

# No More Beating Around the Bush:

How Social Media is Transforming Attitudes Towards Sexual Wellness and Safety

Jamie Lerner  
State University of New York  
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## Feminist Publications

In the early 1990's the third wave feminist magazines became a hit with subscribers and bookstore shoppers. These print publications amassed girl friendly spaces within mass media, creating feminist popular culture. The publications documented current developments, debates, and events, arousing reader participation in the feminist public. Elizabeth Groeneveld, assistant professor of Women's Studies at Old Dominion University writes:

“The generic conventions of magazines- the editorial voice, the use of the collective “we,” and the Letters to the Editor section- foster a sense of community and a sense of having a stake in the political debates that are played out on a magazine's pages that are arguably unparalleled within other other forms of print culture.”

Feminist magazines kept readers informed of debates and happenings, and generated momentum for the feminist movement. Readers participate in the space that is created by these publications by writing letters or subscribing. Participation leads to the development of emotional stakes in their readings, allowing third wave magazines to act as “archives of feelings” (Cvetkovich as cited by Groeneveld 2016: 5). With the internet in incipient form, the magazines connected readers to an alternate community where “it felt like a whole other world of people who were thinking and feeling similarly” (Groeneveld 2016: 6). Groeneveld equates receiving the magazine in the mail to getting a postcard from a friend. Readers form relationships with the texts; the stories contained in each issue shapes readers' understanding of themselves and the world. As these emotional relationships to the texts are formed, the readership begins to “discern connections to one another and assume membership in a collective body or shared cultural formation” (Henkin as cited by Groeneveld 2016: 6).

*Sassy Magazine* was an immediate precursor to third wave feminist magazines, as a teen magazine containing frank discussion of sexuality, the first teen magazine to accept condom ads, and a publication read with a tone reminiscent of an older sister, cultivating a bond between readers and writers.

*Sassy* did not “radically reconfigure” the genre of girls’ magazines but promoted feminist ideologies through existing columns and formats common to the genre, making it successful in reaching girls who weren’t necessarily searching for a feminist message (Groeneveld 2016: 25). *Sassy* is praised for its reinvisioning of girlhood with values of fun, encouragement, pleasure, and independence. This reinvisioning contrasts a widespread cultural image of girls as passive consumers, and instead imagines girls as active agents.

Where are the girl- friendly places in the mass media? Where are the things we can see and read and hear that don’t insult our intelligence? How can we get more of them? We can make them.  
-*Bitch* Mission Statement

When I found your magazine, I felt like singing!!!  
-Letter to *Bitch* Magazine, archived at Sallie Bingham Center

### Instagram as a Public Sphere

Feminist media interacts with concepts of public culture by creating and documenting a feminist community and connecting individuals across North America. Jurgen Habermas, a German philosopher, in his classic work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, defines the public sphere as an arena in which citizens can debate and discuss common affairs, and public opinion. Firstly public chambers were a “medium of communication and understanding between people in their common quality as human beings” (Habermas 1962: page.) Forms of social intercourse, closeness, and morality were able to exist in salons, and coffee houses. The spaces having a number of institutional criteria in common, one being the preservation of social intercourse that did not rely on status but rather celebrated equals, produced debates and organized discussion (Habermas 1962: 36). These arenas served as a domain to discuss cultural product, outside the church and state’s interpretations of art, philosophy, and literature. Cultural product, including print culture, remains a catalyst for critical discussions that have the potential to challenge the established state and allow for advanced dialogue, strengthened community, and critical action. Cultural product has long prompted public discussion and fed public participation.

Public spheres nourish opinions and also offer a space for the formation and enactment of social identities. Groeneveld considers, “a cultural studies approach also considers consumers of media texts as active interpreters who have some agency in taking up, accepting, negotiating, or rejecting the subject positions offered to them” (Groeneveld 2016: 12). Feminist magazines include advice columns, letters to the editor, and other spaces that allow opinions and public participation, overall forming “ephemeral and unacademic texts,” (Groeneveld 2016: 13) and functioning as “active and vibrant sites of debate” (Groeneveld 2016: 5).

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Additionally important to consider is that feminist public cultures are not beyond the reigns of capitalism and rely on monetary profit to continually exist. Publications that Groeneveld calls “friendlier-” meaning straighter and whiter- have a simpler time preserving their publication through ad revenue (Groeneveld 2016: 8). In the *Bitch* Mission Statement, there is an assumption that all readers are girls, although readers of any gender identity have stakes in the actions inspired by the magazine. While constraints exist upon these publications, the magazines still recommend feminist ideologies and introduce topics of social justice into the broader public sphere. As the public embraces these new ideologies, the magazines that more unapologetically represent feminism, queer sexualities, or complex racial subjectivities, are able to find commercial success.

As the internet evolves, there are “social and cultural implications of emerging media” (Jenkins et al 2015: vii). Henry Jenkins, Provost Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts, and Education at the University of Southern California, offers two definitions of participatory culture,

“[a culture] that embraces diversity and democracy through every aspect of our interactions with each other- one which assumes that we are capable of making decisions, collectively and individually, and that we should have the capacity to express ourselves through a broad range of different forms and practices” (Jenkins et al 2015: 2).

“A culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations.. One in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another” (Jenkins et al 2015: 5).

Digital technology and networked communication are transforming education and politics. Just as the print industry involved readers of feminist magazines with feminist politics, digital media invites participation among users. A link between feminism and politics already exists, through legislative debates over female bodies, meaning any user participating with this online feminist community is engaging with public opinions, which discuss the politicization of female bodies. The participatory nature of the Instagram feminist community makes it a forum where public opinions can be discussed and debated. Members of the informal community understand membership to be “defined around notions of equality, reciprocity, sociality, and diversity (Jenkins 20152015: 2).” The expansive access and communicative capacity offers new media a role in advocating for educational and social campaigns. Similar to the community of feminist magazine readers, virtual communities are available to online users, forming among people with similar thoughts and feelings about social justice and gender politics.



Image 0

Instagram is host to a billion monthly active users (Constine 2018), with some accounts tied to brands and companies for promotional purposes. Among these accounts, are companies attempting to market sexual wellness products to users, which, while doing so, create a celebratory tone towards sex.

The pleasure with which sexual experiences and preferences are discussed on these pages works to encourage conversation and reduces stigma surrounding STI's, contraception, representations of sexuality and genital anatomy, and reproductive health. While offering individuals an opportunity to engage in public discourse that influences our perception of what is "normal," the posts by these accounts simultaneously stimulates the demand for their products. As conversation about condoms and lubricant becomes mainstream, people with vulvas purchase, recommend, and discuss products sold by the companies that engender feelings of pride in our bodies and selves. Posts made by these companies don't always push a product, but engage with followers by offering messages of body positivity and other feminist messages. These companies brand themselves using social media marketing strategies, such as the use of highly aestheticized images and references to memes and pop culture. By doing so, they not only create a brand that is socially aware and aligned with consumers' political and social interests, but format public discourse to include feminist ideologies including acceptance of all sexualities and genders, recognition of vaginal pleasure and health, body positivity, and individuality. The pages that advertise products by procuring feminist messages engage a feminist public, arousing conversation concerning vaginal health and defining this conversation as casual, comfortable, and therefore sacrificing the stigma around sex that makes it secretive and replacing it with healthy, informative discussion. This project focuses on pages that cultivate a feminist community, and how this community works to advertise to an alternative market while simultaneously exerting influence over perception of current norms.

Instagram as a public sphere, is an "arena for the formation and enactment of social identity" (Fraser as cited by Groeneveld 2016: 9)." As feminist images proliferate on this platform, pages that promote feminist ideas facilitate critical discussions that challenge norms resulting in the adjustment of expected behaviors. Instagram functions as a public space warranting it an ability to promote critical discourse, and facilitate social change.

Comparable to feminist texts, certain Instagram pages have cultivated feelings of communal belonging and shared ideas and values. Feminist activism has moved to the realms of new media. In digital culture, opportunities to create and share have expanded, allowing amateur and grassroots forms of expression to gain popularity, expanding the community. The intersection of art, pop culture, and Instagram's ability to rapidly spread content works to ring in a new set of norms and new perceptions of sex, sexual safety, and inclusivity. The content analyzed in this project makes use of stylized fonts, memes, images displaying fashion and lifestyle trends, references to pop culture, and fine art, all which is aimed to empower users to take control of their sexual health. Pop culture and marketing, and capitalism and activism intersect here, and while profit remains a priority for these companies, beneficial effects of their marketing strategies- using 'hip' and 'trendy' images to publicly discuss historically restricted topics- include exposure to feminist messages, prioritization of sexual health, and mainstream and public conversation about STI's and prevention methods, therefore normalizing practices that preserve reproductive health.

### Artification of Sexual Health

Artification is defined as a process, having to do with "meanings, objects, interactions, and institutions (Shapiro and Heinrich)." While seeking to understand what people revere and treasure as art has been long considered, Shapiro and Heinrich's focus is on the process of action and discourse through which an object becomes defined as a work of art. This process occurs over time as the sum of "institutional activities, everyday interactions, technical implementations, and attributions of meaning (Shapiro and Heinrich)." Through institutional and organizational change, intellectualization, and legal consolidation, sexual wellness has become artified.

"Art emerges over time as the sum total of institutional activities, everyday interactions, technical implementations, and attributions of meaning. Artification is a dynamic process of social change through which new objects and practices emerge and relationships and institutions are transformed...Since then, countless other groups of people, objects, and

activities have undergone transformative evolutions that can be compared to this inaugural process... We see artification as a process of processes. We have identified ten constituent processes: displacement, renaming, recategorization, institutional and organizational change, patronage, legal consolidation, redefinition of time, individualization of labor, dissemination, and intellectualization.”

Intellectualization of feminist theories have existed in the pages of feminist publications, and now are additionally prominent on online forums. Feminist ideas are intellectualized as scholars deliberate gender identity, the politics of feminism, and the depiction of female bodies in media. Feminism is carefully pondered in public texts that discuss beauty, fashion, politics, and sexuality. Sexual wellness is also recategorized, from a medical association to a more leisurely self-care perspective. Advocacy by members of the feminist community has inspired legal action. Meika Hollender, CEO of Sustain, has been a key figure in lobbying for new regulations concerning the labeling of period products’ ingredients.

Hollender explains,

“The fact that things like ‘rayon’ and ‘synthetic fragrances’ could be found on the back of a tampon box will hopefully push the industry towards not only disclosure but ingredient change” (Valenti).

*Sustain* is a company with an active social media presence. The brand’s main promise is that their products are free from some of the ingredients in other tampons and pads on the market.. Harmful ingredients often present in tampons include dioxin, a chemical result of chlorine processing, as well as chlorine itself, used in the bleaching process, as well as hormone disrupting BPA in plastic applicators. After *Sustain*’s debut collection of period products with no synthetic additives or fragrance and reusable solutions for the “Earth-conscious period- haver” (Sustain), the company expanded to also offer sexual wellness products. *Sustain* offers organic lube and fair trade condoms, free of nitrosamines which have been suggested to cause cervical and genital cancers (Proksch, E.) Not only does Sustain offer physical products that encourage safe sex in a way that is more impassioned than the conventional sense, but the company is also active on social media, arranging a display of graphics and photos that encourage self exploration, vocalizing desires, and incentivizing satisfying, comfortable interactions when in a sexual encounter. *Sustain*’s social media of course also functions as advertisement for the brand, but a form of



readership and community emerges from followers of their page, having their shared images function as more than advertisements. The images introduce and facilitate discussion surrounding sex, sexuality, menstruation, and gender roles. *Sustain* shares art, memes, polls and graphics, that call attention to period poverty, healthcare and abortion debates, and sexual wellness. The *Sustain* site advertises to the “period-haver.” Other pages publicize images of safe and physically and emotionally healthy sex, noting variables in preferences. These posts encourage discussion between sexual partners, encourage using lube and protection, and welcome feelings of comfort and confidence with our bodies and preferences. The company shares posts that acknowledge different body types, gender identities and sexualities.



Images 1, 2, 3 by Sustain on Instagram

Other pages also share sentiments about sex, focusing on positivity, comfort, confidence, and vocalization of preferences. In particular, the account under the name @shrimpteeth, communicates mainly through typography, suggesting protection and encouraging individuals to act authentically to themselves, promoting communication about pleasure, honesty, and consent. This account is run by an individual owner, with some posts promoting products through partnerships. The page also touches on the situation concerning ingredients in certain sex-related products, suggesting that “vagina-owners” be conscious of the products they use. Lubricant is often ignored in sex scenes, and ascribed to aging women, so the whimsical doodles imagined by the artist reassigns lubricant as a tool that enhances pleasure for

people of any age. Reminders displayed through stylized text, doodles, and graphics present these topics as playful and acceptable for public discussion, which is a shift in cultural attitude.



Images 4,5,6 by shrimpsteeth on Instagram

By artifying depictions of sex, lubricant, protection, and menstruation, the posts revitalize viewers' ambition and desire to partake in healthier sexual practices despite pressure from other media to submit to a partner's preferences or desires. The images do not subscribe viewers to heteronormativity or even monogamy, but encourage individuals to prioritize their wants and needs. These media campaigns differ from other media products as heteronormativity is erased and replaced with acknowledgement of all sexual orientations, preferences, actions, and accessories. Accessories in this context refers to toys, protection, lubricant, and other products advertised to enhance one's comfort and wellness. Problematic depictions of sexual accessories exist in many media products; lubricant is referred to as being for "dried up old ladies" (*Superbad* 2007), and condoms are often prescribed to awkward teens who are laughed at by the store clerk and the audience.



Image 7

The image above, a painting by Helen Beard, depicts a human body displaying the vagina. The presence of fine art in the campaign to destigmatize sex and therefore promote safe sex practices, marks a legitimacy. The movement that encourages safe sex by destigmatizing discourse and promoting beautified images is considered “new wave” so the attachment to artwork created using paint and canvas can legitimize the movements close relationship with art. The image beautifies the body, therefore celebrating its capabilities. Beautifying the body eases conversation of topics involving sexuality and genitalia. This image connects fine art, which is cherished and treasured by viewers, and combines the revered expression of female sexuality with the goal of the global acceptance of displays of sexuality. The sharing of the image by feminist pages works to normalize female masturbation and encourage bodily exploration.

### What Messages do we send to youth about sex and contraception?

Richard Perloff, an American academic who studies communications and persuasion, concludes that the more control people perceive they have over condom use, the more likely they are to intend to use condoms and to translate intentions into behavior. Conversely, the lower people’s perceived control over condom use, the less likely (Perloff 2001: 35) they are to use them. To classify condoms as partly embarrassing, immature, or dreaded by the wearer will set expectations that condom use is out of one’s

control or bound to cause conflict, that protected sex is less significant of devotion and love, less pleasurable than unprotected sex, or just a punchline. Perloff states safe sex is behavior over which people do not always have volitional control, suggesting that decisions regarding sexual risk-taking are highly vulnerable to emotional interference and results may differ from decisions made after careful, rational deliberation. (Perloff 2001: 34) With individuals' perceptions that safe sex is out of their control, safe sex does become less likely, as this attitude is not likely to translate into behavior involving protection.

Perloff notes "Campaign practitioners cannot influence people unless they understand the mental goblins and cognitive traps that impede peoples' efforts to change." In this instance, brands that promote safe sex, albeit in order to stimulate a market for their product, do serve as "campaign practitioners" in that they are ambassadors, advocating for protected sex and sex as an available topic of discussion and a norm that has not previously existed due to shame. Advocations for condom use have been surrounded by a stigma that engulfs all sex-related content as explicit or inappropriate, therefore restricting messages of safety.

The next theory Perloff discusses is Social Cognitive Theory, which places a premium on self-efficacy, the belief that one can influence things that happen in everyday life. This theory assumes that people learn they can influence events (or that they cannot) through observations of role models, verbal persuasion, success and failure experiences, and the interpretations of these outcomes. Applied to STI and HIV prevention, social cognitive theory suggests that the more efficacious people feel about talking to partners about safer sex, or exerting control over sexual activities- both of which are encouraged and normalized in these brands' Instagram content- the more likely they are to undertake the challenge of bringing up the subject of safer sex, persist in the face of partner objections, and successfully translate safer sex intentions into behavior. By contrast, those with low perceived self-efficacy may yield when a partner resists their appeal to use a condom, become depressed after unsuccessful attempts to negotiate condom use and fail to practice safer sex even if they harbor positive intentions (Perloff 2001: 35). Currently 21% of sexually active single women ages 20 to 44 use condoms regularly and 71% feel shy about purchasing protection.

According to the CDC, there are 20 million new STD cases in the U.S. every year and half of these occur in people between the ages of 15 and 24 (National Coalition for Sexual Health).

Actions taken by participating pages on Instagram work to combat low perceived control over condom use, fear of retaliation, and low self-efficacy. “Those with low perceived self-efficacy regarding safer sex can change their beliefs if they are motivated to do so and receive compelling information from credible sources (Perloff 2001: 36).” By offering compelling information in the form of trendy images, showing up unexpectedly, distributed throughout other images that suggest positive portrayals of lifestyle, Instagram seems to be an effective outlet for communicating the importance of safe sex and promoting relevant behaviors. Bandura, as cited by Perloff, argues that communication campaigns can increase self-efficacy by doing several things: by providing accurate information to increase awareness of health risks, by teaching social and self-management skills through modeling, by offering extensive practices in these skills to increase the odds that people will perform them in real-life situations, and by providing social support to maintain behavioral change. Instagram posts successfully promote condom use by depicting safe sex as natural, loving, satisfying, and “normal” as unprotected sex; if protected sex can be portrayed to be all of these things, self-efficacy is not doubted and individuals feel capable of discussing contraception.

Understanding that shame and discomfort dissuade individuals from suggesting or recommending condom use, the Instagram community has decided to adopt a contemporary, proud voice in advocating for safe sex. By normalizing a voice that unconditionally advocates for protection and safety, individuals listen and gain self-efficacy after receiving messages that suggest condom use and communication of preferences are empowering actions.

Considering sex education as it is taught in public school, one image that is perpetuated with the intent of educating students may actually be harmful to their perception of safe sex. Teachers ask students to consider how they would react in a situation where a male partner is reluctant to use a condom. This

partner may claim it's not comfortable, it does not fit, or sex is more pleasurable without it. Painting this picture of a man commonly denying and refusing condom use creates an expectation and norm of a non-cooperative partner. Being taught to expect denial results in people believing they have little control over condom usage, as Perloff stated before: the lower perceived control over condom usage, the less likely they are to take precautionary behaviors. Telling students their partner will refuse, lowers perceived control over condom usage, making them less likely to translate intentions into action. Elimination of this motif to create a portrayal of two enthusiastic, consenting partners could potentially be more successful in shifting attitudes and perceived control.

### Dispelling Medical Anxiety

Anxieties around visiting the gynecologist are common, so a campaign that publicly associates the visits with comfort and empowerment indicates to viewers that medicine does not need to cause fear or discomfort. Images commonly associated with topics that are gynecologically concerned heighten anxiety by displaying medical equipment or women with worried expressions. When positioned as an aspect of self care, feminism, and vibrant adulthood, individuals no longer deduce that gynecological visits are due to poor hygiene, promiscuity, shame, or embarrassment. In a study of Manisa Maternity and Child Hospital between September 2004 and February 2005,

“more than one-half of women felt anxious or worried about their health situation during the pelvic examination (54.8%), and 41.8% of women said that they were embarrassed about having to undress. 45.5% of women reported that they would prefer a female doctor, only 4.2% of women would prefer a male doctor in their obstetric and gynaecological care, and the remaining women (49.9%) expressed no preference. Most women (62.1%) expected the doctor to explain their health situation after examination. 71.8% of women said that the nurse should have an understanding and gentle manner, and 28.2% of women stated that the nurse should offer information to the patient about the pelvic examination” (Yanikkerem et al.)

This study makes apparent that female bodied individuals would benefit from reformation of the gynecological visit as an empowering task with which one can take control of their health and body.

Typical images associated with medical care are reminders of a waiting room, stirrups, or feature hopeful but solemn looking women. As exemplified below, a headline to educate about endometriosis is accompanied by an image of two sets of hands twisting a rope. This is a reference to the cramps or pain

someone suffering from endometriosis may experience, however it disconnects the condition from the body. The image decouples the body and the condition, unsympathetic to patients. Another article, discussing vaginal douching features a woman in contemplation. The solemn image equates discussion of

vaginal health to humorless expressions of gloom.



ARTICLE  
Endometriosis Symptoms



ARTICLE  
Vaginal Douching: Helpful or Harmful?

Image 8

Sustain shares the pastel infographic below, paired with a caption that encourages reaching out to a doctor, and ends with “Live, laugh, lube!” The gentle color of the infographic, the typography, and the emoji bullet points support the audience without implanting fear.

Many individuals suffer tremendous anxiety about gynecological exams. Other images shared by the brand prioritize consent, comfort, and contraception. The use of art, memes, and typography encourage us to feel unashamed when it comes to periods, preferences, protection, and medical intervention.

Image 9



Image 10

Image 10 is an artwork by Maria- Ines Gul, shared by Dame Products, “home of phenomenally fun toys for adults (Dame).” The artwork is paired with a caption with information about a condition known as Vulvodynia. The caption tells viewers that this condition can cause pain, and can often be misdiagnosed as a yeast infection. The pairing of information about genital pain- which can be shameful in an environment that stresses sexual perfection of women and represses conversation about reproductive health among individuals with vulvas- with an artistic image eliminates shame and discomfort. The confrontation of this condition through a colorful illustration, creates a space for viewers to comfortably acknowledge genital- affecting conditions in a way that dispels shame, and instead comforts and offers patients togetherness. If scrolling through the homepage of Instagram, this post occurs in the mix of a “news feed” that also contains posts involving fashion, art, social connections, and other interests of the viewer. Conversation about genital affecting conditions is not reserved for medical pages; this post invites it into daily conversation, avoiding the association of genitalia with humiliation. As the conversation is integrated into a social media site, feelings of meekness and reluctance collapse and are replaced with feelings of similarity and acknowledgment. Steps away from addressing conditions through pages filled with medical equipment and doubtful looking women, are beneficial. A less fatalistic and medicalized approach is comforting and community-forming, creating new norms for discussion of reproductive wellness. Viewers are welcomed to acknowledge the reality of genital-affecting conditions through an image containing color and linework that is aesthetically pleasing.

Images displaying doctors’ offices, displeased and doubtful women, and stereotypical abdominal pain medicalize conditions affecting the vagina or vulva. Along with medicalization comes shame, secrecy, fear, and discomfort. Posting the image that depicts a cartoon-ish woman in a vulnerable position, yet gives her colorful arms and legs, and kooky eyes makes the image digestible, fun, and decouples wellness from the shameful, sterile medical office. She isn’t picture perfect, nor permanently disenfranchised. She is still capable and vibrant. The reality is that many vulva- owners dread



gynecological visits and the uncomfortable position we are forced to take on the table. The cartoon woman with silly hair and eyebrows depicted in color depicts a relatable experience with some spunk and humor. This is more closely related to the way an average patient may see themselves. Can we identify with the solemn looking woman gazing out the window or the woman in workout clothes clutching at her abdomen? Interestingly enough, while the latter depicts actual human figures, and the former is an artistic rendering, the liveliness of the former is just much more relatable. This figure is not depicted in a clear medical office, a place that causes anxiety for many. This cartoon figure is in an indeterminate location, but surrounded by red and blue, and positioned on a seemingly soft white surface. A person on their period is not immobilized, but rather is still a complete person with responsibilities and commitments. A depiction of a figure in bed with a heating pad is a simplification of the responsibilities and gender performances individuals must carry out while menstruating.

Images that replace the discomfort of conversation around contraception and the stigma of STI testing with self care and empowerment, normalize wellness including testing. By acknowledging topics that have the potential to stifle honesty and conjure judgement, the community develops an atmosphere where honest conversation can be had regarding sexual topics. Posts that iterate that protection and the conversation that goes along with it is normal and healthy, empowers viewers to take actions that protect their sexual health. The design of these images uses animated body parts, a banana, and cartoon-ish images of protection- gloves and condoms. Presenting playful illustrations eliminates shame and grows contentment for one's body and decisions.

### Images of Sexuality that Challenge Norms

Groeneveld discusses an advertisement run in the 2003 Summer issue of *Bitch*. *Bitch* magazine, a feminist publication, ran an ad that sparked controversy because of its inclusion of an ad containing a model of indeterminate gender, race, sexual orientation, and its depiction of masturbation and fetish. While this ad predates the online images discussed in other parts of this essay, it is important to

acknowledge the precursory images that sparked controversy in order to engage their readership in conversations about self exploration and healthy sex. The history of media and feminism’s partnership continues as brands advertise and promote discussion that normalizes sexuality and vaginal health on social media. In both print and digital media “relationships are formed between advertisers and consumers forming a mutually beneficial feminist marketplace within the broader sphere of capitalist market culture” (Groeneveld 2016: 19.) This advertisement published an inclusive image of sexuality to the public, serving as a pioneer for the feminist community that has blossomed on Instagram.



Image 11. Advertisement for Toys in Babeland, published in Bitch Magazine, 2002. Photograph by Debra St. John.

This advertisement for Toys in Babeland brings forth certain ideas outside the public’s restricted perception of sexuality, otherwise known as “taboos.” Firstly, the model’s indeterminate sexuality and racial identity acknowledges the capacities of identity, sexual attraction and pleasure. Gayle Rubin, argues in an essay on the politics of sexuality, that societies are “permeated with a hierarchical system of sexual value” with some sexualities assigned as “normal” and “natural” (Rubin). Sexualities that are accepted and highly valued are those that are heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. The ad for Toys in Babeland “violates the characteristics of good, normal and natural sexuality” as described by Rubin. (Rubin as cited by Groeneveld 2016: 145) The image that includes a

model's indeterminate identity, promotes the sale of sex toys, and encourages non-marital, non-reproductive sex is a challenge to the public's approval. This advertisement is an ancestor to posts on Instagram that acknowledge all gender identities and sexual orientations.

In opposition to this hierarchy, current digital media acknowledges the range of gender identities, sexualities, and races, and by posting inclusive images paired with educational captions, the participating brands introduce discourse that publicly accepts all sexualities and preferences. Images that acknowledge discomfort and awkwardness, but prioritize personal health and wellbeing lead participants of the community to attitudes that are sex positive, destigmatizing vocalization of wants and needs. These wants and needs involve discussions of contraception and pleasure, which is often disregarded in media depictions of sexual intercourse.

An image that does include self exploration, female empowerment, personal choice surrounding sexual expression and does not include partners, reproduction, or heteronormativity serves as a campaign for inclusivity and normalizes sexual encounters that include discussion, consent, and precautions. The discussion stimulated by the Toys in Babeland advertisement paved the way for progressive outlooks on relationships as expressed on Instagram. Instagram users' audacious, uncensored suggestions to use lube, communicate, experiment, positive portrayal of contraception still work to instill new and safer norms. Groeneveld previously considered the magazines as taking on the tone of an older sister. This differs from the tone taken by other literature. Of course the sources and their purposes differ but the magazines' and pages' unwavering support of self love and all kinds of sexual relationships is morally supportive. The next image discussed is accompanied by a caption that briefs readers on a condition known as vulvodynia. Instagram hosts conversations about sexuality, protection, and empowerment of gender identities and sexual orientations. Pages intentionally share images meant to be inclusive and non-heteronormative.

Where are the "girl" friendly places in mass media? Now they are on Instagram. Digital culture is host to a community of individuals who value individuality, social equality, and inclusive ideologies and

supports public discourse throughout topics concerning health, sex, and safety. The community on Instagram that shares images and text in support of individual preferences, sexual orientations and gender identity normalizes conversations by bringing them into public conversation. The community's sex-positive ideologies are communicated through playful images containing or accompanied by tips on health, maintenance, and consent. Beautified images celebrate individuality, preferences, and well being, encouraging viewers to consider sexual wellness and education as acts of power and care. The Instagram community that advocates for sex positivity, body positivity, and inclusion inspires the public to reconceptualize sex and sexual wellness in a fresh way, that empowers individuals and educates in a manner that is inclusive and celebratory.

Image 0: Sustain. “No matter who you are, your voice matters! And the best way to use your voice is to get out and VOTE!” *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bp18xivgrQw/>. 6 Nov, 2018.

Image 1: Sustain. “Nothing to see here folks!” *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BtJUUp2qgYHB/>. 27 January, 2019.

Image 2: Sustain. “...Secrecy and lack of education leads to misinformation and shame. And what is the best way to combat feelings of shame? Open and honest conversation about our experiences! So start talking about sex, or if you already are, keep talking about it! Sex is a normal part of life, and it’s time we start communicating about it that way” *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BmzHJHKAEWJ/>. 22 August, 2018.

Image 3: Sustain. “when the week is chugging onward..” *Instagram*, [https://www.instagram.com/p/By8BYTsn\\_Xh/](https://www.instagram.com/p/By8BYTsn_Xh/). 20 June, 2019.

Image 4: Shrimpteeth. “We need to stop arbitrarily gendering objects and restricting access to those objects based on incongruent gender identities. Underwear is SO personal; it’s about comfort, fit, and personal taste.” *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B8eOEAbJgcw/>. 12 Feb, 2020.

Image 5: Shrimpteeth. “Part of being sexually active is getting tested for STIs...” *Instagram*, Planned Parenthood Columbia Willamette. <https://www.instagram.com/p/ByktT6eBwdj/>. 11 June, 2019.

Image 6: Shrimpteeth. *Instagram*. [Redacted].

Image 7: Helenbeardart. “#youexhibitionist #helenbeardart” *Instagram*. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BtgItRCIVs-/>. 5 Feb, 2019.

Image 8: Vulvodynia: Causes, Symptoms, and Treatments. *WebMD*.

Image 9: Sustain. “...Live, Laugh, Lube?” *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B32AIF1H8f7/>. 20 October, 2019.

Image 10: Dame Products. “What is Vulvodynia?...” *Instagram*,

Image 11: Advertisement for Toys in Babeland, published in *Bitch Magazine*, 2002. Photograph by Debra St. John.

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