were not easily accessible. Browsing online on a smartphone was preferred by some as it meant they could go sex shopping at any time and in any place, such as on the train in Beth's case or at work and on the bus (and after her interview) for Alice. Alice described this online browsing as enjoyable 'fantasising' time as she was missing her long distance partner. The discretion, privacy and anonymity of online shopping in comparison to going into a visible shop like Ann Summers was the most widely cited favourable distinction. Unsurprisingly, this aspect is highlighted by sex shop websites; Lovehoney, the market leader in UK online sex shopping, has a page of their website dedicated to pictures, videos and descriptions of the various versions of plain brown packaging and inconspicuous labelling they offer, reassuring potential customers that 'the only person getting excited by your delivery is you' (Lovehoney, 2015). A number of interviewees made a favourable distinction between the private and discreet practice of online shopping against the public performance of shopping in Ann Summers:

Um, it's discreet, you don't come out with a massive Ann Summers bag or something like that. It's, they always take care of their being discreet and they send it in an unmarked envelope or box (Jillian).

My first stuff that I bought was online, it was, I think it was Ann Summers online stuff. And that was great... I thought 'yay!' I can actually buy stuff without having to go to any shops or anything, because I wasn't brave enough then (Jennifer).

I started sex shopping online before I went in sex shops on my own. I built myself up!... So, the good thing about the internet thing, it means that it takes away your embarrassment, because you don't have to deal with a person over the counter (Alice).

The above quotes show how online shopping is given value in contrast to the visibility of a trip to Ann Summers, where the shopper has to be 'brave', deal with shop

assistants, and carry a 'massive Ann Summers bag' home with them. At the same time, the privacy offered by online shopping means that there are 'no excuses' not to be a sexual consumer. As I showed in the previous chapter, women who expressed reluctance about the performance of sexual confidence and 'openness' involved in sex shopping tended to position this orientation as either in the past, or a 'problem' in need of work. For those women, online shopping represented a technology of the sexual self by which they might overcome this 'problem', or rather might be required to overcome it. For example Agatha, who spoke at length about her embarrassment around sex shopping, ended the interview by telling me that she was 'much more tempted' by the 'discreet' nature of online shopping; and Claire struggled to explain why she wouldn't want to buy a sex toy when online sex shops are 'such a huge thing now aren't they? And it's anonymous, and I mean you can order stuff, it'll come in, just blank packaging to your door'. Within a relational landscape of consumption online shopping is made distinct from the potential embarrassment of the very public and visible performance of being sexual involved in a trip to Ann Summers. At the same time, this further cements sexual consumption within a regulatory regime of the postfeminist sexual self, as there is 'no excuse' not to be a sexual consumer.

The mainstream visibility and 'high street' nature of Ann Summers also undercut a further set of criticisms and distinctions. The chain was frequently denigrated by middle class research participants as representing an unsophisticated representation of female sexuality. In the selection of quotes below Ann Summers is described using words like 'naff', 'tacky', 'cheesy', terms that regularly recurred in talk about the chain:

It almost kind of borders on being quite seedy, but in a way that's marketed towards women... [the erotica books and dvds] just look so cheesy, and it's just, everything in there is so pink and so bright and sort a little bit just jarring (Beatrice).

I think I always thought it was a bit naff, just a bit like a kind of porn-y kind of sexuality rather than something that was actually I dunno, something I could enjoy or be interested in really (Agatha).

[Ann Summers lingerie] is just so cringe-y and so tacky and I think it's such a stereotype now that a lot of women actually, women that are like me would just be like no, that's ridiculous (Claire).

As these accounts demonstrate, women often distanced themselves from Ann Summers as being not 'for' them (or women like them) because of its perceived tacky, stereotypical or pornographic portrayal of sexuality. As Merl Storr has suggested (2002, 2003), the disparaging of Ann Summers is regularly mobilised in the construction of tasteful and respectable middle class sexual identities upon which distinction and distance from tasteless and unsophisticated forms of working class feminine sexuality is predicated. As I explore below, this distinction is most powerfully

used within the relational discourse around 'boutique' or independent sex shops for women.

In addition to concerns about taste and class, the 'girly' version of femininity reproduced by Ann Summers was also criticised as being overwhelmingly heterosexual by participants identifying as lesbian, bisexual and queer. Indeed, Ann Summers can be read as a heteronormative space in which the promotion of lingerie and 'couples' sex toys is inevitably framed by narrow and normative understandings of the kinds of sex heterosexual couples are and should be having; from exhibiting the body in lingerie for the gaze of a male partner to using vibrating cock rings and small 'bullet' vibrators to enable clitoral stimulation during penetrative sex. On the basis of this research it appears that, where customer preferences fall outside of this remit, the staff response clearly reinforces that their desires are not 'normal', albeit in the most friendly and amenable way. When shopping in Ann Summers Brighton for example Penny asked a shop assistant if the store stocked any strap on harnesses and dildos, in response to which the staff member retreated to a stock room to find the single example of such a product. Waiting on the shop floor for the staff member to return it was clear to Penny and I that this field of sexual activity was not something that Ann Summers usually expects to cater for.

The phallogentrism of the sex toy products in Ann Summers was criticised by Alice, who explained that '50 or 60 percent of the stuff seems targeted at straight women, and lots of it seems really cock based. And I'm just like well that fine, it's not really for me, y'know, so, it's not that I find it a turn off particularly, it's just that I probably wouldn't buy a strap on or a vibrator that had any sort of reminiscence of penis about it'. Whilst online sex shopping might appear to offer some respite from this – Lovehoney has a section dedicated to lesbian sex toys, for example – this was not always the case, as Jade described when talking about purchasing a strap on dildo with her partner:

J: It was funny also after they sent it to us, because like, so we'd gone on the website, clicked on lesbian sex toys, we'd chosen one, and they sent it to us and they sent us, you know they send like a free gift or something, and they sent us a cock ring [laughs] and we were like for God's sake!

R: Oh really, ok.

J: Yeah, so, even then, even after we'd used, gone on that category, chosen one, like sent it to us, they still sent us that. Um, which like, I dunno, we just laughed about it because it is quite funny, but it's like wow it's really like, everything's like sort of geared for straight people it felt like.

Jade also went on to speak about the 'massive realistic' looking dildos that she saw whilst browsing on the website and that made her feel awkward and uncomfortable. As these experiences suggest, lesbian and bisexual women's experiences for shopping for sexual objects is troubled both by the heterosexist and phallogentric

assumptions of the sexual consumer market. Alice explained her response to the heteronormativity of Ann Summers in some detail:

I think the target market for somewhere like Ann Summers are heterosexual women, for a start, and they're obviously used loads by people who do hen party type things, so that's really kind of totally specific. I have also been into some gay boys' sex shops. Which are not great for shopping for things for *me*, but actually they do it slightly better, the way that they target their market, to gay men or bisexual men or, you know, boys who like boys in some degree. They're in Soho and places like that I'll have been in. In terms of like the layout and the marketing and also the feel of the shop, they've got it a lot more right, to my mind, in terms of what you're looking for as a shopper than somewhere like Ann Summers. It's kind of a friendlier atmosphere, there's less embarrassment about it, the staff are friendlier, maybe just because this is because I've been in ones in Soho and there's disco music on, anywhere where there's disco I'm pretty comfortable [laughs] and it's more of a slightly clubby, more comfortable atmosphere, as opposed to the girly ones. I suppose it's just a bit like people who are comfortable with themselves, as opposed to stuff for housewives. I suppose that's me being a bit broad about it, but that's why I would probably be more comfortable in the boys' one than somewhere like Ann Summers. Which is interesting actually because there isn't really many things I want to buy in a gay man's sex shop! Surprisingly, yeah. But it's more of a comfortable shopping experience.

Margaret was another participant, identifying as bisexual, who described an affinity with sex shops aimed at gay men above those purportedly catering for women. For her accompanied shopping trip Margaret chose to visit two shops on St James Street in Kemptown, the LGBTQ district of Brighton. Prowler is clearly designed for gay male shoppers, stocking men's underwear and a range of anal sex toys; as my notes recall 'Margaret spend a few minutes looking at the display of LGBTQ flag products such as badges and patches, she had a conversation with the staff member about the bisexual flag, she was asking why they didn't stock items with it on and he responded positively to the suggestion'. After our shopping trip Margaret explained that she preferred the Kemptown stores, explaining that she wouldn't feel comfortable shopping in a sex shop 'for women' as they would make assumptions about her sexuality, gender and sexual practices. Both Margaret and Alice profess feeling like they 'fit in' and are most comfortable being in these gay sex shop spaces, with the fact that they would be unlikely to purchase any sexual products there presenting no significant obstacle to their feelings of identification. These affinities are clearly relational, constructed around a sense of distance and difference from heteronormative feminine sex shop spaces including Ann Summers.

Whilst Ann Summers is being described as a sex shop here, as I have already noted, the chain outlets are not in fact 'sex shops' according to the legal definition. In line with

the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act of 1982 a shop requires a sex shop license only if items explicitly designed for use in sexual activity make up a 'significant degree' of the business¹² (Coulmont and Hubbard, 2010). However, the Act does effect the arrangement of Ann Summers stores, prohibiting the display of sexual products in window displays and requiring that only those over 18 are able to view and purchase such products (Kent and Brown, 2006, 201). In practice this means that a literal boundary is set up between two areas of the stores: the main part containing lingerie and novelty products, and a restricted area containing the sex toys, dildos, and vibrators. Access to these sections is monitored by staff and is demarcated either by high curved display partitions towards the back of the shop or, in larger stores, being up or down a flight of stairs. As Coulmont and Hubbard note, the legislation regarding sex shops means that the space necessarily represents and reproduces moral judgements about what kinds of sexual identities and practices can be displayed and what should be discreet or hidden (2010).

A number of the women who participated in the research noted the boundary between items in Ann Summers, such as when Beatrice recalled visiting with the intention of buying a vibrator and 'going in and walking past the underwear – and I remember being very aware of going past the underwear and into the *back bit*, and just looking at all these toys'. Claire noted that the shop 'has that bit in the middle doesn't it, sort of like that walled bit? So it's like, if you go in there, anyone else in there knows what you're looking at, cause you're like, in that section'. Jade said that 'I feel like it's almost like a division halfway down the store like you get to a certain point and it's like "bam!" here are the sex items, and it's always towards the back of the store which makes it seem like, I don't know, it almost enforces a taboo kind of thing because like, you know, there's things at the front of the store that it's almost okay to look at'. Jade went into further detail regarding the effect that this boundary drawing had on her shopping experience: 'I did go and have a little look [at the sex toys], but then sort of scurried away, back to the front of the safety of the front of the shop kind of thing'.

As these accounts suggests, the shop space reproduces a division between 'safe' lingerie and more risky 'sex items', a division which customers are highly attuned to. The embodied practices of shopping for these two kinds of primary product in Ann Summers are worth further elaboration here, although the significance of these products in everyday sexual practice is explored further in subsequent chapters.

Shopping for lingerie and sex toys in Ann Summers

Browsing for and trying on a style and size of lingerie to fit the body bears some similarity to shopping for 'ordinary' clothing and underwear in that the shopper's body size, shape and confidence is often foregrounded (Colls, 2003). According to some women's accounts this experience can be both physically and emotionally stressful, as Claire described: 'if you're shopping on your own for stuff and you do go in to like,

¹² Ann Summers does have one licensed store located in Bristol.

Ann Summers and, you can wander round for ages, and stuff like, with sizes and oh, y'know, "are my hips going to look big in this"? And it can be a bit, like something that you *want* to do for the outcome but not actually that much of a fun experience I find a lot of the time'. Similarly Tallulah explained that she would have to be in a 'good mood' to shop for lingerie: 'I'd have to not feel pressured and rushed, and be feeling happy with myself you know cause you've get all your clothes off and try stuff on, it does get a little bit, you get a little bit hot and bothered with it don't you?'. The changing rooms were identified as the key site where body anxieties and criticisms emerged; during her accompanied shopping trip to Ann Summers Penny tried on some lingerie and emerged from the changing room to tell me how 'awful' some of the items had looked. In a discussion with Karin in interview feelings of bodily discomfort were exchanged when remembering trying on lingerie:

I'm not a big fan of [peephole bras] to be honest they don't really feel like underwear, they've got no support or anything like that, they hang off everything, they're not very attractive.

R: Yeah I made the mistake of trying one of those on the other day – errrr [laughs]

K: [laughs] Yeah they're not great are they?

R: Have you ever had that changing room moment where you just go, oh –

K: Yeah definitely, you just turn around and think, oh god, I'm never going to get in that. Now that I've put a bit more weight on you feel a bit self-conscious just looking at some of these things. Anything that's too tight there's just no point.

Although Karin and I are discussing the anxiety that arises from a failure of our bodies to match up to an ideal image of the 'sexy body' in lingerie, our exchange here was a pleasurable one premised upon what Colls describes as 'bodily proximity' (Colls, 2003). Colls contends that the foregrounding of the female body that regularly occurs when women do or discuss shopping may not primarily 'lead to feelings of inadequacy' but may involve sharing 'feelings of concern, empathy, compassion, affinity' (193). A similar exchange took place when taking part in an accompanied shop with Penny, where shopping for lingerie involved discussing our bodies: 'When we entered the shop there was a sale on and we spent some time looking at the sale rails of lingerie near the entrance. During this time we were chatting about styles we preferred or did not like – for example she spoke about how she finds padding and under wiring in bras uncomfortable since breast feeding her son, and I looked at some high waist underwear and said I liked the idea that it would cover up my stomach. She also spoke about the kinds of things she thought her partner would prefer to see her in'. As this former reflection suggests, alongside talk about the body, shopping for lingerie regularly involves the consideration of an (often absent) sexual partner's preferences alongside one's own.

This potentially desiring gaze of a sexual partner is implicitly represented within the layout of Ann Summers' stores. The in-store visual promotion of lingerie primarily operates through numerous images of models and mannequins wearing the products, often themed around events such as Christmas and Valentine's Day. This reproduces a wider cultural aesthetic, explored further in the following chapter, of lingerie as a commodity which enables women to present their bodies as the perfect visual 'gift' to a (male) partner. Over the last decade Ann Summers have taken further steps to reinforce women's awareness of their partner's gaze through the addition of 'peep show' changing rooms featuring a 'spy hole window that opens on the inside so that customers [can] parade for their partners' (Gold, quoted in *The Scotsman*, 2005). Even if unused, this feature reproduces an idea of the lingerie clad body as an object of visual display and invites women to assess the desirability of their bodies in the fitting room. Some women spoke about the importance of their partner's preferences when choosing lingerie. Claire described choosing a lingerie set in a colour that she knew her partner would like: 'I often buy things with him in mind, like for specific, y'know for a specific reason'. Similarly when shopping with Karin, the impact that her husband's preferences had on her choices was very clear: 'We spent some time looking at the costumes upstairs, Karin pointed out a couple that she owns. She was telling me that her husband is into bums and legs and so preferred her to wear short skirts. There was a body suit with long legs and she said she wouldn't get that because it wouldn't work for him as her legs would be covered'.

However, although a partner's gaze was an important influence upon the practice of shopping, none of the research participants expressed a preference for lingerie shopping with a partner in tow. Indeed, Karin explained that she discouraged her partner from accompanying her because 'he would usually come up with something that I'm not going to like so, it's generally easier to buy it myself'; she explained that he was likely to choose items that were too 'scanty' such as peephole bras and thongs. Although Claire looked for colours she knew her partner liked, she also assured me that she wouldn't go to the length of buying something in a colour that she thought wasn't tasteful such as 'Barbie pink'. Clearly the desirability of one's body in lingerie is assessed through a range of factors beside the internalised desiring gaze of a sexual partner, and concerns for comfort, beauty and body norms, and taste may take precedent.

Shopping for sex toys also involves embodied practices, in this case primarily revolving around touch. Over the past two decades Ann Summers stores have shifted their presentation of sex toys in store. The packaging no longer features soft pornography style pictures of women and instead uses simple branding, most notably their signature inverted 'R' logo on the large variety of Ann Summers Rabbit toys. In addition to the rows of boxed products, sample sex toys with batteries are available unboxed for customers to pick up and 'try out' before they make a purchase. On our accompanied shopping trip, the first that I undertook as part of the research, I was struck by Jillian's tactile shopping style:

[The sex toys] were out of their packaging with batteries in, so you could pick them up and try them. We spent a couple of minutes here. Jillian turned many of them on and felt the movement and material. I have always been fairly self-conscious about touching toys in sex shops so I held back a bit until she encouraged me, saying 'you have to feel it'. I touched some of them as she was holding them... she said she had heard that you were meant to touch vibrators to your nose to get an idea of how the vibrations would 'really' feel so we both tried this with a few different vibrators, laughing at and commenting on the strange sensation.

As this experience suggests, shopping for sex toys often involves a range of tactile sensations in which customers use their fingers, hands (and even noses) to assess what the object can do. I had similar experiences with Karin in Ann Summers, where we both took a turn picking up and trying to bend the 'bendy' Rabbit toy and Karin commented that it wasn't bendy enough; and with Jane who picked up almost every vibrator, commenting on the strength of the vibration and the feel of the material, and was frustrated that not all of them had batteries that were working. These public body parts – fingers and noses – are implicitly 'standing in' for more intimate ones in these interactions with the objects, as the aim is to consider whether the vibration and material will feel good and potentially lead to orgasm.

Given that sex toys are objects that will be used externally or internally to stimulate sensitive areas of the body, this tactile shopping experience is often understood to be particularly central to sex toy shopping. Online shopping for sex toys was frequently compared negatively to the touch centred shopping experience allowed by the non-virtual sex shop space. Jillian described the 'pleasure in just having a browse in a store' that couldn't be reproduced by shopping online: 'you can contrast and compare, just holding things, feeling the weight, turning them on and off'. Florence described the problems of online sex toy shopping in detail:

You go into like websites and it describes the specs of them and you're just like, this is overwhelming, I can't cope with 'five speed rotors' and all these different things, so – yeah, like, and the virtual nature of it, and there, like you're kind of trying, and you can get a ruler out, you can get a measuring tape out, and you've got like this measuring tape and you're sitting there looking at however many inches it is, and you're kind of like 'is that huge? Or isn't it?'... you're kind of sifting through fifty pages and you're like, 'well do I want the diameter 5.5 cm or 7.5'? You're like, it's very hard to visualise it I think... even if I've got a ruler and I can kind of measure it, unless it's in front of me I don't think I fully get the scale, the sizing, the shape of a product, like the internet portrays it. So I think maybe for me if I was to make that purchase of a new vibrator, and especially a more sort of penetrative one, I think I probably would have to go to a shop to actually make the purchase, cause although I can sort of dilly-dally online, I think until I see it in the flesh almost, I don't think I'd make a purchase online.

Florence's concerns are not unfounded; Jennifer described ordering a penetrative toy that was too large online: 'I'll look at the picture and think oh that looks interesting, I'll try that. Um, sometimes I've found they're just too large, I cannot even get them in myself... But it's not until, particularly with the online stuff, it's not until you get it you realise, oh God, it's enormous'. Alice, too, spoke about this: 'I'm not one of those people whose very good at gauging sizes, so if it says 6 inches, 7 inches, 20 inches, doesn't mean anything to me... I've often got things in the post and then gone oh god that's too big, far too big, far too uncomfortably big'. Similarly, Jane spoke about the texture and smell of the material on a Rabbit vibrator she ordered, and explained that 'the toys that I haven't liked like the Rabbit have probably all been from online, now I definitely want to go into a shop and pick one up and just sort of see what it feels like and play with it a bit, from a tactile perspective, so that I know that it is more than adequate to do what I want it to do'. Picking up and trying out sex toys in the shop gives customers the opportunity to imagine how well they will fit with their bodies and how the objects will feel, an experience that cannot be replaced with online shopping for some women.

However, as my own self-consciousness regarding touching sex toys in the first accompanied shopping trip with Jillian suggests, a public and tactile sex toy shopping approach can be regarded with apprehension by some shoppers. Given that the shopper's fingers, hands and even nose are implicitly 'standing in' for the clitoris, vulva and vagina it is hardly surprising that many women find the public performance of tactile sex toy shopping unpalatable. The previous chapter examined the impact that undertaking this research had on my own relationship to sex shopping, and the tactile practice of sex toy shopping was a major part of this, as these extracts from later shopping trip notes make clear:

[Penny] seemed fairly cautious about picking up sex toys at first and I picked up a Rabbit and turned it on, handing it to her to feel it.

We started discussing vibrators, their strength and the way they feel, as I turned on different toys. Rayan was not picking up toys but occasionally touched the ones I was holding.

A tactile shopping style can be understood then as a key part of the 'knowledgeable' orientation towards sex shopping described in the previous chapter; picking up and trying out sex toys can be understood as a performance of confidence with sex shopping and by implication one of sexual confidence, body confidence, 'openness' and knowledge more broadly. For those women reluctant to practice confident tactile sex toy shopping in public, shopping online offered a way to participate in sexual consumption in a more discreet and private manner, as Jade described:

I feel like if you shop online then, well, you can look for as long as you want for one thing, and like I can be a bit awkward about that kind of thing in a shop, so like, I'm a lot better than I used to be, but still. If you're looking

online you can just do it in the privacy of your own home kind of thing, and you can spend a lot longer looking as well and like, although you can't tangibly like, see the products, you can, you can like read a description of them and get a better idea and compare different products like, for longer than I probably would if I was in the store I'd feel like, bad spending like half an hour or something looking at two different things, but if you're online you can look for a bit and then go away and come back to it kind of thing.

Interestingly, the majority of independent sex shops or boutiques 'for women' place an even greater emphasis on the display of unboxed sex toys than Ann Summers. For example Sh! Women's Erotic Emporium in Hoxton, Tickled and She Said in Brighton, and Harmony on Oxford Street all employ a central circular table as a sex toy display, with boxed versions of the products available on request once a shopper has decided to make a purchase. This feature invites customers to gather at the table and walk around it in order to pick up, turn on, touch and compare the objects. Indeed, Rayan explained in interview that she felt intimidated by the table display of unboxed sex toys at Sh!, and did not feel confident in approaching them as she wouldn't 'know what to do'. These boutique stores represent sexual knowledge more broadly through their location, aesthetic and layout and the kinds of interactions that take place between staff and customers. Moreover, values of sexual knowledge are intimately intertwined with those of taste, class and distinction, and sex boutiques are frequently set against Ann Summers as a mark of class distinction.

Knowledge and taste: sex boutiques

Since the early 1990s a handful of large cities have witnessed the opening of independently owned sex shops serving a primarily female clientele. A number of these stores have explicitly set themselves up in direct counterpoint to Ann Summers as the market leader (Smith, 2007). Whilst I am contending here that these shops represent themselves as both 'knowledgeable' and 'tasteful', and are frequently experienced as such by the women who participated in this research, it should be clear that these values only emerge in the context of a relational consumer landscape, with Ann Summers as key point of reference. Indeed, a number of interview participants independently raised the topic of boutique sex shops as a counterpoint to describe aspects they disliked about Ann Summers. A substantial extract from Claire's interview exemplifies this:

I think the role play outfits are just the tackiest thing in there, like... these bits of flipping sewn together PVC... and they're so badly made, and they're just horrible, and they don't fit anyone- and the kind of people you see looking at them, you just automatically feel like it's tacky when you're looking at someone that's very different to you, with y'know, very- a Pineapple tracksuit on or whatever... but then She Said is like, very far removed from that. It's very boutique-y and they're, they're lots more expensive, they have a lot more kind of corsets. I don't know what they

have in the way of toys in there, I'm sure they do have some, but definitely not as extensive and I don't think they sell lots of lube and body paint and, and they definitely don't sell things like L plates and cocks on deely boppers, and that sort of thing.

R: Right, yeah.

C: They're a lot more kind of, and their corsets are better made, all the stuff is better made, and it's down an alleyway, it's, it feels older in there I think, it feels like, for an older crowd, partly because it costs more money, partly because of the styles, partly because of just the shopping environment, it being very small and boutique-y and in the Lanes¹³.

R: Ok.

C: Um, but I think it's interesting as a completely different sort of sex shop experience. You don't feel so sex shop-y in there, it feels, it's more kind of um, I guess it's a bit more sort of- I don't know, not really high class but- but you don't really walk in there and there's like, y'know, a pair of pants with a hole in the window. It doesn't, it markets itself as definitely being a bit more classy and it's a lot harder to find.

In the second half of Claire's narrative the independent Brighton store gains value and meaning precisely through its difference to Ann Summers, it is 'far removed', 'more expensive', 'completely different' and 'more classy'. According to Bourdieu, the justification of tastes primarily relies upon the descriptions of distastes, through which the classifier asserts 'one's position in social space, as a rank to be upheld or a distance to be kept' (1984, 50). The distasteful space of Ann Summers is produced through the distinction that is made with the boutique store, and Claire's more respectable sexual and gender identity is constructed through her location of herself as sharing an affinity with the more 'classy' store and a distance and dislike of the tacky erotic retailer.

Interestingly, although Claire aligned herself with the boutique shop, the majority of the purchases she spoke about in her interview were in fact from the more affordable Ann Summers. It seems that the geography of feeling and affinity that Claire constructs, whereby the boutique store is experienced as being for women 'like her' for various reasons, is more central to the construction of a respectable and knowledgeable sexual identity than the actual location of purchases. In a similar way to the affinities for gay men's sex shops described by Margaret and Alice above, here a geography of identification with a consumer space is not constructed according to actual acts of consumption. These descriptions of preferring the environment in a boutique shop were common, with the making of a purchase in these shops frequently appearing to be seemingly irrelevant to the feeling of affinity with it. Shelly for example

¹³ 'The Lanes' is an upmarket shopping area of Brighton made up of a network of small streets.

described Coco de Mer in Covent Garden: 'it's just lovely stuff, and you feel very comfortable in there, but you haven't got the money!'. And Beatrice said 'I really, really like' visiting She Said in Brighton 'but I'm not sure I could afford [the products]'. Practical considerations regarding where shoppers could afford to make purchases did not seem to detract from their identification with these independent stores. A number of key factors shape the strong feelings of affinity with boutique sex shops that middle class women describe here.

Whilst these independent stores are far from homogenous they do have some commonalities that distinguish them from Ann Summers. They are usually, although not always, somewhat smaller than the average Ann Summers outlet, carrying a smaller selection of stock at a higher price point. As Claire notes above, they often employ a more 'grown up' aesthetic in the decor, favouring either dark colours such as blacks, reds and purples or minimalistic white styling, vintage or designer furniture and fittings, erotic artwork, and 'boudoir' style displays of different accessories. This deliberately distinguishes the stores from Ann Summers pink focused colour scheme which was described by a number of women as 'patronising', as Beatrice explained: 'it's almost like "we're making this place really, really feminine and girly so you don't feel any anxiety about being here"'. The styling represents the sexuality of shoppers as grown up and knowledgeable, without the need for 'girly' sugar coating.

Instead of being located in the high street, independent boutiques are most commonly situated in aspirational boutique and designer shopping areas such as Hoxton, Notting Hill, Covent Garden or Brighton's Lanes, and can be hard to locate without prior knowledge. Instead of being accessible and part of an 'ordinary' shopping trip they are positioned as exclusive 'destinations' for shoppers in the know; as when Claire described She Said as 'down an alleyway' and 'harder to find'. The locations themselves carry associations of sexual knowledge and open mindedness. Clara, for example, explained how she always took visiting female friends to her favourite Brighton boutique store: 'and they would say "oh I love it, this great, we don't have anything like this in the – you know Home Counties or wherever". So I suppose it was just that whole thing about Brighton being seen as a bit of a sexy city, where anything goes basically – so they just felt liberated that they were able to go and have a look around'. The location of these stores in expensive Southern shopping destinations means that many women are not able to access them; Jennifer lives in York and explained that her favourite sex shop is in London and she only visits very rarely. Tallulah, who had relocated to Brighton from Leeds, explained that 'being in Brighton, you're more exposed to [sex shops for women]. Um so I guess if you lived in London as well it's more apparent there. But yeah certainly in the North, the only sex shops I can think of are down a back street... but I think here they're designed in such a lovely way, and it's pretty shops, and they're welcoming'.

As Tallulah's comment suggests, just as Ann Summers blends in with the aesthetic of feminine high street fashion retailers, small independent sex shops fit into the narrative of aspirational boutique shopping for women. Clara described a store in Brighton's

North Laine: 'it was more like a gift shop and sort of somewhere where a woman would go and look for little items and things for friends, you know buying presents'. Similarly Beatrice explained that shopping in independent sex shops meant that 'you're buying into something a bit softer [than Ann Summers]... it actually feels slightly nicer as well, and the idea of supporting like a local business as well is kind of like a nice idea'. Through association with aspirational middle class shopping practices these stores gain respectability, positioning sex shopping as a tasteful and appropriate performance of middle class feminine sexuality.

The practice of shopping in these stores also aligns with middle class values, as professional, personal and knowledgeable customer service is emphasised. The shops were described as somewhere pleasurable and sociable where shoppers could spend time. On accompanied shopping trips to these boutique stores interactions with the staff were common, such as when the shop assistant in Sh! recognised Rayan and spent some time talking to her about her previous visit. Shelly described Sh! as a great place in London to 'have a cup of tea and have a chat... you never feel uncomfortable in there, you never feel rushed'. In interview Tallulah explained that she valued the fact that 'the shop assistants are female and they suit the environment that they work in'; Clara described the service in her favourite store as not too 'pushy', but 'if you did want advice there was somebody there you go and speak to'; and Jillian explained that the staff in Harmony 'give great advice, cause you can ask them anything. I literally held up a woman last time for half an hour talking about erotica... they're very knowledgeable'.

A small number of independent sex shops also run classes, held in the evenings after the shop has closed to the public, in which an 'expert' speaks about or demonstrates a particular sexual practice or aspect of sexuality. In these classes the knowledge of the expert is highly valued by attendees. Jane spoke about attending a spanking 'salon' in Coco de Mer with 'like-minded people' in which the expert explained 'the different materials and how they feel, so practical things, but also just in terms of controlling the psychology of using them, it can be quite intense. But at the end she got out a whole range of different things that you could pick up and try, and it was a nice a nice way of actually being able to play with things without having half of the general pedestrian public walking past'. In this account the enclosed shop space allows for 'like-minded' knowledgeable customers to enhance their knowledge and practice tactile 'hands on' sex toy shopping. Similarly Jennifer described classes at Sh! as 'friendly', 'helpful', and very 'up front' in describing both how particular implements might be used and what users 'expectations' might be. I attended one such class as part of an accompanied shopping trip with Rayan and was struck by the relationship that was set up between the audience and 'expert' sex writer, who was speaking about sex in non-monogamous relationships:

'[The speaker] was advising the audience to accept their desires and think about the reasons (such as fear and shame) that might hold them back from doing this... The audience members were all taking notes, laughing and

nodding in recognition. At the end almost everyone asked a question or two... a woman asked about safer sex and [the speaker] repeatedly told her to expect/demand that her preferences be met without feeling ashamed. It seemed like the woman was feeling a little uncomfortable or reluctant about this. It really felt as if [the speaker] was very accepting of herself and her sexuality and desires and everyone else was not so much, and needed her help and advice to become more open, accepting and fulfilled'.

As these examples demonstrate, classes in independent sex shops offer 'expert' knowledge and guidance not only about sexual commodities and how to use them, but also perhaps more importantly they instruct attendees about how to feel about their sexuality and sexual activities. The emphasis is on seeking the guidance of an expert in order that the attendee can better work upon coming to know their 'inner' sexual self or sexual psychology. As such they can be seen as examples of technologies of the sexual self in which sexual knowledge must be facilitated by experts, and is framed as central to 'healthy' or 'good' sexuality.

The privileging of sexual knowledge in independent sex shops is not always valued by customers however. On an accompanied shopping trip with Penny, who had not visited a sex shop before, the interaction with the staff member in Brighton sex toy boutique Tickled demonstrated this: 'Penny was looking at the strap on harnesses, dildos and butt plugs as she had explained that she wanted an anal toy to try out with her husband. The shop assistant recommended a few products that were good for "anal training"¹⁴ because of their shape and size, Penny seemed uncomfortable with this and told her she wasn't interested in trying that. The exchange was slightly uncomfortable and Penny made a face at me, rolling her eyes a bit; after we left the shop we spoke about how the woman had been rude. I thought she had not been very perceptive of the kind of products Penny was interested in, and Penny thought the whole idea of anal training was a bit weird'. In her subsequent interview Penny described this interaction further:

'The shop assistant, who I didn't think was a particularly nice or warm person, she was quite abrupt and short tempered. I wouldn't, that put me off. And she seemed extremely, she seemed like to me, a perverse, perverse character in that she talked a lot about – no, I mean I won't say that that's a bit unfair – but she seemed short tempered with a beginner anyway. Who was investigating things and was perhaps not as knowledgeable about anal training and things like that [laughs]... She seemed *extremely* knowledgeable about everything, which is a shame that she wasn't a bit nicer person.

R: Yeah, so that made you feel less comfortable did it?

¹⁴ The practice of training the anus to comfortably accommodate larger objects through 'wearing' increasing sizes of butt plugs for prolonged periods.

P: Mmm, well on the other hand I didn't feel like I was going to shock her!
But I was just asking advice, advice about anal, anal objects for a beginner'

Boutique sex shop spaces represent sexual knowledge as a valuable commodity, and in so doing set the stage for encounters in which 'knowledge' can be conferred or not conferred upon the various performers negotiating the space. The encounter between this shop assistant and Penny was a complex one, as Penny felt intimidated and uncomfortable about her 'beginner' status, but also wary of the shop assistant who is presented here as somehow 'too' sexually knowledgeable. Penny was looking for an object with which to anally stimulate her husband, a 'risque' sexual act perhaps, but one that Penny could fairly unproblematically position within heterosexual practice¹⁵. The shop assistant's suggestion of anal training fell outside of the 'normal' to Penny, who saw the act of training or stretching the anus as strange, unappealing, even 'perverse'. Penny made herself distant from the shop assistant primarily through inviting me to participate in speaking about and laughing at her; indeed, as Penny said in the interview, she hadn't been that distressed by the encounter because I was there: 'I felt fine 'cause you were there! So I felt I was with my posse, I wasn't on my own'. As my notes recall, I did feel the shop assistant had been un-perceptive of Penny's requirements (for a small beginner's anal toy to try out with a male partner), and I did participate in speaking about her after leaving the shop; at the same time I felt wary about Penny's characterisation of the staff member as 'perverse' and her perception of anal training as outside of an acceptable 'norm'. As this incident suggests, negotiations of knowledge in the space of the boutique sex shop are complex, and it is not simply the case that embodying and performing a greater degree of sexual knowledge confers superiority upon the knower. In Penny's perception, the level and nature of the sexual knowledge embodied by the shop assistant did not represent an appropriate or 'normal' orientation towards sexuality, and so she distances her sexual self from the shop assistant and from the store.

It is also important to note that, whilst I have discussed these independent stores collectively, there are representational and experiential distinctions between them. A key one of these is the degree to which they cater 'for women', or, put more clearly, the way in which femininity and womanhood are represented in and by the space. Simone was one interviewee who spoke about this in some detail, as she compared two sex shops 'for women' she had visited in San Francisco and New York. She understood the former location as a 'feminist' space where she was able to talk with the shop assistant and purchase some books about female sexuality. The space felt 'empowering' because 'it was like, it felt that it wasn't something to be ashamed of, you didn't feel like, you know, can I look at this? It felt safe, like a women's space'.

¹⁵ Curran Nault's review of 'pegging' pornography titles such as *Bend Over Boyfriend* (1998), featuring a woman penetrating a man using a strap on dildo, suggests that such cultural representations violate 'the long-standing taboo against male anal eroticism' and potentially move hetero-eroticism away from a exclusively 'phallic-based' regime (2010). Both Penny and Karin discussed 'pegging' with their husbands.

Simone contrasted this with the New York store which she thought 'was presented as a woman's shop, but it just wasn't':

As soon as you walked in you saw, a pole, what do you call them? Pole dancing, a pole dancing pole. So you know, like the commercialism, and they had loads of costumes, you know, like the nurse's outfit and the waitress. So as soon as I walked in I felt like I was in someone else's fantasy. And it was a woman's shop, but you felt like you was in someone else's fantasy that you had to fulfil. And I really reacted – badly, to it... it just, and I know this is weird word and whatever, it made me feel dirty, like something was being done to me.

Simone's feminist politics mean that she cannot align the 'commercialism' of the version of sexuality represented by this store with the idea that the shop would be 'for' women or in their interest. Indeed, participants' perspectives on whether or not a shop was 'for women' suggested that a range of distinctions between discourses of femininity and female sexuality were at play.

As I explained above, 'women friendly' stores usually eschew pink colour palates in favour of more 'grown up' décor. Harmony in London is one exception to this; here the ground floor is decorated in white, pinks and purples with accessories such as hanging bead curtains and pink leather upholstered display stands. Prior to our accompanied shopping trip to Harmony Jillian described her preference for this style: 'Harmony is in bright colours, is in mainly purple colours, and uh, it looks a bit boudoir-ish- um, nice layout... It's very feminine, it's, and you feel instantly at home when you come in here. Um, most sex shops, most, um, backstreet sex shops don't really have that, it's open... I mean, it's uh, the nice colours and bead curtains and the, fluffy sofas'. Jillian suggests that the feminine, bedroom-like appearance of Harmony is what makes her feel 'at home'. In contrast, Jane disliked the 'pinkness' of the other independent sex shop that adopts this aesthetic, Sh! Women's Erotic Emporium in Hoxton, which she visited for the first time on our accompanied shopping trip:

'There was a wall display for breast cancer awareness that was decorated pink with a selection of pink vibrators, and Jane told me she hated all this pink everywhere... After leaving the shop Jane said it wasn't a shop she'd be likely to return to as it wasn't really her style and she didn't feel it had much for her. She hadn't liked the colours, especially pink, she felt she didn't need her sex products to be made soft and feminine in that way... She said she could see why some women would like that shop but it wasn't for her'.

In distancing herself from the 'soft' and 'feminine' space of Sh! Jane reproduced her identity as a more sophisticated and knowledgeable shopper who can 'handle' a more risqué or explicit sex shopping space such as her favoured shop in Covent Garden, Coco de Mer. A particular aspect of the Sh store that Jane told me she disliked was their women focused admission policy as she thought that it 'wasn't equal' and

wouldn't allow her male partner to shop for BDSM accessories. The Sh! Facebook page describes their policy as follows:

The first female sex shop in the UK, Sh! was established on 1st April 1992 as an antidote to sleazy sex shops... our mission has always been to create a comfortable, welcoming and informative atmosphere for women to browse and buy sex toys on line and in our London Store in Hoxton. To maintain the female-focus of our store, we ask for men to visit with a female friend (Sh! Women's Erotic Emporium, 2014).

For those women who had visited Sh in London, or the Brighton shop Tickled which in previous years had a similar policy for the downstairs sex toy section of the store, the women focused nature of the store was key to their experience. In a similar way to the Sh! store's online mission statement, a female focused admission policy is understood to differentiate the store from a 'sleazy' sex shop for men:

'R: So you went into Tickled, and you said that it was kind of woman friendly?

C: Yes.

R: Can you explain a bit more what you mean by that?

C: Um, I guess the fact that there was a big sign saying that men weren't allowed to go downstairs unless they were accompanied by their partners, and I thought that was quite interesting... it wasn't like those private shops from years ago where it would just be a man going in quite furtively then come out with a brown paper bag' (Clara).

'I've always been aware that there are sex shops but sort of in terms of, um, they're seedy places... I just really like the fact that [Sh!] is for women only so you feel safe going in, it doesn't feel seedy, it feels friendly' (Jennifer).

'I like the fact that men aren't allowed in there on their own, I think that's important... you haven't got people hanging around, and I think that's always quite good.

R: Yeah, did you notice that in other shops?

S: Only in the really sleazy ones yeah, the male ones.

R: And how does that make you feel?

S: They're just sleazy aren't they, they're just typical, just exactly what you think a sex shop would be, was like, or is like, but it doesn't need to be these days – you know through the dark door, signs up, prohibited entry, in you go, dirty mags you know, it's just hysterical, quite funny. I find it funny, I didn't find it offensive, I just thought it's just so typical' (Shelly).

As is clear from the extracts above, those women who value the women only nature of these stores confer value upon them through a different relational structure, distinguishing them from licensed sex shops and the predatory or 'furtive' men who frequent them. It is not a coincidence that Clara, Jennifer and Shelly are all in their 40s and 50s. Just as for women in their 20s and 30s for whom Ann Summers is a primary point of reference in a relational landscape of sex shopping, these women take the 'traditional' sex shop as theirs given that it represented their first encounter with or awareness of 'sex shopping'; as Shelly puts it, this is what sex shopping 'was like, or is like, but it doesn't need to be these days'. This set of relational meaning making is key for understanding the way in which contemporary femininity has been constructed through the sex shop 'for women' as a point of departure from the 'seedy' 'backstreet' sex shop and its contingent representation of male sexuality.

Men in raincoats: licenced sex shops

We were going into Soho, and then we went in a sex shop while we were there. And, it was quite a seedy experience, quite a sort of overwhelming, sort of oppressing experience... it struck me that it was down stairs, which gave it that kind of seedy feel 'cause it felt sort of hidden, like you were going into something hidden... [we went in] more just to see, and sort of, [gasps] 'we're doing something shocking just by *looking* at this, even if we're not buying it we've *seen* it, we know it's out there'

As Florence's remembered teenage experience suggests, there is a strong moral element to the geography of the 'traditional' licensed adult sex shop. In line with the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act of 1982, the interiors and contents of such shops are not permitted to be visible from street level, meaning that they commonly have blacked out windows or are situated in basements. Alice described an adult shop that had 'boarded up windows, sort of like neon sign, that says sex shop and then yeah, panelled windows with grills on, and you have to ring the doorbell to get in'. The concealed nature of these spaces and the restriction of access means that they are often understood to represent an illicit or even threatening idea of adult sexuality.

These kind of shops carry clear connotations of taboo sexuality variously referred to by participants as 'backstreet', 'naughty', 'seedy', and, perhaps most revealingly, as shops for a particular kind of man: furtive 'men in raincoats' clutching brown paper bags of pornography. Avoiding an association with such spaces is key to maintaining respectable femininity. As Penny noted: 'I'd never been to a sex shop before, so, um, I thought it was just for old male perverts, who had no partners, lived on their own, sort of bachelors but also sad characters. And I thought it was really male orientated, yeah blacked out shops and somewhere I would never go into, sort of seedy'. These shops were categorically not 'for women'; Jillian set Soho adult shops in direct contrast to the feminine space of Harmony: 'you have the registered sex shop on the basement floor. And then you think, you go in there and it's just plastic packaging, depressing colours,

just there's a grumpy dude standing at the front of the till – bad porn – it doesn't make you feel welcome'. The 'grumpy' service was set in contrast to the friendly and knowledgeable nature of the (usually female) staff in the boutique sex shop; such shops were seen as spaces that prohibited communication and instead created an atmosphere of shame and embarrassment. Claire said that 'everyone's just got paper bags and looking a bit sheepish about it', and Florence described how everyone was 'looking very serious' and 'the old man in the corner' was staring at her and her female friend.

The masculinity associated with such spaces is understood to be, at best, intrusive and unappealing and, at worst, predatory, 'perverted' and dangerous. As Jillian went on to note: 'you have the occasional pervert who just leers at you from his corner, who just spies at you testing whips and going "could she be my mistress?" and stuff like that'. Similarly Jennifer said that, whilst she herself had never been 'accosted' in an adult shop, 'the fact is it could happen, if you go into somewhere like that you're not quite sure of men in there, what they're looking for'. The locations of 'backstreet' sex shops are also associated with danger for women. Instead of being located in busy consumer areas such as the high street or affluent shopping districts, licenced sex shops are frequently located away from other shops¹⁶ (Martin, 2014). Tallulah described an experience of visiting one such location:

'There was this massive sex shop not far from where I used to live, and it was on this industrial site, a massive shop, in Leeds. That was a bit of a weird place... and everybody who saw you going up that alleyway, up that road, knew you were going to the sex shop... It's not very inviting for women to go there on their own. So you'd probably go with a man, or I went with a friend but you probably wouldn't choose to go to an industrial estate on your own.

R: Did it feel weird doing that? Like scary or?

T: It just felt like, it felt a little bit scary, the only people in that area were you know kind of truckers and it was just a very male kind of dominated area, so to be there already made you feel vulnerable, and to then, clearly a sex shop, so you know, you feel even more kind of exposed I guess'.

Visiting this kind of store can carry implications of putting oneself at risk or making oneself vulnerable from danger, implicitly here from male sexual violence.

However, some women did describe visiting licensed sex shops as a potentially pleasurable experience. Curiosity was cited as the main reason for this, with the 'hidden' nature of the space creating a need to explore it, as Claire described: 'I just went in it completely out of curiosity because the windows were blacked out [laughs]

¹⁶ The obvious exception to this is the high volume of licensed sex shops in London's Soho, of which Melissa Tyler gives a comprehensive legal and cultural overview (2011).

like “I wanna have a look now” because it’s there...I guess it’s tantalising, there is that kind of thing you walk past it and you want to know what’s inside’. As Tyler argues in her ethnography of Soho sex shop workers, the licensed sex shop is a space tainted with associations of dirtiness, cheapness, dubious morality and risk; but these spaces can also be tempting, tantalising and pleasurable precisely because of this liminality (2011). Tyler draws upon Kristeva’s notion of the abject to describe the dual disgust and pleasure that draws customers into sex shops, arguing that ‘not only the pains but also the pleasures, the dirt and the desire’ of the licensed sex shop should be acknowledged (1494).

Marvelling at the ‘dirtiness’ and ‘weirdness’ of these shop spaces also involves ironic and humorous pleasures. Agatha was the interviewee who described this pleasure in the greatest detail, and suggested we visit one such shop in Manchester on our accompanied shopping trip. She explained that she thought I might be interested to visit this shop as it is something of an oddity; the ‘sex shop’ section is concealed at the back of a large basement emporium selling second hand clothing, records, books and homewares among other items:

Agatha headed straight to the back of the shop. On the left there was a sales counter with a man reading a magazine behind it, then on the right was a narrow space concealed behind a long bookcase; it was full of porn magazines, books and DVDs, and glass cabinets along the middle full of sex toys. There were second hand items mixed in, such as pulp fiction novels and a ‘vintage’ porn magazine section, Agatha pointed these out and said she thought they were cool, reading out some of the funny titles. The sex toys were quite traditional hard plastic dildos. She pointed out one called ‘Ladyfinger’ and we both laughed at the name. The whole encounter was framed by curiosity, surprise and humour: I was saying how weird and unexpected it was to find a sex shop here and she agreed, telling me about how her and a previous boyfriend had stumbled across this part of the shop and found it really strange and funny.

Visiting this location was not a ‘shopping’ trip in the conventional sense of looking for potential items to consume. Instead this kind of visit involves curiosity, laughter, astonishment, and a knowing form of ironic distancing. In her interview Agatha compared the ‘backstreet’ shop to Ann Summers:

[I’ve mainly visited] kind of the weird ones on the corners. Um, and they’re kind of still tacky but less glossy and pink, bit grittier.

R: That’s interesting, they’re tacky in a different way, how’s that?

A: A bit more real, cause it’s not as commercialised and glossy and like, they’ll have these massive fists and stuff and you wouldn’t find anything like that in Ann Summers, well I don’t know maybe you do now, but when I went in you didn’t... with that stuff yeah, yeah giant fists and sci-fi vaginas – that’s

just kind of like, who buys that? There must be a market for it to get made, it's kind of –

R: Yeah it is interesting, 'cause it seems like the most fun thing about those products is just like, going, 'oh my god!'

A: Yeah, yeah, it's extreme. And it is quite entertaining sometimes, 'cause like all the vibrators and stuff, they can be quite normal, but some of the things in there, there just like astonishing, that someone could use that, or it is to me personally. I know people like pain and stuff but that would be just, yeah [laughs].

R: So is it like, does that take any of the shyness away from it?

A: Yeah definitely, I haven't been on my own in a sex shop yet but I think it's kind of good with friends, just to have a look, it is kind of curiosity a lot also, just to see what kind of stuff is out there.

For Agatha, who did not visit Ann Summers for fear of embarrassment or being judged, the pleasure in visiting these 'grittier' shops appears to lie in the performance of shock and laughter with friends. In entering these shops as a curious observer she practices an astonished and entertained form of sex shopping that detaches her from the role of a 'sex shopper' who might buy or use any of the items on display. These shops are presented as edgy and risqué, containing things that Ann Summers would never dream of stocking. As Evans and Riley suggest, the ability of young women to perform humorous and ironic 'shocked' reactions to sexual materials such as 'extreme' pornography is a key 'mark of knowingness' (2015, 71). The humour of this orientation is a crucial distancing mechanism, as women perform 'pleasure in transgressing norms and in an ability to view extreme sexual practices, so long as this is for the purpose of knowing about these practices and not taking part in them' (2015, 69). In Agatha's account the 'other people' who might buy and use the 'extreme' sex toys in the licensed store are framed as sexually strange and incomprehensible, distant from her own sexuality at the same time as she is fascinated by them.

More broadly, it is worth considering the way that feminised sex shopping, whether in Ann Summers or boutique stores, gains respectability and acceptability through a kind of 'othering' or abjection process. As Alice put it, the 'seedy backstreet' sex shop is 'completely the opposite of Ann Summers'. Tallulah also set her description of the 'weird' and 'scary' backstreet sex shop against the feminine boutique sex shops in Brighton: 'It just feels like the kind of place you want to go in... it would feel like a totally normal thing to do really. I think it's really good, I think women should embrace their sexuality'. Traditional sex shops with their associations of seediness, shame, perversion and, perhaps most importantly, the figure of the strange, furtive, potentially predatory, single male shopper are entirely what the 'friendly', 'open' shop for women is not. The feminised sex shop, through location, layout, staff interaction and product range wholly negates the spectre of the secretive and strange masculine form of

'seedy' sex shopping. In so doing these stores have successfully made sex shopping something almost entirely 'normal' and safe so that women can practice sexual consumption proudly and openly. In the same move however, sex shops for women become associated with a 'healthy' and 'normal' feminine orientation towards sex and sexuality so that not to take part in this culture is to be cast as *unhealthy*, with a problematic attitude to sex that must be worked upon and changed. The othering or abjection of the 'seedy' sex shop, then, is precisely what so firmly cements the feminine sex shop into a disciplinary regime of the neoliberal sexual self.

As Hubbard et al. argue, the forms of commodified sex that are 'mainstreamed' – thriving in prime urban shopping and leisure locations, forming chains tied into wider corporate interests, and meeting with little to no resistance from councils and local residents – are most revealing of dominant cultural and social values around gender and sexuality (2011). The success of feminised sex shopping, whether boutique or mainstream, is predicated upon its repudiation of the 'seedy' licenced sex shop. This represents and strengthens the mainstreaming of a regulatory regime of female sexuality as confident, unashamed and most importantly, expressed through knowledgeable and tasteful sexual consumption.

This chapter has demonstrated the way in which locations and forms of sex shopping form a complex relational landscape within which sex shoppers make choices that allow them to embody the 'right' kind of orientation towards sexuality. Through affinities expressed and distinctions made between different modes of sex shopping, gendered, sexual and class identities are produced in ways that are intelligible in postfeminist culture. Boutique sex shopping intertwines values of taste and knowledge, and invites women to articulate and re-make their sexual selves through the techniques of 'expert' knowledge. Finally, the key distinction made between sex shopping 'for women', and 'seedy', risky or taboo 'backstreet' sex shopping is what truly cements the role of sexual consumerism within the neoliberal regime of the sexual self. However, whilst this chapter has necessarily focused closely on the sex shop as a space of representation and experience (Hubbard, 2002), sex shopping practices do not end when a purchase is made (or not made). The following two chapters investigate the main groups of sexual product sold in sex shops for women – lingerie and sex toys – in order to explore how the meanings and values associated with these commodities are negotiated in practice.

The Sexy Body: Wearing Lingerie

I think the first time I actually bought something was, awfully, from an Ann Summers party... So there were kind of things in the catalogue, it starts off with the lingerie, and then as you go through it gets sort of dirtier or sluttier, or whatever, um, and sort of the hardcore stuff is nearer the back and so you, everyone's kind of ordering furtively from the front pages. (Florence, in interview)

Lingerie is often positioned as a safe 'way in', or as a more socially acceptable form of sex shopping, set against the purchase of 'dirtier or sluttier' products such as bondage items, dildos or vibrators. As Florence notes, the Ann Summers catalogue reproduces this distinction. I examined in the previous chapter the distinction produced by Ann Summers store layouts where lingerie predominates in the front of the store, and sex toys are concealed within circular display partitions or down stairs. Indeed, the very reason that Ann Summers and other independent erotic stores for women escape licencing regulation is that lingerie, which makes up the majority of their product, is not deemed 'inappropriate' nor is it seen to be explicitly designed for sexual activity (Martin, 2014). This effectively draws both spatial and moral boundaries regarding what is safe and acceptable and what should be hidden or private with regard to heterosexual sexual expression. The desire to display the female body is constructed as an appropriate *public* act, whilst toys and products that speak to genital or other bodily pleasures need to be private, concealed and discreet. This reproduces normative constructions in which the sexual display of the lingerie clad female body is, particularly in heterosexual relationships, an often expected component of the sexual desires and practices of both men and women.

This chapter focuses on the 'everyday significance' of lingerie in feminine women's lives (Juffer, 1998, 8), from the moment of browsing and purchase to the multiple sexual and non-sexual contexts in which it is put on, worn, and taken off the body. Women's engagement with the representation of lingerie and the ways that they enact and speak about lingerie buying and wearing in their everyday lives show complex and often incongruous strategies of accommodation and negotiation. These strategies make buying and wearing lingerie gratifying for feminine women in a number of ways, whilst at the same time potentially critiquing and even resisting some of the norms of femininity that lingerie represents. Lingerie is made pleasurable through the use of 'nice' lingerie to construct respectable classed gender identities, to work on relationships and bodies, and to gain sexual pleasure in being the object of visual desire. In talking about these pleasures women often express forms of anxiety, ambivalence or laughter. I contend that it is precisely through this contradictory engagement that strategic counter discourses emerge, by which the respectable norms of female sexuality represented by lingerie are resisted, contested, or simply 'made do' with in various ways.

In particular, the accounts explored in this chapter demonstrate the complex effects of foregrounding the *embodied* experience and feelings of wearing lingerie. This discourse has the potential to exceed or even circumvent the dominant code of the female body as an object of visual pleasure, replacing it with a more ambivalent narrative of bodily pleasures, sensations, and (dis)comforts. Laughter also emerges as a strategy by which women can distance themselves and refuse to take seriously the gender performance produced by 'dressing up' in lingerie, and instead enact that performance in pleasurably playful and potentially non-normative ways.

'Lingerie'

The broad definition of 'lingerie' that I employ here relates primarily to items of underwear purchased and worn for use in a sexual context. Often, underwear worn in this setting involves the addition of other garments beyond the practical everyday bra and knickers. These items might include suspender belts, stockings, corsets, waspies, bodies, babydoll dresses, body stockings, and so on. It may also include 'dress up' costumes such as a 'schoolgirl' or 'French maid', burlesque items including nipple tassles and gloves, or bondage accessories like blindfolds and cuffs. However, for some women 'lingerie' may be as simple as a matching bra and knicker set from M&S. As Tsaousi argues, women use different kinds of underwear to construct different aspects of the self at different times: from worker, to sports player, mother or sexual partner (2011). My primary focus here then is on underwear worn for a sexual purpose, defined as lingerie.

Given the interview context of 'sex shopping', women did tend to focus on underwear for sexual use. From Ann Summers to independent sex boutiques and even traditional licenced sex shops, almost all erotic shops stock some form of lingerie. However, women also purchase a range of products that could be described as lingerie from more 'ordinary' high street department stores including M&S, BHS, and Debenhams, underwear stockists such as La Senza and Bravissimo, or more expensive designer outlets such as Agent Provocateur. These lingerie outlets, whilst not understood as 'sex shops', regularly employ products, advertising and display to reproduce a normative ideal of 'sexiness' based upon the visual showcasing of the 'sexy' female body (Morrison, 2007).

Lingerie shopping, then, is 'relationally constituted' (Gregson et al., 2002). I explored the relational landscape of sex shopping in the previous chapter, but in the case of lingerie shopping this landscape extends beyond 'sex shops' to include a range of underwear shopping environments with different sexual and taste connotations. I explore some of these connotations further below, but note here that the women interviewed were aware and often critical of the distinctions they perceived between 'sexy' and 'everyday' lingerie. Some women, including Beatrice, Clara and Jade, were keen to assert that 'lingerie' such as stockings and suspender belts was something they liked to wear every day, and not just when they anticipated wearing it in a sexual context. In contrast, Florence was critical of the way in which 'uncomfortable' styles

with sexual connotations, such as lace and revealing cuts, have become ubiquitous and almost unavoidable in more 'everyday' underwear designs and stores. So whilst I am working with the definition of lingerie outlined above, there is clearly a degree of negotiation with, and slippage between, the categories of 'everyday underwear' and 'sexual lingerie'.



Figure 4 - Ann Summers 2014 catalogue

The popular visual representations of lingerie that are promoted to women through branding, catalogues and advertising emphasise the display of the body as an object of visual sexual pleasure. The Ann Summers Autumn/Winter 2014 catalogue encourages readers to 'unleash their inner vixen' in matching lingerie sets, 'dress-up' costumes and 'asset-enhancing' bras and corsets (2). The emphasis is on women having 'flirtatious' fun in presenting their bodies as the 'perfect gift' for a (male) partner (fig. 1). The text accompanying the role play costumes in particular frames explicitly the kinds of heterosexual practices and pleasures promised by outfits such as 'Naughty Nurse' ('give him a fever while you impress him with your sexy bedside manner!') and 'Sergeant Sexy' ('you'll have him banged to rights') (2014, 22)

A small number of scholars have explored the norms promoted through this visual culture of lingerie, which reflects the wider postfeminist

cultural shift towards representing women as 'active' sexual agents (Gill, 2003). Since at least the 1990s, lingerie advertising has sold back to women the figure of 'the sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman who plays with her sexual power and is for ever "up for it."' (Gill, 2009), with the 1994 'Hello Boys' Wonderbra campaign being a notable example (Winship, 2000). There is a homogeneity to the kinds of female bodies that are visible in such representations, with feminine, slim, white, young female bodies dominating the visual landscape. The emphasis is upon women's 'choice' to present their bodies as sexually desirable objects for visual consumption, where the parameters of 'sexiness' are persistently narrow (Amy-Chinn, 2006).

Talking bodies

An analysis of the practices of buying and wearing lingerie necessitates an engagement with an embodied narrative that is wholly absent from the visual emphasis on 'looking sexy' that pervades lingerie representations. I have already examined the way in which the body is foregrounded when shopping for lingerie, as women consider how their bodies might look in lingerie, go through the sometimes anxious and uncomfortable experience of trying on items in the fitting rooms, and

imagine the gaze of an absent partner. In accompanied shopping trips, talking about and shopping for lingerie often involved the discussion of bodies, both the participants and my own. Similarly, when participants spoke in interview about wearing lingerie they did not only – or even primarily – talk about how it looks, but also how it feels; the bodies multiple sensations and responses to being in lingerie. Talking about lingerie in this way often involved an embodied construction of meaning that can be somewhat difficult to capture in written form. For example, Claire explained that: ‘the sexier the underwear the less comfortable it tends to be, and the more you go [pushes breasts up] with your tits, and you’ve got whalebones in here [pushes fingers under arms] y’know, digging in’. Participants frequently touched parts of their bodies or used their body language and posture to convey the feelings of wearing lingerie that they were describing.

In this chapter I explore further the particular significance of the body to understanding women’s engagement with lingerie. In these accounts the body itself – its pleasures, comforts, discomforts, and ability to ‘fit into’ lingerie – is the vehicle through which lingerie and its attendant discourse of femininity and female sexuality is reproduced or challenged in often shifting and contradictory ways. This is crucial precisely because an *embodied* narrative, even one that aligns lingerie with physically pleasurable sensations, appears to in some way exceed the dominant visual code of the ‘sexy body’ that pervades lingerie representation. A number of scholars have theorised this shifting and often contradictory potential of the body as a site of resistance to gender norms.

Susan Bordo’s feminist theorisation of the role that the body plays in accommodating and resisting regimes of power draws heavily on the Foucauldian idea of the ‘docile body’ (1993). She argues that homogenous mass culture images of the female body act as normalising forces against which women measure and modify themselves. Through every day practises of embodied self-regulation the body becomes disciplined, ‘less socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification’ (166) These everyday body modification and maintenance practises are very often experienced as being pleasurable and freely chosen (27). Bordo contends that these willing reproductions of normative femininity necessitate an analysis of power ‘from below’, drawing on Foucault (167). For Foucault power operates through the shaping and proliferation as well as the repression of desire. Bordo contends that this framework allows scholars to be alert to the ways in which ‘local and minute’ forms of resistance might emerge gradually, paradoxically, and through those very acts that seemingly conform to ‘prevailing norms’ (28). It is precisely because gender power relations are sustained through embodied practises that they are so unstable and can be perpetually disrupted or resisted in unpredictable ways (262).

Shelley Budgeon’s analysis of her interviews with young women about their relationships to their bodies develops Bordo’s approach (2003). Budgeon argues that women do not simply internalise and discipline themselves in relation to mass media representations of the female body. Instead, she contends, women enter into complex

and contradictory strategies of negotiation with norms ‘in ways that suggest that the body is best theorized as a borderline’ (43):

Bodies then can be thought not as *objects*, upon which culture writes meanings, but as *events* that are continually in the process of becoming – as multiplicities that are never just found but are made and remade (50).

By situating the body as a temporal event in continual movement and flux we can account for the ways in which embodied practices are constantly negotiated on the borderline of the flesh, allowing for minute shifts in the distribution of power. The idea of the body ‘as becoming’ draws on a Deleuzian approach that theorises bodies in terms of what they do and how they are lived, asking what ‘capacities, capabilities, and transformations’ may be possible (Coffey, 2012, 4). As Grimshaw contends, women can make active interventions into bodily practices and habits that impact upon their ways of being in often positive ways that exceed an understanding of the female body as docile and conforming to ‘ideological pressures’ (1999, 115). Female bodies ‘become’ through the continual negotiation of the relationship between the body and femininity: a negotiation that can be experienced as constrained, anxious or alienating at the same time as it can be playful, pleasurable or empowering (Frost, 2005, 83). Buying and wearing lingerie represents one aspect of everyday life through which women make and remake processural and embodied feminine identities.

The women who took part in this research were often acutely cognisant of the impact that the visual culture of lingerie had on their perception of their own ‘sexiness’. Narrow visual representations of women in lingerie were on occasion brought into conversation by participants in interview, demonstrating a ‘clear awareness of the mediation of their own relationship to their bodies’ (Budgeon, 2003, 40). One example of this was from Florence, who spoke about a recent Marks and Spencer’s lingerie campaign featuring a ‘size 6’, ‘beautiful’, ‘buxom’ model:

And you’re like oh *God* – *that’s* what he’s expecting when I take off my clothes, that’s what *I’m* expecting [laughing]. And yet when I wear this underwear I do *not* look like that! I think, somehow I thought lingerie was like this magical cure and everything would just, “poof!” into perfection.

In this quote Florence laughs at the way in which she feels the visual norms of female beauty in lingerie advertising have shaped her impression of her body and her high expectations of lingerie’s transformative potential. Although it is clear that representations of women’s bodies and sexualities in lingerie advertising have had an impact on her body image, Florence is also very much aware and critical of this mediation of the relationship to her body. It is this ambivalent and critical process of negotiation, shown here by Florence in response to advertising imagery, that women also undertake through the practises of buying and wearing lingerie in their everyday lives.

As Bordo's Foucauldian framework shows (1993), power constitutes women within regulatory regimes, but it also actively shapes our desires and pleasures, so that such regimes can be lived and felt by women as something done 'of and for themselves' (Frost, 2005, 73). Women use a number of discursive strategies through which lingerie wearing is shown to be not only liveable but actively pleasurable for the wearer as well as the viewer. In the following sections, I examine how pleasure is constructed through discourses of taste and 'niceness', and looking/feeling good. I then explore the more ambivalent themes of relationship and body work and anxiety, before focusing on the strategic counter discourses of (dis)comfort and laughter.

The Pleasures of 'Nice' Lingerie

Class identifications frequently intersect with gender in women's lingerie choices and uses. Merl Storr (2002, 2003) provides an insight into the ways in which lingerie buying constructs classed gender identities. Storr shows that judgements of different lingerie products as 'tarty' 'tacky' 'vulgar' or 'classy' are deeply embedded in ideas of respectable femininity (2003). As the previous chapter suggested, descriptions of Ann Summers lingerie often involved references to 'tacky' role play outfits (Claire) and 'cheap', 'tiny' costumes with 'no authenticity' (Florence). I have argued that the idea of Ann Summers is decried as a way of making the shopper distinct from an othered 'inferior' form of classed femininity. The sexuality attached to Ann Summers is seen as inauthentic, 'porny', 'stereotypy' or, as Clara described, a 'man's idea of what's sexy'. The performance of femininity that rejects this inauthentic display is therefore positioned as more feminine, more tasteful, and above all more authentic; as tasteful lingerie is constructed as a more genuine reflection of the woman who wears it.

One word that was used overwhelmingly in descriptions of lingerie that women liked was 'nice', with frequent descriptions of 'nice underwear', or 'nice things' in 'nice colours'. 'Nice' underwear was primarily defined through what it was described as *not* being: it was often contrasted with bright colours and 'cheap' designs, such as when Claire expressed her dislike for 'Barbie pink', Agatha felt that nice bras were not 'cheap ones from Primark', and Clara spoke about the red underwear she had bought in her twenties and now thought was tacky and horrible. It is also not too revealing: Florence described nice underwear as not too 'tiny', Agatha disliked thongs, and both Shelly and Karin expressed their distaste for unflattering, exposing peephole bras. Beyond this definition of what 'nice' lingerie was not like, descriptions were often rather vague, with women mentioning 'nice materials' (Agatha), 'nice subdued colours' (Beatrice), or 'something that fits nicely' (Clara). This 'niceness', particularly when opposed to other words that might have been chosen such as 'sexy' or 'gorgeous', seems to sum up a pretty, tasteful, feminine style of lingerie that is safe and respectable, valued primarily for its *inoffensiveness*.

'Nice' was also sometimes set against dull, everyday, practical underwear. Wearing something 'nice' in this sense was a treat for yourself, making women feel better about themselves and their bodies, as Jade described: 'I know I'm sort of wearing something

nice, I don't know, it just makes me feel quite like confident in a way, I don't know, it just makes me feel better'. Overall 'nice' appears to connote a pretty, soft version of femininity which is special and different from the everyday, but at the same time carries no risk of appearing to be distasteful.

One lingerie aesthetic that a smaller number of participants expressed a preference for was the trend for 'burlesque' or 'vintage' underwear styles referencing 1950s 'pin up' style. The discourse of 1950s underwear appears to do something more for these women than simply avoid distastefulness. It carried connotations of sophistication and style, as Agatha described: 'I think it really pretty and feminine and like, quite elegant... I just think it looks really like grown up and nice'. Beatrice, Agatha and Tallulah all described this style of underwear as more 'comfortable' to wear because it was less skimpy and revealing of the body: Agatha preferred 'long line bras' and 'bigger knickers'. This covering up of flesh was also presented as a better fit for 'curvy' or 'shapely' feminine bodies, offering an alternative mode of display that Beatrice described:

I think in a sort of fashionable sense, in that at the moment I like 50s looking vintage style, something that's quite shapely and you know makes you feel sexy. That's the nice thing about underwear is that it makes you feel really nice. But something that isn't like you know, bum cleavage and peep hole bras, that's again sort of hilarious, hilarious because I find it the opposite of sexy, for me, because I find that it's really presenting yourself as a sexual object, which in some ways you are doing when you have sex, but I think for me I want to have control and direct it in the way I feel that my sexuality goes.

Wearing this style of lingerie opens up a form of displaying the visually pleasing body that is somehow qualified differently from the dominant aesthetic of the scantily clad body as 'sexual object'. Tallulah used a similar framework:

So [burlesque] was kind of a little bit more appealing to women I guess, and seeing a way of being sexy without being – a slut [laughs]. Because it's always seemed a bit slutty to me before that, so it became, it looked a bit more sophisticated and a bit more sexy, as opposed to slutty.

R: So what's that lingerie like?

T: Well, it's not necessarily as revealing, it can be, but it's a bit nicer, made nicer, to wear. Darker colours, so not just like bright reds, still quite kinky but not, it just seems like a bit more of a pleasure for the woman to wear it just as much as a pleasure for the man to see it, where before it all seemed the other way around to me.

Taste and class discourses are clearly playing an important role here; Tallulah compared burlesque style to the 'slutty' aesthetic of pin ups in 'garages or mechanics'

torn from 'page three'¹⁷. Also contained within these accounts is the ascribing of sexual agency to the wearer of tasteful 1950s underwear that is wholly denied for the female 'sexual object' in a bright red peephole bra. The women who wears vintage style underwear is understood here to be acting in her own interests and for her own pleasure, inspired by what Agatha described as the 'creativity' and 'humour' of the burlesque performer. Ferreday has written of the inherent contradiction in burlesque by which normative femininities are both parodied and, on occasion, re-naturalised (2008, 49). It is clear from Agatha, Beatrice and Tallulah's accounts that the adaptation of burlesque style does afford feelings of 'control', but at the same time this sexual agency is reified as an intrinsically respectable middle class privilege.

Beyond conveying a tasteful and respectable femininity, 'looking good' – or more precisely looking sexually desirable – is one of the central tenets of wearing lingerie. These accounts speak about how it *feels* to 'look good'; and a complex relationship was established between feeling and appearing in participant's accounts. In many cases, wearing lingerie was positioned as a kind of 'trade off', building upon a discourse of sexual 'reciprocity' (Braun et al., 2003). So on the one hand, lingerie was something a woman would wear 'for' the visual pleasure of a partner, and was often explicitly framed as a gift through its purchase for wear on a special occasion such as a birthday, anniversary, Christmas or Valentine's Day. Jade described this as making the occasion 'different' and 'a bit more special'. Claire spoke about the effort she put into choosing colours and designs her partner would like: 'If I buy stockings and suspenders I'm not really concerned about what I like... I'm buying it for him and with something I think he'll like in mind'. Doing something 'for' a partner was individualised through its expression as a practise of loving and caring for that person. Claire believed she was doing something 'good for the relationship' and elaborated that: 'you feel a bit like making an effort, and, particularly when you've been in a relationship for a while, it's nice to kind of surprise them'. Similarly, Agatha said that 'I think it's just making the effort isn't it? And it's just doing something for someone else as well'.

The emotional work involved in this kind of relationship improvement is coded as feminine. Even Jade, who spoke about buying lingerie for Valentine's Day with her female partner, was aware that buying lingerie to make an occasion special was something she did, and her partner did not: 'it's more likely to be me that does that to be honest. Um, also she's not very good at keeping surprises so I don't think she'd be able to do the same'. The work involved in preparing, keeping and revealing the 'gift' of the lingerie clad body is a feminised form of emotional and embodied labour. Importantly, the actual labour involved in this is wholly obscured through the 'surprise' element, which reveals only the perfected image of the lingerie clad body to the unknowing spectator. As Jade described: 'not that I made a big deal but it was just

¹⁷ 'Page three' refers to the topless model who appears daily in the Sun newspaper; Tallulah is drawing upon the association of the page and the newspaper with working class masculinities.

like, when I got undressed or whatever it was there'; and Claire described her body in lingerie as 'a treat for him yeah, like a sort of package'.

Importantly however, this 'gift' was framed as having important personal benefits for the giver. Claire asserted that she would get something in return: 'I mean you get kind of like a nice night out of it, and appreciation, and good sex and whatever'. Tallulah described a similar kind of exchange:

Well I suppose you do it for both of you don't you... yeah it gives you confidence as a woman to be admired by your partner, which, you kind of think they would do anyway, but sometimes we all need reassuring don't we, and I guess it's just to give to both you, to make them excited and make you feel more confident.

For the wearer there is a promise of confidence, reassurance and appreciation that the body looks good. The moment of being looked at with appreciation and desire is essential here, as it confirms that it was worth 'making the effort' and promises to remove any anxiety or embarrassment. Claire explained the emotions building up to revealing the surprise of her lingerie clad body:

I do actually find it quite daunting like, once you kind of get going it's alright because, you get a good reaction and sort of confirms what you've done is good, and it's nice and you feel sexy, and y'know, you can forget about your hang-ups and you don't worry about it...but, but, the whole leading up to it, even if you think they'll like it, there's always a bit in the back of my mind that goes 'he's just going to laugh at you anyway'.

There is an emotional risk involved here then, and a fear of humiliation that the body will not be deemed desirable. Similarly, Tallulah described feeling embarrassed and self-critical when she began performing a striptease for her partner:

R: So what does that feel like, doing a strip for someone?

T: Yeah, it's slightly, it's fun but a little bit embarrassing at the same time [laughs], cause you always think, oh we're all self-critical, but then you look at their face and they're like, 'yeah', so you're like, ok, I'll keep doing this, but it's a bit weird, but ok –

R: So does it get better with the reaction?

T: Yeah totally, yeah you need a positive reaction definitely, well I do anyway, so yeah just seeing the reaction and it's like yeah, ok, I'll keep going, this is good, this is working.

In this account Tallulah emphasises the importance of her partner's positive reaction, allowing her to gauge that the revealing of her body is 'working' and to keep going despite her embarrassment. In both these accounts the moment of validation provided

by the desiring gaze promises to remove any feelings of insecurity, anxiety and pressure. Being looked at and desired provides a moment of forgetting, where 'hang-ups' and self-criticism melt away. This deferred moment of being looked at, and its role in confirming success, is the solution to, but also partially the source of anxieties about the body, although it is not explicitly named as such in these accounts.

Looking good on the outside, and being assured of that fact by the gaze of a partner, is experienced as pleasurable then, despite the anxieties involved in pulling off the performance. Agatha told me: 'it's nice feeling wanted and being looked at'; and Shelly said: 'You want to look nice when you start to take your clothes off. I think it's partly about wanting to feel good about yourself as well'. Feelings of body confidence were important not only in terms of how the body appears but also in terms of what it can do. The knowledge that one 'looks good' on the outside was described as giving the wearer an inner feeling of confidence and sexiness, the implication being that this feeling will lead to better, more pleasurable sex. Jade said that the feeling that she looked good in lingerie made her feel 'more confident in the things I'm doing' when performing sexual activities with her partner.

Wearing lingerie also promises a feeling of sexual excitement and anticipation, as Tallulah said, 'you know it's going to lead to something else, and gets you both quite excited'. Alice too explained that, 'it totally gets you going I think, like nice underwear gets you as well as your partner going'. Wearing lingerie could also enable women to shape both the timing and the pace of sexual activity. It could be used as a signal to initiate sex, as Beth described: 'if we're at home it's often like, he'll be downstairs working or doing something, and I'll put something on and go and try and distract him [laughs]'. As Claire said 'it is quite empowering I think, like if you're taking control of something, you're sort of taking control of that evening'. Beatrice spoke about her use of lingerie to prolong the 'foreplay' stage of sex, a stage that she suggested her male sex partners are inclined to rush:

So it kind of functions, it's almost like foreplay I think, that point of like I'm almost undressed but I'm not and that kind of teasing state, which is a sexy thing, is a nice thing, it's something a lot of people skip! [laughs]... it's kind of my personal thing of presenting how far I want to go at certain moments, and I feel like it's that space in-between where I'm still able, not that you can't change your mind when you're completely naked, but it gives that kind of breathing space.

Whilst lingerie wear is a 'gift' for a partner in some senses, it was clearly important for women to discursively frame this as something that also benefited them: something 'for me' as well as 'for' a partner's gaze. This is achieved through the overlapping discourses of 'making the effort', body confidence, and better sex. The importance of this reciprocal framing of lingerie was further revealed when women spoke about situations in which lingerie was not equally beneficial to both the wearer and the spectator. This could be spoken about in the abstract as when Alice speculated that 'I

suspect that some people wear it in that “well, I’m wearing it *for you*”, some people might wear it thinking “oh they’ll like that and they’ll find me attractive in this”. Clara related her own experience with an ex-partner some years ago:

I did buy some underwear then for my partner at the time, cause I thought, oh, that’s the sort thing to do. But I just found it was all quite cheap, I dunno there was just something about it that was, um, sort of plasticky red and black stuff and it was all very much aimed at, I guess what men were seeing in the porn industry at that time, and the stuff was really uncomfortable so I think I wore it once and that was it, so, never to be seen again, hidden at the back of drawer... I think my partner at the time liked the fact that I had made a bit of an effort for him, but just then you start to questioning, who was I doing it for, was it for him or for me?

In both Alice’s speculation and Clara’s experience, the idea that women would wear lingerie with no thought to their own pleasure or tastes is understood as problematic. Although lingerie does involve the presentation of a visual ‘object’ for the pleasure of a partner’s gaze, normalised within this practice is the understanding that women must actively choose and enjoy the wearing of lingerie. This takes into account postfeminist and neoliberal regimes of the sexual self, in which women frame their sexual practices as chosen, reciprocal and pleasurable on their own terms. And yet the visual framework within which the body can be read as ‘sexy’ is troublingly narrow, as the following accounts of the physical labours associated with lingerie wear show.

Body Work

Coffey defines body work as ‘the embodied everyday work that individuals undertake to modify or ‘improve’ their bodies’ (2012, 2). Scholarly approaches to body work attend to the ways in which these practises can be situated within the ‘body project’ of self-improvement required by modern Western neo-liberal culture. Wearing lingerie is, in itself, clearly a form of body work. It is also deeply concomitant with other body improvement practises. The transformation of the female body into a desirable ‘surprise’ for a partner involves multiple connected acts of body work.

Dieting and weight loss was often mentioned by women who sometimes felt ‘too fat’ for certain lingerie styles. As Shelly explained: ‘nice lingerie is uncomfortable when you’re fat, it really is... and if I put on 4 or 5 pounds the thongs are not so comfortable’. Monitoring her diet to make sure her weight did not increase is linked to the image she wants to create through lingerie. For Agatha, hair removal was part of the surprise to prepare for a sexual partner: ‘Like I would wax everything sometimes, and that is the surprise element, cause I think that’s like you get down and touch and it’s all gone, that’s like quite good shock for them’. Lingerie provides an impetus to carry out related body work as it is so often positioned as something ‘special’: an occasion for which the body must be prepared and perfected.

Claire spoke in more detail about the micro bodily modifications, such as gesture, posture and dress that went into wearing lingerie for her:

You do have to plan *a lot*, like what you wear over the top... if you put anything on that shows any kind of lines... if you want it to be a surprise, and you're out with your boyfriend, you don't want him like, feeling anywhere [laughs]... Like round your thighs or anything, so you get into this like, weird, and y'know, you sit differently, you do act differently when you're in it because, just physically because you don't want the lines to show and you don't want anyone to touch it and feel it.

Claire makes clear the multiple forms of body work that are associated with lingerie. These physical and emotional labours are invisible to her male partner, indeed, the reason behind them is to maintain his lack of knowledge of the work she has put in, and on which the success of the final spectacle is contingent. The work of creating the spectacle is inextricable from the work of concealing that labour, as Ferreday argues; 'the feminine subject must constantly work to conceal the labour and anxiety involved in its production' (2008, 56). However, I do not wish to obscure the pleasure that can be gained from this work; Claire's description does suggest that an embodied sense of (sexual) anticipation and excitement is involved in the awareness and constraint of wearing lingerie. Beatrice also described the pleasure of being reminded of a thrilling 'secret' by the sensation of lingerie: 'I feel like I've got something physically lovely against my skin and that's a really nice feeling'. These minor, embodied sensations speak to the everyday textures and pleasures involved in the performance of femininity, and cannot quite be accounted for by the visual imperative of the sexy body reproduced through lingerie.

Of course, these forms of body work also exert countless pressure and anxieties about not being 'sexy enough'. Comments about body size were the primary form through which the anxieties related to lingerie were expressed. This anxiety was felt when wearing lingerie but also, as I have explored, when browsing in shops and looking at different designs. Florence spoke about the range of images of women in lingerie 'looking really hot' that are displayed not only in 'sex shops' but all underwear stores and departments, indicating that her own body was lacking in comparison: 'there's me, with bits rolling out all over the sides'. Claire spoke about failing to perform the much anticipated 'surprise' reveal because of anxieties that were attributed in part to feeling 'too fat': 'I've wimped out before, y'know if I'm feeling particularly fat on a day or something I've wimped out. I've wimped out literally before we get in bed before, like, pulled it all off and hidden it under the bed'. These feelings reflect what Bordo describes as the effects of continual body work practises: 'we continue to memorise on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough' (1993, 166). Budgeon explores the way in which these feelings of bodily failure and dissatisfaction are routinely accepted and normalised in women's talk (2003, 44). However, a discourse of discomfort, whilst anxiously positioning the body as failed, can at the same time suggest an ambivalent form of critique, where

'discomfort' with the performance of visually desirable femininity represented by wearing lingerie can be expressed.

(Dis)comfort

Comfort was something that was regularly raised when discussing what lingerie styles women would or wouldn't choose. Descriptions of items as 'uncomfortable' often seemed to overlap with some of the issues I have explored, including bodily anxieties, such as when Shelly described how thongs are 'uncomfortable when you're fat'; or taste distinctions, when 'cheap' lingerie was described as nasty and scratchy. The offered solution to these forms of discomfort might be to alter the body, or to become a 'better' consumer and choose more comfortable products.

Florence was one interviewee who spoke about this issue at greater length, and I explore her narrative in some detail here. Her interview demonstrates the potential for discomfort to be discursively deployed as a form of critique of some of the gender norms circulated around lingerie. Florence implied that the practicalities of having sex wearing lingerie are awkward and uncomfortable for her. While initially she suggested that a better, well-fitting product would solve these feelings, as she continued, her 'discomfort' with lingerie was constructed as more complex. In particular, she spoke about her discomfort with the pressure to 'appear' as the perfect visual object for the gaze of a male partner, something that she had tried unsuccessfully to do in the past:

I just felt very uncomfortable... wearing lingerie and knowing that I'd have to take my clothes off and they'd have to see it. And then you have to prance around a bit 'cause you feel that there's, 'I'm wearing it, therefore you have to see it for a bit'... I think when you wear lingerie you're almost advertising it, so therefore you have to be *in* it for a while, and therefore you have to just be in your pants and bra for a bit, and that just makes me feel uncomfortable.

The memory of the feelings of awkwardness and discomfort were visibly performed by Florence during this section of the interview. She was physically squirming, displaying the embodied sensations she described, and even laughed and asked: 'am I portraying my awkwardness?' The physical feelings that are being remembered, felt and spoken about here are clearly unpleasant, but they also form the foundation of a critique of the expectations produced by lingerie. She describes wearing lingerie as 'advertising' the body. Her discomfort is directed towards what she perceives as the pressure to perform a particular version of femininity, and with the requirement 'be seen' and appreciated visually as an object of sexual desire:

I think lingerie offers that *tease*. So you're kind of like 'hey look at me, I'm wearing something sexy' and you're like 'oh no can't take it off yet', but I just find that I – can't really do that tease, I think lingerie sets up this expectation of sort of what it is to be female, and what it is to have sex, and, sort of like, quite, almost empowering, I think it is quite an empowering

thing. Because if you hold it the right way, you can kind of be like, 'oh yeah, you really wanna have sex with me, but I'm just looking hot in my pants and you can't'. Whereas, I just felt like, so worried about the situation, and so *un-* turned on by the situation, that it didn't work that way.

On the one hand she reiterates a postfeminist discourse of lingerie as 'empowering' for women, giving them ownership and control of their sexuality. This empowering performance is seen as being out of her reach however: 'I can't do that'; 'it didn't work that way'. This contradictory engagement with lingerie wearing is self-berating and self-liberating at the same time: she constructs her femininity as failed (she can't inhabit the empowered sexiness expected of her), and at the same time sets up this norm as unrealistic and unfairly pressurising, an impossible 'expectation' of what it is to be female. Florence's engagement with lingerie here is an example of 'making do' with postfeminist culture through contradiction, expressed in this case through a discourse of discomfort with the performance of femininity required by lingerie. It is precisely the *embodied* nature of her narrative that allows Florence to express her ambivalence towards the pressure to appear and be looked at in lingerie, offering a temporary moment of resistance to the visual imperative of normative femininity.

In their study of young women speaking about their bodies and sexual practises, Maxwell and Aggleton (2011) argue that the female body can be experienced as an 'agentic force'. They demonstrate that feelings of pleasure and/or discomfort are experienced as originating in the body can subsequently (re)direct practise in sexual relationships, allowing young women to assert agency: 'physical and emotional sensations and residues (be they pleasurable, painful or unarticulated) experienced through sexual and intimate relationships may provide the stimulus for potentially new modes of thinking and doing' (310). Florence's articulation of embodied discomfort, her physical feelings of being ill at ease and 'so *un-*turned on' by wearing lingerie, not only redirect her sexual practice but also form the basis of a critique of the imperative to visually perform femininity that lingerie reproduces.

Laughter

The descriptions of pleasure, anxiety and critique analysed so far in this paper show women taking lingerie and its related practises seriously. Indeed, when Claire described her anxiety building up to the moment of surprise reveal, the idea of her partner's humiliating laughter was what was feared. But this was not always the case when participants spoke about wearing lingerie, and indeed some women explicitly valued lingerie precisely for its ability to produce sexual pleasure out of a different kind of laughter, that of performance and play.

Karin was alone amongst respondents in favouring role play costumes above other forms of lingerie. She described costumes as fun and entertaining:

The costumes are quite entertaining... To be honest I don't think either of us particularly have a heavy fantasy sex kind of thing, I've never really

dreamed of being carried off by a soldier or anything like that... I think it just makes it more playful... It just gives it more of a sense of fun.

Penny was another respondent who described a playful pleasure and laughter in the gender roles offered by lingerie. She enjoys dressing up primarily for the sense of fun and play it creates:

I just think it's more funny and makes me laugh sometimes, to get dressed up.

R: Oh really, how do you mean?

P: It's um, just like, playing and laughing and having a laugh or – pretending or sort of role playing. So going 'Oh, hello darling', y'know, sort of, um, I think it's fun... But I find it ridiculous at the same time!

R: Do you? So when you say you find it ridiculous, do you actually laugh –

P: – yeah, yeah –

R – or sort of ham it up a bit?

P: Yeah it's hammy, it's very Rocky Horror Show [laughs].

Penny's description here shows her playful attitude towards the performance of a glamorous, hyper sexualised femininity that 'dressing up' in lingerie can produce. Penny and Karin's role play calls to mind Butler's concept of performativity and in particular the self-conscious gender performance of drag (1990). In these accounts the lingerie wearer revels in flaunting the spectacle of their femininity, and explicitly draws attention towards its contrived and fabricated nature. In contrast to the lingerie practises described earlier, where the success of the 'surprise' is predicated on the invisibility of forms of emotional and body work that are coded as feminine, the laughter of Karin and Penny draws attention to, and refuses to take seriously, the performance of femininity that wearing lingerie entails.

Gender play

As Karin and Penny's accounts have suggested, the feminine performance and play offered by lingerie has the potential to become de-naturalised from the female body through forms of gender play and performance. Shelly describes the way she and a male partner played with forms of feminine performance through lingerie:

I had a lover... he was very into the feminine, and he liked to cross dress. So we used lingerie for more than one person which I think is quite an interesting way of using lingerie as well. And he really liked really feminine women, and I wasn't, and that's when I started thinking about what I was wearing underneath, and we bought some lingerie together. Um, so that was really nice and now, yeah, yeah, I like nice things.

In this account, lingerie's naturalised mapping on to femininity and forms of feminine labour, and indeed the mapping of femininity onto the sexed female body, are troubled and disconnected. Shelly sees her male partner's performance of the feminine as allowing her to explore and play with her own femininity. This example shows that lingerie can be used playfully by heterosexual lovers in a non-heteronormative way that potentially disrupts the gendered norms of sexual practise.

Offering a different perspective, Alice, a lesbian woman in a relationship with a new partner at the time of our interview, described her changing attitude to lingerie and its associated form of feminine performance:

I've realised that things to do with lingerie do actually turn me on more than I realised. And it's not just the other person wearing them, which is strange because I generally don't really care what I'm wearing in terms of clothes, I'll just throw any old thing on normally, but I have started to see lingerie as kind of something that I like to wear... And I'm finding a similar thing with wearing dresses recently which is interesting also, so there's a bit of a dressing up thing going on... I really like pretty underwear, which is really unusual because I don't, I'm not really a very lacy flowery kind of 'girl', I'm sort of – denim and leather jackets and that kind of stuff. But in underwear I really like feminine underwear on me. Which is –

R: So how does it make you feel then?

A: Super feminine! Yeah this is the thing, I like feminine underwear on me because it makes me feel really, really feminine.

Alice's account frames lingerie as something that allows her to pleurably perform a form of femininity that she repeatedly de-naturalises and disassociates from herself. Having previously seen 'pretty underwear' as something she would only enjoy seeing a partner wearing, she describes playing with 'dressing up' as a "girl" and feeling 'super feminine'. Along with Karin, Penny and Shelly's accounts, Alice's use of lingerie derives its pleasure from forms of performance, play and laughter that denaturalise and destabilise the connections between lingerie and normative femininity.

Lingerie advertising emphasises creating a perfect desirable visual spectacle through the lingerie clad female body (Amy-Chinn, 2006). Women do accommodate this expectation, gaining pleasure from visually performing femininity as a form of love and care for a partner, to feel sexually 'wanted', to enhance feelings of confidence or to do

something 'nice' for themselves. But women also have diverse ways of critiquing and negotiating this discourse. Through speaking about the tensions and anxieties caused by lingerie, the multiple forms of body work and 'effort' involved in creating a sexual spectacle, and the embodied feelings of discomfort caused, the ambivalences and contradictions involved in the everyday performance of femininity and female sexuality are exposed. Buying and wearing lingerie can be seen as part of the process of bodily 'becoming' (Budgeon, 2003), where meanings are made and remade through a continuous everyday process of both resistance and compromise. Whether the lingerie clad body becomes feminine spectacle, becomes failure, or becomes playfully 'ridiculous', women's multiple, shifting and processural strategies of embodied negotiation show that the visual culture of the postfeminist 'sexy' body will never be an easy fit.

Sexual Objects: Using 'Sex Toys'

This chapter focuses on women's everyday experiences of buying and using objects that can be grouped under a broad category of 'sex toys'¹⁸. Interviewee accounts point to the ways in which these objects are mobilised in the construction of sexual intimacies with the self and others. Sexual commodities can enable and disable a range of possible sexual identities, desires and activities. The design and marketing of these commodities means that they are imbued with a form of 'intentionality' (Dant, 2004), constructing female sexuality in heteronormative, heterosexist and phallogocentric ways. Women's accounts show a number of anxieties, pressures and limitations arising from the discourses surrounding sex toys. Yet at the same time, the everyday use of sex toys can reveal practices of adaptation and critique, demonstrating the complexity of meaning that can accrue to material objects as they become integrated into everyday intimate repertoires.

To conceptualise the use of sexual objects I draw upon an intersecting body of scholarship that seeks to understand human/object relations in everyday contexts, combining theories of 'objectualisation' (Cetina, 1997) and the material culture of commodities (Appadurai, 1986; Wilson-Kovacs, 2007). I argue that the body and sex toy can be productively understood as an 'assemblage' (Dant, 2004) that makes possible but also regulates particular sexual acts, pleasures and identities. Through these various forms of assemblage the object accumulates a complex 'biography', shifting beyond its commodity meaning and value (Appadurai, 1986). As the interview data demonstrates, doing sex with sexual objects either alone or with sexual partners involves multiple processes of adaptation, assimilation, and making ordinary. These processes mean that, over time and in particular mundane contexts, these objects may accrue meanings that exceed, adapt or even subvert their 'intended' commodity meanings.

Sex toys, when used alone as part of women's auto-erotic practices, can be understood as a key part of the regulatory regime of sexual self-improvement through consumption regularly promoted by the kinds of postfeminist sex advice examined in Chapter Two. And yet, as I show in the first half of the chapter, women's mundane masturbation routines highlight narratives of 'favourite' vibrators and their adaptation

¹⁸ Sex toys include a wide range of commodities designed to be used in a sexual context whether alone or with partner(s). These objects include, but are not limited to: penetrative objects such as dildos and g spot stimulators (which may or may not vibrate); vibrating clitoral stimulators sometimes referred to as 'bullets'; toys such as the 'Rabbit' designed to both penetrate and stimulate the clitoris; anal toys such as butt plugs or anal beads; cock rings; 'love eggs', male masturbators; and strap on harnesses and dildos. 'Sex toys' also covers an assortment of BDSM accessories comprising: ticklers; blindfolds; gags; 'impact' toys such as paddles, whips and canes; and restraints including harnesses, rope and handcuffs. Other sexual products including novelty condoms, lubricant and massage oils can also be grouped both by stores and customers within this category. Given that these lists cover only the most mainstream commodities that can be purchased as 'sex toys' it should be clear that a wide variety of sexual practices and desires are represented by this range of sexual objects.

to suit sexual preference that appear in part to exceed this commoditised understanding of sexuality. Similarly, the marketing of sex toys to 'spice up' long term sexual partnerships requires women to undertake 'emotion work' in order to maintain and nurture an ideal relationship. In the latter part of the chapter I explore the ways in which these objects can become integrated into sexual relationships as mediators for, or communicators and symbols of desire and pleasure. Throughout the chapter I consider the particular anxieties that focus around dildos and other phallic shaped sex toys including the ubiquitous 'Rabbit' vibrator that, as I explored in Chapter Two, are popularly constructed as replacements for or threats to the penis. In the final section I examine the experiences of women who use strap on dildos with other women. I argue that, whilst these women are not exempt from the pressures and anxieties of dildo use, their narratives do suggest that, through repeated sexual use, these objects can exceed and challenge that construction through the feeling that they are a part or extension of the body.

Human/Object Relations

This chapter's discussion of the use of sex toys is framed by wider questions regarding the role that the consumption and use of material objects plays within the construction and performance of sexual identities. Being sexual and doing sex is routinely produced partly through interaction with and use of one's material surroundings, including items that might ordinarily be thought of as 'non-sexual' such as clothing, shoes, food, wine, lighting, bed sheets and pillows, not to mention domestic technologies such as household appliances, laptops, tablets or mobile phones. As Wilson-Kovacs contends, sexual and erotic personas and intimacies are 'based upon access to various objects and their users' ability to mobilise them' (2007, 181). These practices could be placed within the wider context in which intimate relationships are conveyed and constructed through material culture. As Clarke finds in her analysis of heterosexual co-habiting couples, objects such as home wares, furnishing and gifts form 'an integral part of the public and private negotiation' of an intimate relationship (1998: 83).

The postfeminist call to female subjects to articulate their sexual selves through a neoliberal and individualistic rhetoric of entrepreneurship and consumption fits neatly with this increased mediation of sexuality and sexual relationships through consumer object relations. As Cetina argues, the 'modern untying of identities has been accompanied by the expansion of object centred environments which situate and stabilize selves' (1997, 1). She proposes the concept of 'objectualisation' to explain the way in which human relationships and interactions are increasingly either replaced by or mediated through the use of objects, demonstrating an 'increasing orientation towards objects as sources of the self, of relational intimacy, of shared subjectivity and of social integration' (9). Object relations both stand in for and constitute social relations.

Cetina's work can be broadly situated within the field of actor network theory (ANT); this work has substantially contributed to the consideration of the role that objects play

in a network of human-object interaction. ANT demonstrates that all entities, human and non-human, acquire meaning through their relation in a network of other entities (Law, 1999). These relations are not fixed, but can become durable through their repeated performance (ibid.). Importantly, by conceiving of humans and non-humans as relational actors in a network, ANT proposes that objects can themselves exert a form of agency in the enabling or disabling of possibility. However, as Tim Dant contends, actor network theory has been subject to critique for failing to wholly acknowledge or clarify the agentic ‘difference between humans and non-humans’ (2004, 70). Examining the relationship between a driver and a car, Dant asserts that a car cannot be said to have agency in the same way that a human does. He instead proposes the idea of ‘assemblage’ to conceptualise the way in which humans and objects combine to make certain kinds of social action possible. The car contributes to the driver-car assemblage due to the intentionality of its design and everyday use, through which all designed objects ‘become imbued with human intentionality’ (71).

Dant contends that the assemblage of driver-car ‘enables a range of humanly embodied actions available only to the driver-car’; for example, the car can extend embodiment through the driver’s feeling that they can ‘get through’ a space in the car (74). He suggests that this theoretical model could be expanded to analyse other assemblages of human and object, and concludes that ‘the driver-car is neither a thing nor a person; it is an assembled social being that takes on properties of both and cannot exist without both’ (74). Could the same be said for an ‘assemblage’ of human and sex toy? The combination of sexual actor(s) with sex toy(s) also enables social possibilities and actions, such as the penetration or stimulation of one’s own or a partner’s body, which may not otherwise have been possible. The combination of human body and sexual object could be said to constitute an assembled social being that enables and also limits or regulates certain kinds of sexual identities, acts and desires. In a similar way, the body and sex toy object as ‘assemblage’ becomes something more than human: a sexual actor with the ability to extend the possibilities and boundaries of the material body.

It is important to remember here that sex toys are *consumer* objects, and so enter actor’s sex lives complete with all the promise, meaning and value imbued through a consumer exchange. Appadurai defines a commodity as an object that has an ‘exchangeability’ that is socially relevant to its meaning (1986, 4). Yet he also argues that any analysis of commodities must call attention to the ‘total trajectory’ of such objects, acknowledging that their role within any exchange is socially constructed and malleable. One object may move in and out of commodity status over the course of its social ‘life’, circulating in ‘different regimes of value in space and time’ (4). In the same volume Kopytoff argues for an analysis of the ‘biography’ of a thing, demonstrating the dual forces of ‘commoditisation’ and ‘singularisation’ through which objects move in and out of exchange and non-exchange values (1986, 73).

If these objects are seen as having complex ‘biographies’ – if their meanings and value as commodities can be challenged and changed in the context of everyday use – then

this may mean that material objects used in sexual relationships will not always be 'unconsciously mobilised to complement dominant ideologies' (Wilson-Kovacs, 2007, 192). Such objects are ascribed complex meanings as part of an intimate repertoire, and while women do follow some established norms when using these objects in their sexual practice they often do so in ways that 'seek to transform these rules in order to adjust them to their own interests' (Wilson-Kovacs, 2007, 192). The sex toy uses explored in this chapter evidence the complex and contradictory nature of object relations in an everyday sexual context.

These intersecting theorisations, of body/object 'assemblage' and of object 'biographies', provide a productive framework through which the relationship between bodies and sexual objects can be understood. The following sections turn to data from interviews in which interviewees spoke about the use of sex toys in their everyday sex lives. These accounts point to the way in which body and sex toy as 'assemblage' enables and disables or regulates particular kinds of sexual activity and pleasure, and also demonstrate the process of 'making ordinary' that occurs over the lifetime of a sexual commodity. This chapter then evidences the many ways in which cultural objects and their associated discourses are in practice adapted, questioned, or used in ways that surpass or exceed their original meanings.

'A special evening in': Using sex toys alone

For some women, using a vibrator alone represented one of their earliest experiences of masturbation or orgasm. Beatrice related her purchase and use of a vibrator as a teenager:

I think that was the first time I'd properly given myself a clitoral orgasm, I'd sort of touched on things before. But I didn't really know what I was doing because I still felt kind of unsure about it, but at that point I felt like I'd actually been licensed to go yes, you're allowed to masturbate and that's fine.

As I demonstrated in Chapters One and Two, one of the enduring legacies of feminist framings of female sexuality has been the avocation of masturbation as a healthy and positive activity for women. The cultural and social legitimacy of vibrator purchase produced by the mainstreaming of sex shopping means that auto-erotic sexuality is comparatively permissible and acceptable for women. Masturbation with a vibrator fits easily into postfeminist regimes of self-improvement and 'treating' the self through consumption. Clara explained that using a vibrator alone was 'just giving myself that time... or sort of being in that space where I think oh yeah, I'm just going to enjoy myself'. Yet she also expressed guilt that she didn't always feel inclined or able to give herself time in that way, revealing the disciplinary and regulatory effect of a required regime of self-care and self-improvement through masturbation.

Some women had built up everyday relationships with their sex toys over time in ways that seemed to be legitimated by but also partially exceed the popular discourse of

self-improvement or care of the self. A number of interviews described a somewhat more mundane and functional orgasm 'routine'. This was often expressed in the way that some interviewees talked about their 'favourite' vibrators, objects that inspired feelings of familiarity and affection. Jillian explained that she had named all her sex toys and that she had one that she would 'always go to' and Karin used the same vibrator every time 'just because you know what works'. There was a sense of routine and familiarity here, as when Alice described, 'you get into a routine with it don't you, particularly where, particularly if it's at night time when I'm not doing anything else and there isn't anything on telly, I might go, "may as well", so it's that sort of thing. More in a before you go to sleep, kind of way, to relax you'. Using a favourite vibrator for a number of years was not uncommon; Florence spoke about one that she had owned for six years:

R: How do you feel about that toy now? Like where is it, do you use it ever, or?

F: I don't know just, [laughing] can it hold a fond place in your heart, kind of?

R: I don't know, can it, I don't know?

F: I think it does, I think, I think the fact it was the first sort of sex toy I bought was an important thing. So I think that's kind of a landmark thing. And, also, I just enjoyed using it so I think – I don't know, I could just buy a replacement, like I'm sure if I went on the internet or went into a sex shop I'd find that brand, but I think, I dunno maybe you have a certain commitment to a sex toy? [laughs] And that, if you enjoyed things with them you want keep them, it's not a memento, it's more just sort of a memory booster, like a holiday souvenir [laughs] or something.

R: Really, oh so you don't use it, you just keep it?

F: No I have used it recently but I'm kind of thinking I need to replace it, so, I've used it and still enjoyed using it, and I think in some ways, in that way that certain people enjoy certain sexual positions or sexual activities, that you always go back to because you always enjoy them.

R: Mmm.

F: I think maybe that's what sex toys can provide as well, the repetitive, well kind of repetitive, almost comforting, I know that's gonna get me off so I'm gonna go back to that because it's kind of a guaranteed, then, isn't it... that's when it would come out, rather than I would think 'oo I've got a special evening in', and, I know this sounds awful, [laughs] but kind of like, when you're a bit hung over, bit lazy, it kind of works a treat kind of thing.

R: [laughs]

F: [laughs] I think it's that, it's that knowledge isn't it, that you know it's gonna work, or you know you're gonna have a good time.

Here Florence directly counters the self-improvement narrative, familiar from postfeminist sex advice, of treating the self with a 'special evening in' in favour of a more mundane fulfilment of desire. She is embarrassed and apologetic about using a sex toy in this more routine and 'lazy' way, suggesting an awareness that a postfeminist regime of sexuality frames masturbation with a sex toy rather differently. It is through this habitual everyday use that the object has acquired a 'biography' (Kopytoff, 1986, 73). The vibrator is imbued with memory and a sense of loyalty and affection, to a degree that Florence says that it could not easily be replaced, even by buying an identical new product in a sex shop.

As Chapter Two demonstrated, postfeminist popular constructions of sexuality, and the cultural framing and promotion of Rabbit toys in particular, exert a disciplinary regime through the requirement that women add to their orgasm repertoire the 'ultimate' 'blended' orgasm through the dual stimulation of clitoris and vagina. Interestingly however, many women who did use 'Rabbit' style vibrators were critical of the design in various ways, and often did not use them in this intended manner. Jillian explained that the Rabbit did 'absolutely nothing for me' and made her feel like she was being 'probed', and Karin complained that many of the designs were too rigid: 'some people are different than others, they don't like pressure in particular places... an awful lot of them are so stiffly made you can't move anything anywhere and so you're basically stuck with wherever they decide to put it and it's not always right'. Jane also expressed dissatisfaction with the rigid and homogenous design of a Rabbit toy she purchased: 'if it doesn't fit you it's quite uncomfortable to use'. There was an overall sense of frustration that this ubiquitous and widely hyped sex toy, perhaps like many mass marketed commodities, does not fulfil its promise and is too prescriptive in its shape and design. Some women partially solved these issues by using the toy in different ways than intended; Florence stated that the 'appealing element was always the Rabbit-y bit, the ears, and the out- clitoral stimulation, the outside bit, rather than the penetrative bit'. Clara described her Rabbit toy as 'cumbersome' 'hard plastic' and 'rigid' and then concluded 'but yeah I quite liked the ears because they were good when they vibrated'. As Beatrice explained:

I wasn't really interested in the shaft bit at all, but it didn't actually occur to me at that point I could just buy a bullet... it's interesting that they sell vibrators with the, the shaft bit in. because I think I know one person that actually uses the shaft bit, um, and that surprised me, that really surprised me because I just assumed that everyone just used the vibrator bit, but I didn't know at that point they could come in a separate bit.

The status and accessibility of the Rabbit means that it is often the first or only kind of vibrator that women use, but it seems that it is rarely effective in the way intended¹⁹. Speaking about the toy's everyday use reveals women's strategies of criticism and adaptation in the face of a restrictive and prescriptive sexual consumer culture. The Rabbit is imbued with intentionality through its design, promotion and cultural framing, reproducing values of female sexual entrepreneurship through the promised achievement of the ultimate orgasm. Although not one woman I interviewed spoke about using and enjoying the Rabbit for this purpose, and most were critical of its design, many of them had purchased the product and adapted it through routine everyday use in order to enable their own sexual pleasure. By using the Rabbit but also adapting it these participants are 'making do' and 'making with' ready-made culture, demonstrating the irreducibility of women's diverse sexual pleasures to a 'one size fits all' mass market commodity (de Certeau, 1998).

Although many women had developed comfortable and pleasurable masturbation routines with sex toys, it is important to note here that both sex toys and masturbation can also be a potential source of shame or anxiety. Whilst postfeminist culture has meant that self-pleasure with a sex toy has become somewhat of a socially acceptable practice and even part of a disciplinary regime, feelings of secrecy and shame do still circulate. Beatrice spoke about a male acquaintance who learned that she and a group of female friends had purchased vibrators:

[He was] just a proper kind of lads' lad, and I remember him approaching... and going 'so, I heard that you all bought sex toys today?' and I was just like 'that's none of your business' and he goes sorry, sorry – but then he started to try and talk about it later and I was like, I don't want to talk about it it's making me feel really, really uncomfortable, but he was always a bit creepy. But at that moment I sort of felt like I had done something a little bit bad, even though I knew that I hadn't.

This experience suggests that buying a sex toy might lead to assumptions of sexual availability or promiscuity and unwanted sexual advances. Florence spoke about her fears of telling her boyfriend that she owned a vibrator: 'you kind of think, are they going to judge me, are they going to think I'm kind of a massive whore who's going to want to do anything in the bedroom?' Again the inference is that masturbating with a vibrator will lead to assumptions and potential sexual pressure from a partner. Agatha referred to a gender double standard, speaking about feelings of shame and secrecy around masturbation for girls and women:

There's quite a big stigma about girls and masturbation, at the school that I was at as well, it was like something I noticed was that the guys would just talk about wanking all the time and brag about it and say all these gross

¹⁹ Perhaps in response to the seemingly common adaptation of the Rabbit in which only the vibrating ears are used, Ann Summers has recently released a smaller 'Just the Ears' model.

things that they would feel comfortable saying around whoever, but girls never talked about it, we saw it as like dirty or gross or something.

The feeling that masturbating means that women will be read as 'bad', 'dirty' or 'a whore' demonstrates the impossibility of performing postfeminist femininity. As Griffin et al. contend, women are permitted, indeed required, to perform agentic sexuality, yet at the same time they must somehow avoid being seen as a 'slut' and thus inviting (or deserving) sexual harassment from men (2013).

An additional source of anxiety is the fear, widely reproduced in the postfeminist sex discourse explored in Chapter Two, that sex toys can become troublingly 'addictive' for women who use them for masturbation (eg. Cox, 1999). Claire explained that she used her first vibrator regularly but then chose to throw it away because 'it was a bit like, I needed that, to come. And, that was a bit weird... it like, kind of got me to a point where I needed more to, than just myself to, [laughing] be able to come. And I kind of, I didn't really like that, I think that has sort of put me off. I don't wanna become like reliant on one thing'. Beatrice spoke about regulating her use to avoid becoming reliant on the sensation: 'I'm trying not to use it as much I have done in the past at the moment because I think my body has gotten used to it'. The fear that the body might adjust to and need the feeling of vibration is contingent upon the way in which masturbation is often constructed as a supplementary or secondary practice to sex with a partner. The fear here is partly linked to the idea that women should avoid needing vibration to orgasm because it is a sensation that 'real' sex does not offer.

A second major discourse that reinforces masturbation as supplementary or secondary to 'real' sex could be seen when participants positioned solo sex toy use as something women would only resort to if they weren't having regular sex with a partner. Claire stated that a sex toy is something a woman would use 'either while your husband's away or if you haven't got a husband or whatever... it's definitely considered as a replacement for having sex with a man, I guess because of the shape and because of whatever'; Tallulah explained that she didn't enjoy using sex toys alone but that 'if I wait a long time without sex I might think about it'; Agatha spoke about helping her friend choose a vibrator because 'she hadn't had sex for a year or so, and she was like, I need to buy one'; and Jennifer described sex toys as 'a substitute man'. Beatrice explained that within her group of female friends if 'someone was single they'd talk about how furiously they were going at it with themselves [laughs], in a sort of slightly sad desperate, in a kind of, in a jokey way'. Jennifer expressed frustration that she was unable to successfully reproduce the experience of sex with a male partner through her purchase and use of various sex toys to use on her own, describing her high expectations and subsequent disappointments when purchasing various products to replicate a 'hands free' sexual experience. She concluded by wondering 'if I had a man around, whether I'd actually need them, I don't know'. Dildos are overwhelmingly constructed as replacements, imitations or representations of the penis in these accounts, resulting in a range of anxieties and pressures that must be carefully negotiated and managed. Again, this mirrors the

postfeminist framing of sex toys examined in Chapter Two, whereby sex toys are an attractive sexual commodity, but their use must be carefully regulated to contain their implicit threat to heterosexual masculinity and monogamy.

There was limited resistance to this idea, particularly amongst the group of respondents whom I described in Chapter Three as 'expert' sex shoppers. These women were keen to assert, as Jillian did, that 'the *Sex and the City* view of "it replaces a boyfriend, it's better than a penis" is a misconception... sex toys aren't meant to replace anything – it's fun to enhance the experience, enhance the sex, enhance your masturbation time'. Women like Jillian consciously refute the view that sex toys replace men's bodies as part of their performance of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1997), but they do not question that it is a view widely held by many women.

Given this framing of sex toys as replacements for 'real' sex, the majority of the women interviewed only associated solo sex toy use with being single, although a few women continued to use vibrators alone when in a relationship. Karin deliberately used a vibrator alone without her husband's knowledge, explaining that she preferred not to use a sex toy with him as he would expect her to 'put on a show' and 'it would be extremely boring to watch, cause I don't make any particular effort I just sort of get on with it'. It appeared that Karin still wanted to retain a mundane and habitual masturbation routine alongside her sexual relationship, but in other cases the sex toy still represented a replacement for a temporarily absent sexual partner. Alice suggested she was using a sex toy more frequently because she was in a long distance relationship, and Florence explained that she didn't live with her partner so 'he couldn't be there all the time, he couldn't suddenly appear at my door'. The pervasive idea that sex toys 'replace' bodies, or that dildos replace penises, caused some anxiety and necessitated careful management particularly when introducing sex toys into sexual relationships with men.

'Bringing something in': introducing sex toys in relationships

Speaking about beginning to use toys in relationships commonly involved the use of phrases related to 'introducing' something or 'bringing something in'. Sex toys and indeed other material objects are often perceived as external 'extras' to the partnership of two sexual bodies. This process of introduction was one that had to be carefully managed lest the integrity of the relationship might be threatened. As Claire summarised, 'if you do it and you get it wrong it's funny to your relationship, and if you do it and you get it right you feel really good about it'. This idea is connected to the discourse of intimacy, explored further below, whereby sex toys as objects can be positioned both as enablers of intimacy, making a relationship stronger, or as barriers to authentic closeness between sexual bodies, or even threats to the integrity of the relationship, depending on the context of their introduction and use. In heterosexual partnerships the onus appears most often to be on the female partner to make sure she 'gets it right' when introducing sexual objects. As a number of critics have explored, women in relationships with men often expend considerable and widely

unacknowledged effort in monitoring, managing and maintaining their own and their partner's sexual pleasure and activities (Cacchioni, 2007; Duncombe and Marsden, 1996). This trend can be linked to the technologies of postfeminist sexuality whereby women are encouraged to continually 'work on' their sexual selves and relationships (Jackson and Scott, 1997). For the women whom I interviewed, 'introducing' sex toys necessitated careful management through emotional labour and making the 'right' consumer choices.

Given that the view of dildos and phallic shaped toys as replications of sex with men is fairly pervasive, interviewees rarely considered introducing them into their sexual relationships with men. Penny explained that 'I've already got a penis if you see what I mean [laughs] so when I have a penis I'll just use that one'. Clara was unusual in showing a dildo she owned to a male partner, and she did not believe it had been successful:

And I suppose it depends on what it is you introduce, cause yeah I had um, a vibrator it was quite a large one, and unfortunately this guy that I just thought I'd show it to, he then became quite intimidated and he got a bit of an issue about whether he was able to satisfy me, and all that, and had a bit of small penis syndrome. So yeah, I suppose because of that it made me a bit sort of apprehensive about what I introduce.

This experience suggests that anxiety can accumulate for both men and women around the possibility that a dildo might be larger and/or more sexually pleasurable than a penis. Claire used this framework to explain why she would not introduce a dildo with her boyfriend:

I don't think I would use like a big dildo with [current male partner] when he was there [laughs]

R: [laughs]

C: I just don't think it's a very like, I don't know how he'd feel about that really, like [laughing] 'can you use this instead?'

R: [laughs] Like competition?

C: Yeah and y'know it is a bit like, it's pretty impersonal isn't it... it is a bit of a, might be a bit of a challenge to just whip out a massive, [laughing] massive fake cock and wave it around at your boyfriend.

When choosing sex toys to use with male partners women might consciously choose smaller vibrating toys that do not have a phallic shape in an attempt to contain this threat, as Florence explained:

'It wasn't an obvious penis shape, it was more, I dunno, I think you'd describe it maybe, a beehive-y sort of shape? Like an oval but with ridges

in it. Um – so that seemed like, I think it was obviously a less threatening shape cause it wasn't a large sort of penis shape... I definitely feel there was more option and variety with what you could use with, and also using it with a partner in a way that wasn't intimidating and didn't, didn't look like you had sort a massive dildo with, you're, 'hey!'. I just think I'm not sure I'd quite cope with that situation if I – just brought a dildo into the room, I don't know how –

R: So do you think that you would find that weird, or that he would find it weird?

F: I think he'd find it weirder than I would. I think.

R: Did you talk about it or do you just think that?

F: This is just thoughts I think, I could do it and someone could be like, really like, aroused by it, but I think in my mind it seems like a bit of an emasculating thing almost to walk in the room with an erection before you've even met your partner [laughing] you're kind of like 'hey! Look what I've got!'

Both Claire and Florence vividly describe a scene whereby they would 'walk into the room with an erection' saying 'hey! Look what I've got!', or 'whip out a massive fake cock and wave it around'. That they imagine this 'reveal' at its most comically ridiculous, both laughing as they describe it, suggests that they believe that an introduction of a dildo into a heterosexual partnership could never be achieved without ridiculing and emasculating a male partner. In these descriptions a dildo *is* a penis, and to use it when there is already a penis 'in the room' would be deeply and laughably insensitive. However, Tallulah related an experience of using her Rabbit vibrator with a male partner where she felt that mutual laughter was precisely the reason why it had been a successful experience:

I think it was just the mood we were in, we were just being really silly and it was more playful... It was just fun, I'd forgotten I had it actually and I got it out the drawer and I was like 'ahh look what I've got, let's use it!' and it was just silly, and I don't think it was, kind of, I don't think it impaired his masculinity in any way, I don't think it made him feel inferior or like, 'what are you trying to say I'm not good enough?', it was just silly and funny.

Here the introduction of a sex toy is managed emotionally through its framing as a 'fun' and 'silly' accessory. It is the 'look what I've got!' playful reveal of the toy that makes this a positive experience for Tallulah, possibly because it appears that the laughter and silliness is directed only towards the toy and not towards her partner's penis, which is protected from being produced as 'inferior'. In both these cases then, women are carefully managing the use of sex toys in order to protect potential threats to their partner's masculinity. Tallulah achieves this emotionally whereas Florence make the

'right' consumer choice in purchasing a small clitoral vibrator in an abstract shape. Florence positioned vibration as an extra sensation that was not threatening because it was not something her sexual partner's body could offer: 'you could do more with the vibrator than you could do with parts of your body, than with your fingers or with your mouth. It feels different'. Within this logic Florence felt that she had successfully circumvented the perceived emasculating threat of a phallic sex toy in her relationship by choosing a smaller and more abstract shaped object. However, even this was not always a successful tactic, as Beatrice's experience suggests:

I think in my last relationship I did suggest the use of the bullet just because I was interested and he just said straight away, 'oh no, those don't work'.

R: Oh right ok, on who?

B: Apparently anyone! And that was the first time I'd ever broached someone about the use of toys and, that was just a 'no'. Um, and –

R: How did that feel then?

B: Really annoying! Really annoying, but I was so, I was so taken aback at the time, and I didn't really know how to respond. Cause how do you respond? You just kind of go, oh, okay then. And particularly when it's with someone that you love as well I think it's really easy to get angry about something like that when its someone that you might not like that much, you can be like, 'how could you say that'? Cause you're pretty much undermining a woman wanting to get pleasure out of sex. But in that context I kind of thought well I don't want to push him. And I was thinking about bringing it up again but I never did, and I feel a bit sad that I didn't.... that's why I suggested the bullet because it's small enough to be – well what I thought – was not too threatening and it also had like, one purpose, so I thought well that's not trying to replace a penis, that's for a specific place, was what I thought would be alright but apparently not! [laughs]

In this experience Beatrice's male partner is resistant to the idea of using a sex toy designed for a 'specific place': the clitoris. Whilst his motivation cannot be speculated on here, it is clear that Beatrice was surprised by this reaction as she had thought that in 'not trying to replace a penis' with her suggested object she would successfully contain the threat of sex toy use. She also spoke about how she had suggested the 'bullet' vibrator as a way of communicating her dissatisfaction with the penetration focused nature of her sexual relationship with that partner: 'unless you say something that automatically implies that everything's fine, and that just regular "in-out-in-out" is alright'. For some other women, vibrators were used as a way of successfully calling their partner's attention to their desire to have an orgasm. Shelly spoke about getting out her vibrator during casual sexual encounters:

[Sex toys have] allowed me to say what I want. So basically, I've had other lovers as well, and I do take my toy. Because if I'm not bloody satisfied I get my toy out, and it's as simple as that. Cause I'm not wasting an afternoon with somebody and not actually coming out of it feeling like – so I will, I will introduce it, you know, so I might say, I'm going to play with myself for a bit, and then encourage them to join in.

Sex toys could also be introduced as a way of steering partners towards sexual activities that women wanted to participate in and away from other less appealing practices, as Karin explained:

I think that we're running short of ideas now. I think they could do with bringing out some more stuff [laughs]. Cause um, you do reach a point where it's a bit 'oh is there anything else you'd like to try darling'? And it always comes down to the same things you've said no to 15 times, so you're desperately trying to think of something, anything a bit new that isn't going to come straight down to anal or a threesome.

In both these cases women are mobilising sex toys as communication devices, and using them to shape sexual activities in order to better suit their own desires and preferences. Given that the labour of shopping for and buying sexual commodities regularly falls to women, these objects can be used to facilitate, or stand in for, verbal communication of female desire for which the socially and culturally available language of sex often proves inadequate (Robinson et al., 2007). In Shelly's case the vibrator is consciously mobilised as a badge of sexual autonomy and control. Control also emerged as a theme when women spoke about the somewhat less common, and wholly unpopular, experience of men purchasing sex toys and introducing them into the sexual relationship. Clara spoke about a 'controlling' ex-partner buying her sex toys to 'try and help me relax and go with the flow' and Agatha described a friend's experience of being bought a large dildo by a boyfriend as 'some kind of power thing'. In these cases sex toys introduced by a male partner are seen as objects that shape sexual practice in a coercive or controlling way. Tallulah was made uncomfortable by being bought a vibrator for different reasons:

One boyfriend bought me one, and it just put me off him, I'd only been going out with him a few weeks and he was like 'ooh look what I've bought', and I was like. 'oh – do we need that? I was like can you, can you not get it up or something?' [laughs], yeah I found it a bit off-putting, and he was more into it than I was.

Tallulah interprets her boyfriend's attempt to use a sex toy with her as throwing into question his sexual ability and masculinity. Similarly Beatrice explained that she thought men have a lot of 'anxiety about not being able to perform, and having to go and buy something is kind of implying that you're not able to'. Again sex toys are

framed as equivalent to the penis here and threaten forms of masculinity associated with sexual performance.

Finally, in even fewer cases, women had chosen and bought sex toys together with their partners. Here the introduction of the toy could be positioned as a form of foreplay, anticipating the sexual experience of using the product, as Jane described buying a spanking toy with her husband: 'that was actually very exciting because we had sort of a, a mental tease, a bit of information and a dialogue going on beforehand'. Jade described choosing a toy with her female partner, recalling it as a process that facilitated closeness and dialogue between them and positioning the object itself as part of, or representative of, their relationship: 'because that was the first thing we bought together, I guess, like in that sense I mean, and cause we'd taken the time to choose one we both liked, and like so um, yeah like we'd made a good decision and so it was the right one'. These experiences suggest that sex toys could provide impetus and a focus for mutually pleasurable dialogue and negotiation about sexual practice instead of simply being used by one partner to control proceedings. Indeed, when sex toys had been successfully introduced into sexual practice with a partner they played interesting and complex roles within those relationships.

'It's a lot more physical': Using sex toys in relationships

A number of women interviewed were in or had been in relationships where sexual objects featured regularly in their sexual practice. Sex toys were framed as both enablers of and barriers to intimacy with partners, depending on the kind of object and how it was used. The contemporary cultural narrative of the couple relationship encourages partners to strive for an ideal egalitarian form of intimacy involving 'closeness' and 'knowing' of one another predicated on mutual disclosure and communication (Giddens, 2013). However, structural gender inequalities including those of work and childcare mean that negotiating intimacy is often fraught for heterosexual couples (Jamieson, 1999; van Hooff, 2013), and the 'emotion work' of maintaining intimacy often falls to women more than men (Duncombe and Marsden, 1996). Part of this emotion work involves women in long term relationships spending time and money consuming sexual objects in order to work on and maintain intimacy and preserve the relationship. As with lingerie, buying sex toys to use in a relationship was commonly expressed through the tropes of 'spicing things up' or 'making the effort'.

Katie runs an online business selling subscriptions for monthly selection boxes of sex toys, and framed the market in this way:

We were just sort of thinking it's a shame people don't seem to make the time for each other anymore, there's just not enough time in life, and we thought, we quite like sort of positioning it as an alternative evening's entertainment. So instead of, if you're knackered, slobbering in front of the telly, you know, why not go upstairs and have some fun?

This neoliberal narrative frames modern couples as time poor and places the onus on those couples, but particularly women, who make up the majority of Katie's subscribers, to consume the right things in order to 'give time back' to and maintain their relationship. Upholding sexual intimacy is regularly set in conflict against the pull of the more mundane, routine and ordinary aspects of long term relationships. Jane described how busy she and her husband were with work and children and said that 'sex toys in a sense do give you that permission to make time, make time to play with each other'. Penny spoke about using sexual consumption to avoid slipping into a routine with her husband:

[I want] to vary, and also to show that um, mmm, that I haven't, that I care, that I'm making an effort. To, cause I like I think I'm a bit lazy to be honest in sex, sex life [laughs] so I like, want to show him that I'm still, that I want, want to make an effort to, to please, well, please us really, not please him but please us.

R: Yeah ok, that's interesting. So it's like, um, do you think it will make you make time to do that kind of thing maybe?

P: Yeah, yeah. Hmm, but you can get sort of, comfortable in your sort of slippers and just get, slip into a bit of routine and do all the same things and, especially when you've got a family, children, it's not much time, so, I think it's, it's good to vary everything in life really, don't get too set into a routine.

Here buying and using sex toys demonstrates that the relationship is still valuable and worth time and work. Jane similarly spoke about avoiding 'complacency' in her sex life with her husband of 13 years, and Karin discussed the importance of keeping her sex life active: 'people always warn you that you reach a point where you just can't be bothered really and you just stop having sex and I never want to reach that point'. In these formulations sex toys are objects that 'make time' for intimacy, enabling stability in the relationship.

Sex toys also have the potential to become symbols for, or representations of, closeness between sexual partners. Much in the same way as those women who felt affection for 'favourite' vibrators, some women in relationships seemed to describe the objects they used as themselves imbued with values of closeness, love and intimacy, representing, mediating and reinforcing closeness with a partner. Jade's description of a strap on dildo and harness that she had purchased with her partner framed the object as a conduit for communication and closeness: 'it can be something that can bring a couple together, almost, like a bonding thing that you do together, and enhances the relationship kind of thing', and also produced the object itself as a mutually owned possession: 'yeah I do consider it both of ours I guess, rather than like belonging to one of us, so sometimes it will stay at mine and sometimes it will stay at my partner's'.

Beth was in a long term relationship at the time of her interview but also spoke about her regular attendance of various 'parties' where sexual activity might take place with a range of people. For Beth, whilst there are some sex toys she would bring to such parties, she described some objects as being too 'personal' to use with anyone other than her primary partner:

It just feels weirdly more private... some of the things I don't take with me are things that, a lot of the toys can be quite intense and quite personal and I don't know if I'd be entirely comfortable with that in an environment when I don't know everyone and trust everyone... some of those things there's an association and they are quite personal, there's certain things, or I guess certain ways I would be, with my boyfriend or another close person that I wouldn't be with someone at a public party.

In this account it appears that certain sexual objects and their associated practices have become imbued with personal meanings for Beth to the extent that using them with a new partner or in a public setting would feel too intimate and exposing. Here then, the idea that sex toys are alienating barriers to intimacy appears to be reversed. For Jane, BDSM sex toys such as bondage restraints and impact toys were described as central to the dynamic of her relationship. She and her husband's communication about and use of these objects was framed as both constitutive and representative of their intimacy:

Especially with anything that kind of generates pain, you don't know where the line is, and it's a bit of an experiment to work out where that line is going to go, especially if you're playing with someone, and you know you trust them, I trust him 100%, if you're looking at somebody coming at you with a crop or a hot candle you've got to trust the person that's doing that... the pain dynamic is quite hard to explain to somebody, if they're not into it, from the other end, so we have to find ways for him to find out what the sensation is like from the other end... my brain reacts to it in a completely different way to his, so, he likes to use things on me but not coming back the other way. So he obviously uses me as a judge as to how much things hurt.

In this description the sexual objects that Jane and her husband use are mobilised as symbols of closeness and trust and also conduits or mediators of communication and disclosure between them. The objects appear to be imbued with some form of agency in this description as they mediate and enable sexual communication and pleasure.

However, as often as sex toys were described as enablers of intimacy they were also positioned as barriers to 'authentic' closeness between bodies, facilitating a different kind of performance of sexual desire and pleasure that may or may not be desirable. Both Sam and Claire drew upon an understanding of sex toys as preventing more intimate forms of sexual activity:

Just kissing, fumbling in the dark, having sex and falling asleep, like that isn't, that isn't a kind of thing that's shown anywhere in the sex industry is it? It's not like a kinky thought to just have normal sex... I wouldn't like to become reliant on having to spend three hours having this crazy long – sex [laughing] like to actually have fulfilling night you can actually just have normal sex as well, I think it's important to be able to do both. And to be able to have it as like a loving thing, just like a normal loving couples thing if you want to (Claire).

We wouldn't really use [a vibrator] at the start [of sex] because the start is more like our relationship, our bodies type of thing. So bringing something in then would feel quite alien to us I think. I think for us sex has to be quite impulsive ... no, it's too much fussing, it should be more, you know, raw (Sam)

Here sexual objects are positioned as a kind of invasion or intrusion upon the sexual relationship between two bodies which is constructed as more authentic and 'raw'. The objects represent obstacles that distance bodies from one another in this framework, making their sexual partnership less emotionally intimate and 'loving'; Penny said that 'what I like about being in a relationship is the contact with another person. So I'd rather he made love to me, than him use a dildo on me'. This framing of sex toys as intrusive or impersonal appears to be partly contingent upon the kinds of sex toys and how they are being used, as Karin explained:

It's, yeah, it does liven things up a bit. Um, you do feel a bit more like you're actually making an effort, doing something a bit more exciting than just sort of the standard stuff. Um, having said that though it does probably feel a bit more like it's just about sex rather than, you know, being a couple.

R: Ok

K: That's pretty much how I've thought of it, it's not quite so romantic if you can call it that, it's a lot more physical.

R: Yeah, and is that good?

K: It's fine as long as it's not the only thing that you do.

R: Ok, so is that true of all the sort of toys and costumes and stuff, are they more – ?

K: Mmm, not always, but it can be. I think it depends on which ones you're using I mean certain things like they have those [cock] rings you put on that vibrate, and those are just more of an enhancer really. It's more, the more dramatic stuff, it's uh tends to make things a lot more physical.

R: Yeah, ok. So what do you mean by that – how does it feel different?

K: I suppose part of it might be the position that things are in. You might end up in a sort of more cuddled up position if you're just sort of doing it at the end of the night. Whereas if you put a different outfit on or got your camera out and that kind of thing, you'll probably end up bent over a table or something, and it's not quite so, not quite so sweet and romantic in that position.

Being 'cuddled up' or face-to-face is here a prerequisite to a loving form of intimacy that sex toys may represent a barrier against. Although Karin clearly values more 'physical' and 'dramatic' sexual practices, she makes clear that it is also important to maintain a 'sweet' and 'romantic' element to her sexual relationship. Similarly, Alice explained that she wouldn't want to use a double-ended dildo with her female partner because 'you'd have to position yourself at opposite ends of it, and I'm sure it would feel great and be fine, but, I would prefer something where I'm kind of facing my partner, or could be on top of her or vice versa, rather than having to be at opposite ends of the bed... But then I suppose if you're not bothered particularly about a degree of intimacy in the sex then that wouldn't be as much of a problem I guess'. In these examples the sexual object appears as an intrusion that prevents bodies from being close and thus prevents emotional closeness, heightening a sense of difference between authentic bodies and artificial objects. The object itself also exerts a form of agency through limiting or preventing intimacy and closeness.

So far this chapter has included analysis of heterosexual women's experiences of using sex toys and, whilst I have considered some lesbian and bisexual women's accounts, it is worth considering the specificity of these in further detail. As Fahs and Swank have found, given the popular equivalence that is drawn between sex toys, particularly dildos, and the penis, discourses and experiences around sex toy use for women who have sex with men are different to those of women who have sex with women (2013). Their study concluded that lesbian, bisexual and queer women had a greater degree of freedom and less anxiety around sex toy use. My research does not entirely reflect their findings; frustrations and restrictions resulting from the consumption and use of sex toys were still spoken about at length by women in sexual relationships with other women. As I have already explored in Chapter Four, shopping in sex shops resulted in a range of frustrations for lesbian, bisexual and queer identified women given the overwhelming heteronormativity of the retail landscape. In addition, the anxieties arising from the popular parallel drawn between sex toys and male genitalia do not somehow bypass lesbian, bisexual and queer women because their sexual practice with female partners does not involve a 'real' penis. This issue primarily arose during the discussion of the use of strap on harnesses and dildos. This practice is not free from anxieties about 'replacing' the penis, but at the same time can suggest new ways of thinking about the assemblage of sexual body and object made possible by sex toys.

‘An extension of your own body’: strap on dildos

Haraway’s influential cyborg manifesto conceptualises the possibility of technologically extending or enhancing the human body from a feminist perspective (2013). Haraway views the cyborg – a hybrid of machine and organism – as a ‘creature of social reality’ (2013, 274), and calls for ‘pleasure in the confusion of boundaries’ (275) between human and machine. She posits that the cyborg has the potential to exceed gender binaries and become a creature for ‘a post gender world’ (276). The assemblage of body and (often mechanical) sex toy object may well involve such a confusion of bodily and gender boundaries. No image calls to mind the ‘enhanced’ gendered body than that of a woman wearing a strap on dildo. A number of scholars have explored this symbolic relationship, drawing upon Butlerian queer theory, theorising the dildo variously as a radical performative object that has the potential to subvert or transgress gender boundaries (Findlay, 1992; Lamos, 1995); queer the ‘hetero/homosexual dichotomy’ (Reich, 1999, 262); and allow the lesbian strap on dildo wearer to emerge ‘as an unaccountable gender-bending sign’ (Hamming, 2001, 337)²⁰. Whilst the utopian promises in these accounts are undeniably seductive, they are largely abstract, and call for a degree of caution. As critics of the cyborg manifesto (Gonzalez, 1995; Balsamo, 1996) and indeed Haraway herself have acknowledged, these kinds of abstract readings have the tendency to obscure the ‘lived relations of domination’ enacted through the confluence of human body and machine (Haraway, 2013, 279).

Talking to women about buying and using strap on dildos reveals a somewhat more complex and perhaps less exhilarating picture of the relationship between the penis and the dildo. Jade positioned her and her partner’s strap-on dildo and harness as an object that brought them closer and signified their intimacy: ‘with the strap on it’s like, I think it’s like something that you’re obviously both involved in um, and use together’. She contrasted this with the experience of using a small vibrator, which she positioned as a barrier to intimacy: ‘the vibrator it’s like oh, do I hold it or do you hold it? It’s just a bit more awkward it’s less obvious what you do with it maybe and so, it’s sort of something you’re better off just using by yourself’. Again the object that facilitates the physical proximity of bodies and mutual pleasure is positioned as the greater enabler of intimacy. However, Alice spoke about how previous girlfriends had been resistant to using this kind of object due to its perceived phallic symbolism:

I think I would say it’s probably almost a political choice on the part of, some of the what I would term quite parochial Midlands ex partners. In

²⁰ A number of texts also point to the pernicious racial representations that circulate in the ‘realistic’ dildo market, where ‘flesh coloured’ almost always means a pale pink/cream colour (Findlay, 1992), and the hugely exaggerated size of those dildos that are moulded in black or brown colours draws upon and reinforces the representation of black men as ‘hypersexual and sexually aggressive’ (Alavi, 2004, 86).

that it's been seen, the strap on thing has been seen as kind of quite a performative sexual thing. Which is interesting isn't it?

R: Ok, mmm.

A: I haven't really been bothered either way so you don't like to pressure people.

R: So what, so can you explain that a bit more?

A: Um, so yeah so when sex toys or stuff have been brought into it, um, they've really not liked the idea of any kind of strap on sort of thing, so maybe a little bit of light level sex toy play has been fine, but nothing to do with a strap on. And in a couple of cases it's been specifically because that's seen as a, like, performing sort of male on female gendered sex, you know really heterosexual sex, I guess. Because it's like, it's like fucking with a cock isn't it? I guess, and I guess that's been kind of the problem with it.

Alice positions this choice as 'parochial', suggesting that she does not agree with a view of strap-on sex as mimicking heterosexual sex and views it as an outdated standpoint. Indeed, Alice spoke at length about her experience of using a strap on dildo and harness with her current partner, framing this sexual object in a complex way that demonstrated its specificity as a sexual object in an everyday context:

It's loads more intimate than I thought it would be, like loads less, it's loads less like banging around than I thought it would be, but also it's loads more difficult to use than I thought, something that's really interesting that I, for some reason, hadn't thought of at all, I suppose because I hadn't thought about using one, is that you don't know how it feels for the other person? So generally speaking if you're having sex with a woman you're using your hands, and because you've got lots of, sort of, nerve endings on your hands you can, you've got a sense of whether they're enjoying it or not, and you've got a sense of whether you're being too rough with them, and you've got a sense of how much they're liking it, and that's fine. And I think it had completely passed me by how much I relied on that in comparison with, how much, how important the sense of touch, is very important actually when you're having sex with a woman. For some reason I just hadn't thought of it at all, and then all of a sudden you're in a position where actually you're not using your hands, and you're kind of a bit like, well, they seem to be enjoying it? So you're not, you're a little bit left without the things that you usually rely on in terms of how you feel their experience is going I suppose...

I suppose I'm not as confident with these 'alien' things, if you want to put it like that. These extra things that aren't part of me, cause you're using it essentially as an extension of your own body aren't you. But in the way that

you would use any prosthesis it's going to take some, you've gotta walk before you can run... I think that's the thing about sex toys is that, because it's not a part of you, you kind of have to feel your way with it a little bit you know, because using something that's very alien on somebody else's body you've got very little idea what you're doing.

Alice suggests the strap on dildo as a form of 'prosthesis'. This sexual object extends the body and enables it to perform sexual acts that would otherwise not be possible, yet there is also a powerful sense of its artificial status as an object intervening between bodies and preventing sensation. Alice suggests that it is specifically the newness of this sexual object in her own repertoire that confers its 'alien' status, and as such it is worth comparing her account to that of Trudy, who has a slightly longer history of using strap on dildos:

I think actually there was something quite scary – scary? – quite intimidating about using a strap on for the first time because it's like the physical things that you do when you're using it, are so, they're so alien, it's like you've never done that kind of motion before, and it was interesting using it again with [current girlfriend] and remembering the kind of, like the almost fear feelings of thinking god what if I'm not any good at this – yeah it's really interesting also, having sex with a thing that you can't feel, so the worry of hurting the person you're having sex with because you can't feel, you can't feel the end of it.

R: Yeah, I'm interested in, does it start to feel like it's part of you or part of your body or does it feel very separate?

T: I don't know, yeah I think, it feels very alien and separate when you start having sex with it, and then, once you become comfortable with it and you start to really get into it and you know that your partner's having a nice time and you sort of get into the rhythm of things. The more good about using it you feel, the more, the less cut off, you stop feeling so cut off from it and you feel, maybe it starts to feel, not a part of you because you can't feel it and I never forget that I can't feel it, well so far. The more comfortable and sexy you feel using it the more it feels really nice, and you can almost imagine it feeling, imagine that it's part of you... I can imagine that the more I use it, the more we use it, it could feel like an extension of me, it hasn't felt like that yet but I can imagine that happening.

Trudy's recollections of her early experiences mirror Alice's description of the object as alien and difficult to use due to the lack of sensation, but her experience suggests that, through repeated everyday use, the object has the potential to be imagined as a part of or an extension of the body. Although the utopian image of the 'post-gender' dildo-wearing lesbian cyborg seems something of a leap (Hamming, 2001, 330), Trudy's account certainly indicates the way in which sexual commodity objects have

the potential to exceed their dominant cultural constructions. Whilst strap on dildos are surrounded by anxieties reproduced by the heterosexism and phallogocentrism of the sexual consumer industry, through everyday use they absolutely have the potential to exceed and challenge these constructions, becoming through practice something entirely other than a 'replacement penis'.

This chapter has demonstrated the complexity and ambivalence of meaning that accrues to sexual objects through both their framing in women's talk and their everyday deployment in sexual practice. The 'assemblage' (Dant, 2004) of body and sex toy makes possible and permissible certain kinds of sexual acts and pleasures, opening up a number sexual options whilst at the same time foreclosing others. Sex toys are instruments within a disciplinary postfeminist and neoliberal regime where women are incited and expected to work upon their sexual selves and relationships through appropriate consumption. And yet the biographies and social lives of these objects demonstrate that they can become imbued through practice with meanings that cannot quite be accounted for by their value as commodities: the 'favourite' vibrator in an orgasm routine, the 'shared' object that mediates intimacy, and the extension of or part of the body. Whilst the powerful cultural discourses circulating around these objects exert tangible anxieties and pressures that must be carefully managed, there are also glimpses here of other possibilities that are mobilised when the assemblage of body and sexual commodity object becomes, at least temporarily, more than the sum of its parts.

Conclusion

The preceding chapters have explored the experiences of being a sexual consumer at three levels: spaces/shops, bodies/lingerie, and objects/sex toys. By dividing analysis in this way I have been able to access a range of practices whereby the postfeminist and neoliberal technologies of the self offered by sexual consumer culture are taken up and used to articulate and work upon particular kinds of sexual identities. In 'Sexual Spaces: Going Sex Shopping', I explored the ways in which performing sex shopping in the 'right' way – respectably, knowledgeably, confidently – and in the appropriate place, is a crucial technology of the self through which sexual identities are articulated in ways that are intelligible in neoliberalism. The 'right' forms and locations of sexual consumption are produced through a complex relational network of distinctions, locating sex shopping spaces and practices in a hierarchy of 'good' and 'bad' forms of sex shopping and, by extension, orientations towards sex and sexuality. By forming allegiances with particular spaces and practices chosen from the various forms of shopping on offer, women construct sexual personas that are both respectable and knowledgeable.

Ann Summers represents a key entry into sexual consumption through high street acceptability and accessibility. Whilst reservations about the public performance of sex shopping were expressed by some, this was frequently located either in the past or as problematic, with online consumption representing a key technology whereby the 'problem' of embarrassment and shame might be worked upon and overcome. Ann Summers' mainstream and 'tacky' nature was constructed largely through its distance from aspirational boutique shopping, where values of taste and knowledge are successfully intertwined. Whether or not women can afford to shop in such stores, they are able to express deeply held affinities with them due to their alignment with middle class shopping values of independence, uniqueness, exclusivity, and customer service. The 'expert' guidance of the staff and speakers at such stores reproduces the notion, central to neoliberal regimes, that sexual knowledge must be facilitated by experts. Such experts facilitate not only the improvement of sexual technique, they provide a technology through which to work upon the inner sexual self in order to overcome 'hang ups' and become more sexually confident and 'open'. Finally, the notion of feminine sex shopping 'for women' whether in Ann Summers or a boutique store, is predicated on its crucial distinction from the 'men in raincoats' associated with 'seedy', even dangerous, licensed sex shopping. This foundational distinction has a crucial effect: it normalises and mainstreams sex shopping 'for women' through the othering and abjection of the seedy, perverted and taboo; and at the same time it fully cements the role of sex shopping as a primary technology of the sexual self in neoliberalism. It is this distinction that so firmly positions feminine sexual consumption as a technology for producing, working upon and articulating a sexual self that is 'healthy', happy, knowledgeable and confident.

Chapter Five, 'The Sexy Body: Wearing Lingerie' explored 'sexy' underwear known as lingerie as a technology through which postfeminist forms of sexiness and femininity are constructed. Just as a hierarchy of forms of and locations for sex shopping is

produced through distinction, the accounts in this chapter evidence the taste distinctions that shape the presentation of the feminine body in lingerie. Through the discourse of 'nice' lingerie – pretty and feminine underwear that is primarily valued for its inoffensiveness – and the more niche aesthetic of burlesque or vintage style, an 'authentic' feminine sexual performance is conferred upon the tasteful lingerie wearer. Authentic lingerie wearing is reified as a middle class subject position, predicated on the denial of such agency and knowledge for the implicitly working class figure of the othered 'slutty' woman in revealing and tacky garb.

What is the nature of this 'authenticity'? The authentic performance is one that has been chosen and is manifestly something done 'for me' (and not only 'for him'). Thus this chapter also highlights the postfeminist specificities of lingerie practice. Whilst some women are willing to conceptualise their presentation of the lingerie clad body as a kind of 'gift' for a partner, this must be situated within a discourse of self-benefit and choice. The interviews represent a range of strategies through which this is achieved, from 'making the effort' and thus working upon a relationship, to a discourse of reciprocity whereby the sexy body is exchanged for 'better' sex and/or a body confidence boost. The contradiction of these accounts – where the possibility of a partner's desiring gaze is the 'reward' for displaying the body, but also a potential source of anxiety and uncertainty – did not seem to undermine their significance. The multiple forms of labour, or 'body work', that lingerie and its related body preparation practices represent must be framed and experienced as chosen and even pleasurable despite the numerous anxieties and failures that such practices reproduce. These choice based discourses take into account postfeminist and neoliberal regimes of the sexual self, demonstrating the technologies by which women must work to 'choose' to present the sexy body in a way that is authentic, reciprocal and pleasurable on their own terms.

Finally 'Sexual Objects: Using "Sex Toys"' explored the body and sex toy as an 'assemblage' through which sexual activities, identities and desires are enabled and disabled (Dant, 2004). This chapter demonstrated that women articulate and regulate their sex toy practice in line with a number of the discourses offered by the postfeminist sex advice examined in Chapter Two. The postfeminist re-framing of masturbation as a regime of self-care and sexual improvement was revealed through some women's awareness that they 'should' be making time for themselves in this way. At the same time, solo vibrator use was monitored and regulated lest the body become 'addicted' to or reliant upon the sensation. This anxiety is predicated on the postfeminist tenet that masturbation must always be understood as supplementary or secondary practice to sex with a partner. This construction was also evident in the way that sex toys, particularly phallic shaped dildos, are overwhelmingly constructed as replacements, imitations or representations of the penis, resulting in a range of anxieties and pressures that must be carefully negotiated. 'Introducing' sex toys to a sexual relationship can be a fraught process necessitating management through emotional labour and making the 'right' consumer choices. As with lingerie, the introduction and use of sexual commodities in a relationship was central to 'making the effort'; revealing the continual emotion work that women undertake in monitoring and maintaining 'good'

sexual relationships and sex lives. Knowledgeable and well managed sexual consumption is a technology of the sexual self in which women 'make time' for intimacy, enabling stability in the relationship.

What is clear from this summary is that sexual consumption offers multiple technologies of the sexual self through which women can work upon, articulate and construct sexual subjectivities that are intelligible within postfeminist and neoliberal culture. Being a 'good' sexual consumer involves a comprehensive programme of such technologies: from locating and experiencing the appropriate retail spaces and negotiating them in a way that demonstrates and confers taste and knowledge; to producing a sexually appealing bodily performance that is rewarding, chosen and authentic; to working upon and regulating a repertoire of sexual practice enhanced by objects that are intelligently and appropriately chosen, introduced and used. The performance of the 'right' kind of sexual consumption is also predicated upon the othering of the imagined 'slut', an implicitly working class feminine figure who is emphatically 'not like me'; in denying agency, authenticity and respectability to this othered figure, middle class women confer and secure these values around their own sexual consumption habits. In this way technologies of the sexual self powerfully hail women and are taken up by them in ways that are genuinely felt to be not only agentic and pleasurable, but crucial to producing a respectable and authentic identity. However, as I have argued, it is only through exploration of the realm of the everyday that the potential for slippages and resistances in the 'taking up' of these technologies of the sexual self become apparent. In investigating shop spaces, sexy bodies, and sexual objects at the 'micro' level of the mundane and the experiential, the preceding chapters have also revealed the multiple contradictions and subversions inherent to negotiating postfeminist and neoliberal sexual culture in everyday life.

In exploring sex shop spaces, the process of distinction by which some shopping practices and locations were distanced from others was revealed to be more complex than it might first appear. Some shoppers' accounts evidenced the ways in which 'non normative' shopping preferences are also produced through distinction: so that lesbian, bisexual and queer women expressed affinities for gay male sex shops, expressing a critique of the exclusionary heteronormativity of sex shops 'for women'. Others were drawn to the ambivalent, even abject, pleasures of the 'seedy' 'backstreet' sex shop through curiosity, laughter, shock or disgust. The process of 'making do' with sexual consumer culture becomes even more apparent when we turn to the extended biography of sexual commodities beyond the moment of purchase. The mundane and intimate contexts in which sexual commodities are used can cause the intended meanings of such objects to shift and change. Such transgressions might occur through intentional adaptation or they may happen more intangibly through the gradual drag of the ordinary, 'stubborn' daily logic of everyday life (de Certeau, 1998).

With regard to lingerie, these adaptations take place on the borderline of the body, through a negotiated process of 'bodily becoming' in which the postfeminist visual regime of the sexy body may be contested and contradicted (Budgeon, 2003).

Narratives of how the body *feels* in lingerie represent an important site for ambivalence and critique. In particular, an account of discomfort in lingerie evidenced an embodied discourse of failure, suggesting the impossibility and contradiction of the performance of femininity and sexiness required by lingerie. Women's experiences in lingerie also spoke to the playful aspects of wearing feminine sexy underwear, where gender norms were made ridiculous, laughed at, or reiterated in ways that challenged the gender normativity reproduced by lingerie cultures.

Sex toys too are frequently used in unpredictable ways in everyday contexts. Women's mundane orgasm 'routines' with a favourite vibrator create an alternative narrative to the self-improvement one of postfeminist sex advice. The adaptation of the Rabbit sex toy demonstrates a process of 'making do' and 'making with' ready-made culture, showing the inadequacy of a mass market commodity to serve women's diverse sexual practices (de Certeau, 1998). Whilst sex toys do play a key role as a technology whereby women work upon their sexual relationships, these objects also have the potential to become imbued with meanings of closeness through their repeated use in reinforcing or mediating sexual intimacy and communication. In the case of strap on dildos users must still negotiate the heterosexism and phallogocentrism of the sex shopping market, but their accounts also suggest the way that this particular assemblage of body and sex toy can develop over time in ways that exceed and challenge those discourses.

The multiple uses, adaptations and meanings of sexual commodities in mundane domestic contexts demonstrates the irreducibility of everyday sexual practice to the logic of the neoliberal and postfeminist sexual marketplace. The technologies of the sexual self available within sexual consumer culture speak powerfully to contemporary women and are repeatedly taken up and made meaningful by them. Yet the realm of the everyday in which these technologies are taken up and played out is a site for incessant processes of destabilisation, contradiction, adaptation and subversion. These subversions are very rarely direct assaults upon or challenges to the limitations of postfeminist and neoliberal regimes of sexuality, and they are unlikely to provoke any change to those regimes. Nonetheless, they do show the inadequacy of neoliberal technologies of the self to wholly capture the textures, nuance, diversity and ambivalence of everyday sexual practice. In arguing that the everyday is a key site for such destabilisation this thesis is not suggesting that feminist scholars become complacent about women's ability to 'cope' with the pressures and restrictions of neoliberal and postfeminist sexual cultures of consumption. Quite the opposite, I contend that the inability of neoliberal technologies of the sexual self to be taken up without some contradiction and opposition only reinforces a feminist critique of those technologies, their limitations and harms.

Perhaps a more challenging question is to what extent these everyday manipulations and adaptations of the spaces and materials of sexual consumer culture can be extricated from the social and cultural capital of the middle class women whose accounts are examined here. Dana Wilson-Kovacs contends that the manipulation of

material culture in the creation of intimacies is class specific with regard to the taste hierarchies governing the objects chosen, and also suggests that the very ability to enact creative adaptations 'cannot be disassociated from the social capital' of the middle class women interviewed for her research (192). She asserts that the women's 'approach to intimacy reflects assertiveness in manipulating cultural meanings and the practical means to do so' (192). Can the same be said of the women whose accounts form the basis of this thesis? I have contended that the negotiation of sexual consumer culture in everyday contexts can suggest an ambivalent resistance to neoliberal postfeminist regimes of the sexual self. I am wary of suggesting that such manipulations are an exclusively middle class pursuit, as to do so appears to reproduce some of the structures of distinction I have aimed to critique here, whereby agency is conferred upon knowledgeable middle class consumers and denied to an imagined working class other.

Indeed, perhaps part of the problem here is that the figure of the working class woman remains 'imagined' in the accounts explored by this thesis in a similar way to other recent research into women's engagement with neoliberal technologies of the sexual self (Evans and Riley, 2015). Given this figure's status as an othered spectre in middle class women's accounts, it might be easy to assume that the negotiation of sexual commodity culture is indeed a middle class privilege. There are certainly likely to be particular hierarchies and forms of distinction at play in working class women's constructions of sexual intimacies, as the politics of taste remains crucial across the class spectrum. Merl Storr's research with Ann Summers party planners and attendees offers one example of research that looks beyond middle class women's engagement with sexual consumer culture (2002, 2003); she contends that the Ann Summers party is a key site for class identifications and dis-identifications. The idea that middle class sexual lifestyles are aspirational is complicated in Storr's work by the fact that women often reject such tastes as 'unacceptable, inappropriate, stuffy and boring' (2002, 32). I would suggest that research looking at the everyday use of such commodities amongst working class women would find that, whilst there may be nuances in the styles of 'making do' and the tactics adopted, the everyday remains a space for 'making ordinary' the material of mass produced sexual commodity culture.

Another set of experience not captured by this thesis is that of those who refuse to engage with sexual consumption altogether. Although I have interviewed a number of women who were reticent to engage with particular areas of sex shopping, such as sex toys or lingerie – and one woman, Penny, who had never visited a sex shop before her accompanied sex shopping trip – all participants had some engagement with or interest in at least some aspects of sexual consumption. The experiences of those women who are entirely disengaged from sex shopping would suggest that the technologies of the sexual self on offer do not equally and powerfully hail all women to the same extent. Evans and Riley's recent research, for example, explores the accounts of a group of older women deeply suspicious and reluctant to engage with sexual consumer culture (2015). They contend that this group, through their affinities with second wave feminism, reject what they perceive as a capitalist form of sexuality

represented by consumer culture for being inherently problematic, inauthentic and anti-feminist. But in so doing, Evans and Riley argue, the women distance those who do engage with sex shopping from any form of feminism, agency, or sexual pleasure (2015, 137). Would all forms of disengagement from sex shopping culture be this divisive? Again, further research might address the diverse reasons why some women are not drawn, or refuse to be drawn, into taking up the technologies of the sexual self on offer in sexual consumption.

Finally, whilst this thesis has taken as its central tenet the consumer and the related realm of the experiential and the everyday, it should not be forgotten that sex shopping is a global industry driven by the same kinds of capitalist forces as any other. This industry is absolutely concerned with retaining and growing the existing market created in the decades examined in the opening chapters of this thesis. The links forged between sexual liberation and sexual consumption in feminism were exploited by the targeting of the young, Western, heterosexual consumer in the late 1990s, and continue to be exploited today. It is now impossible to keep up with the growing range of fashionable, desirable sexual commodities for the postfeminist consumer, and the emergence of ever more aspirational and convenient ways to shop and buy. Yet this is also an industry with an eye on developing markets, both in terms of location – such as the rise of sex shops in China, despite restrictive legislation (McMillan, 2006) – and demographic, including the increased targeting of the heterosexual male consumer (Evans and Riley, 2015, 89). Looking beyond consumers and markets, manufacturing technologies and materials also continue to develop in connection with economic factors, and with environmental consequences. Moreover, the industry employs numerous workers at a range of levels, the labour of whom is largely invisible from the Western consumer. Whilst the forms of work undertaken and the potential exploitation occurring within the industry undoubtedly bear further investigation, it is also important to bring to light the ways in which workers also engage critically with the sexual commodities they contribute to producing and distributing.

In the final months of completing this thesis I spoke to a Sussex Masters student from Hong Kong who described her ten year experience of working in one of the world's largest sex toy factories. She told me that most vibrators were essentially the same cheap materials and components presented and packaged differently, and spoke about how she and her colleagues would laugh at how much Western women were expected pay for what is essentially another bit of plastic. On the one hand, the student and her co-workers have a point; looked at from the perspective of the production line, sex shopping might well seem like something of a con, and even more than a little laughable. And yet, from the point of view of the consumers – the women whose accounts make up this research – seemingly minor differences in the materials, packaging, and presentation of sexual commodities matter a great deal. In making the right distinctions between sexual products and sex shopping locations shoppers are responding to the powerful call of neoliberal and postfeminist technologies of the sexual self. In taking up those technologies women are working upon, articulating and making intelligible a sexual self that is knowledgeable, respectable, agentic and

authentic. In this way, being a good sex shopper is ultimately about being a good sexual person. Beyond that moment of purchase however, those objects – bits of lace, silk, silicone and plastic designed, produced and sold within a global capitalist industry – will become part of women's sexual lives. Such objects are made ordinary as they are brought into a network of other objects and bodies, becoming part of domestic spaces and daily routines, gathering memories and associations over time. It is this way that women make do with the material culture of sex shopping, evidencing the irreducibility of everyday sexual experience to the logics of sexual consumer capitalism.

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