

# The Sydney Morning Herald

Sex & relationships

## What women want: How pleasure toys went mainstream

Spurred by growing sex positivity in the mainstream, today's sexual wellness industry is booming. But the history of adult toys dates back 28,000 years. So, how did we get here?

By Lauren Ironmonger

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CREDIT: ARESNA VILLANUEVA



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**I**n the pilot episode of *Fleabag*, Phoebe Waller Bridge's layered exploration of heterosexuality, grief and love, the series' titular character is caught masturbating to a

speech by Barack Obama. The scene was shocking, yes, but also symptomatic of a shifting tide in popular culture.

Depictions of female sexuality are on the rise, from *Broad City* to Lena Dunham's *Girls* (the cast of the latter have said the most [common gift sent by fans was vibrators](#)).

More than a decade later, the wave of adult toys – primarily targeted at and used by women and LGBTQ people – seems only now to be cresting.

The days of sneaking into an adult store are over. Today, those in the market for a new toy have a smorgasbord of options for every taste and sexual proclivity, available in online storefronts, local department stores and independent boutiques.

How is our understanding of health and pleasure evolving? And what's next for today's multibillion-dollar sexual wellness industry?

## Sex toys in history

"As far as we know, the history of sex toys goes back over 28,000 years," says Dr Esme Louise James, a sex historian and author of *Kinky History*.

From [ancient Rome](#) to 13th-century China, archaeologists and historians have uncovered artefacts believed to have been used as sex toys.

It's often said that in the Victorian era doctors prescribed vibrators to women diagnosed with hysteria. At the time, vibrators were used for medical purposes and women were diagnosed as hysterical, but James says the idea of doctors prescribing masturbation [is a myth](#).

"Doctors specifically stated at the time their use was to be avoided in any area of a woman that may cause sexual excitement. So they were actually banned from using it anywhere in the pelvic region," she says.

However, this may have foreshadowed what emerged in the 1960s when massagers – namely, the Hitachi Magic Wand – began to be used for masturbation.

James says vibrators were then common. "You would have your kettle or your toaster, and you would have your vibrator. But they were seen as medical devices for things like massage, curing wrinkles or easing headaches."

American sex educator Betty Dodson popularised their use for masturbation in a series of workshops in which she coached women on how to reach orgasm.





In season five, episode six of *Sex and the City*, Samantha Jones visits a home electronics store to buy a “vibrator”, which she is told by staff is in fact a neck massager.

This connection later gained fame in a 2002 episode of *Sex and the City* in which Samantha Jones goes shopping for a Magic Wand – the device promptly sold out in stores. Unhappy with the product’s association with sex, Hitachi withdrew it from shelves but quickly backflipped.

“Lo and behold, capitalism does speak. It was their top-selling product and so they brought it back because of high demand,” says James.

About the same time as Dobson was teaching her workshops, Gosnell Duncan, an American paraplegic, invented the first silicone dildo, laying the groundwork for many popular devices on the market today.

## The ‘missing’ clitoris

In 1998, Australian urologist Dr Helen O’Connell made history when she became the first person to fully map the clitoris (in a doctoral thesis published in 2005).

Anyone with a clitoris, obviously, had been aware of the sensitive region. But O’Connell’s work was groundbreaking in helping to bridge the chasm in scientific research between men and women’s health.

From a medical point of view, it enabled surgeons to operate on the pelvic region safely without damaging blood vessels and nerves that may harm sexual sensitivity.

It also changed the way sexologists could talk to clients about pleasure, what sex toys looked like and, perhaps most importantly, how women gained awareness and pleasure.

Dr Suzanne Belton, a medical anthropologist who researches sexual and reproductive health, worked with the late Dr Ea Mulligan to translate O'Connell's anatomical findings into a tangible model.

"[O'Connell's findings] are important because if something doesn't exist in knowledge, then it can't be talked about," she says. "There is an idea that the clitoris is very tiny and extremely difficult to find."

Many regard the clitoris as the small, round point at the top of the vaginal opening visible from the outside. However, the clitoris is large (about nine centimetres by nine centimetres), shaped like a wishbone and made of sensitive glands with thousands of nerve endings.

"What O'Connell did was anatomically describe the clitoris, and that demonstrates it is an external and an internal organ simultaneously ... it explains female pleasure zones," says Belton.

Christine Rafe, sex and relationship expert for adult toy brand Womanizer, adds: "It provided scientific backing to the anatomy of pleasure for vulva-owners, identifying an organ that exists *solely* for the pleasure of the person, with no reproductive purpose."

O'Connell's discovery also suggested the G-spot was not in fact a separate, mythical part of anatomy but an extension of the clitoris.

Belton connects this misconception to the idea of vaginal orgasms, popularised by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. He argued a woman's inability to have a vaginal orgasm was a sign of immaturity or even psychiatric illness, and that married, vaginal intercourse was the only "proper" form of pleasure.

"The 'myth' that those with clitorises are 'harder to please' is an ongoing misconception," Rafe says.

Compare this to the oft-cited "orgasm gap" during partnered sex, which a [recent large study](#) suggests still persists, with men of all sexual orientations reporting higher orgasm rates during sex compared with women.

O'Connell's discovery also heralded a new breed of devices.

In 2014, German inventor Michael Lenke developed the first clitoral suction toy, the Womanizer, with his wife, Brigitte, as the guinea pig for the design. The technology works by delivering rapid air vibrations without the need for direct contact.

Johannes Plettenberg, chief executive of Lovehoney Group, the German conglomerate that owns Womanizer, says the toy's success was spurred by the growing sex-positive movement of



A life-size model of the clitoris. COURTESY OF DR SUZANNE BELTON

the 2010s.

“With that invention, it fuelled or supported more growth and more acceptance of the market, because it clearly showed there are products which fulfil a need,” he says.

## The ‘Goopification’ of pleasure

Today, large parts of the adult industry more closely resemble the beauty or wellness industries. Indeed, most adult products fall under the umbrella of “sexual wellness”.

And it’s big business. An IBISWorld report on the US adult industry found revenue hit \$22 billion in 2024, with sales surging in the pandemic years.

Gwyneth Paltrow was at the forefront of this movement when her lifestyle empire, Goop, introduced its first vibrator in 2021 (the brand had been selling sex toys from other retailers for several years).

Three of Australia’s biggest beauty retailers, Sephora, Mecca and Adore Beauty, have sexual wellness categories that include toys, although these are sold exclusively online. In July, singer Harry Styles’ beauty brand, Pleasing, announced a line of premium sex toys.



Christine Rafe, sex and relationship expert for adult toy brand Womanizer.





Certified sex and relationship practitioner Georgia Grace (left) and entrepreneur Lucy Wark, co-founders of Australian sexual wellness brand Normal. SAM MOOY

In Sydney, certified sex and relationship practitioner Georgia Grace and entrepreneur Lucy Wark founded sexual wellness brand Normal Co, aiming for well-designed sex toys that don't make users feel ashamed of pleasure.

"We took a look at products on the market, and our classic way of describing this is, like, 'corny and porny'. They were all pink, purple, black, red," says Wark.

"We both felt sexuality in the 21st century isn't something you should feel embarrassed by, and toys should feel like a beautiful modern object that fits into your life."

Rachel Baker founded sexual wellness brand LBDO five years ago. At the time, she was working for beauty group L'Oreal. She says there was a great deal of stigma and secrecy around female pleasure.

"They weren't products people were comfortable leaving out on display. I saw that every other category in beauty had had its own version of a makeover from the quality of the ingredients to the design of products, but when it came to sexual wellness and the category, it was still really lagging behind," she says.

LBDO's main offering is the Essensual Vibe, a silicone, tear-drop-shaped external vibrator. The brand also sells a "natural water-based lubricant" with ingredients such as Kakadu plum and organic aloe vera.

Baker, a Melburnian based in New York, thinks Australia has lagged the US market in terms of acceptance and visibility for pleasure, but says it is slowly catching up.



Rachel Baker, founder of Australian sexual wellness brand LBDO, and her brand's core product. ARIANNA HENRY, SUPPLIED

## How are new toys developed and tested?

Engineer Tobias Zegenhagen, Lovehoney's chief technology officer, says the development of new devices is comparable with other parts of the consumer electronics industry.

But the first stage – human testing – is markedly different.

“As you can imagine we cannot hand prototypes to consumers and observe how they're using the products. The testing environment is mostly at home,” he says.

Lovehoney's team of more than 15,000 toy testers sends feedback to the developers. Collecting this feedback, and translating it to data, can be tricky.

“You have users who are not willing to talk about the topic,” says Zegenhagen. “They also have difficulty describing what's happening because stimulation, pleasure and climax are very complicated topics.”

As satisfaction can vary according to mood, environment and, for women, where they are in their cycle, it's an imprecise science. Further complicating matters, he says, is that stimulation is often driven by non-physical triggers such as memory or mental images.



“If you think about sexual pleasure and orgasm climax, we are building a drive train that does a certain movement, stimulates certain types of mechanoreceptors in erogenous zones of the body that’s then being transferred to the brain,” he says.



Sex historian Dr Esme Louise James. JUSTIN MCMANUS

## Heteronormative toys

Historically, sex toys have replicated heterosexual norms in their design and marketing. Georgia Grace attributes this to the fact men have typically been the designers.

“Even the ones that were designed to be used by a person with a vulva were often, for example, very phallic, which isn’t necessarily the most effective way to have an orgasm. It was this idea of, ‘What would women want? Let’s give them a penis but make it pink.’”

James says the LGBTQ community has long used sex toys, adapting those made with heterosexual users in mind.

Dildos, for example, were historically rejected by lesbians and feminists. But others have reclaimed their use as a legitimate element of queer sexual culture.

Conversely, James, the sex historian and author, says more heterosexual couples today are adopting sex toy usage from the queer community. Many sex toys today – including those by Aussie brands Normal and LBDO – take on new, non-phallic shapes and emphasise gender-neutral language in their marketing.



## Reaching the audience

Despite growing acceptance of sex toys in the mainstream, those in the industry cite censorship by major advertising and social media platforms as an impediment to reaching new audiences.

Meta, the owner of Instagram and Facebook, outlines its policy on adult nudity and sexual activity on its [website](#), stating, “ads must not contain imagery depicting nudity, sexual activity, depictions of people in explicit or sexually suggestive positions, or activities that are sexually suggestive”.

TikTok does not allow advertisements for any sexual products.

Plettenberg says: “[Lovehoney] are really struggling and we’re unhappy about the situation because there are so many other industries [like alcohol and gambling] who are allowed to advertise on Meta, Google and Amazon who deliver bad or at least challenging content to the world.”



Lovehoney Group CEO Johannes Plettenberg (left) and chief technology officer Tobias Zegenhagen.

Baker says she’s experienced similar censorship with her brand LBDO, including having content blocked, ads taken down and being shadow-banned (when a platform reduces the visibility of a user’s content without informing them).

She says she’s also had difficulty partnering with payment providers and charities.

Many agents and talent managers have also been reluctant to put clients up for sponsorship in the sex industry. Lucy Wark says Normal’s ambassador, influencer Abbie Chatfield, has spoken

previously about a former agent discouraging her from accepting brand deals with adult companies.

Such censorship is ridiculous, says James. “It is still coming from that really reinforced idea that sex toys are dirty and naughty, and they’re not ... for a lot of people this is actually an essential necessity in terms of sexual wellbeing.”

## Future of the industry

As with other industries, sexual wellness has been swept up in a wave of technological advancements, as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, robotics and more shape new products.

But Wark is sceptical.

“I think a lot of technological innovation in the sex toy space is driven more by marketing than consumer demand,” she says.

“There’s only so many bits of anatomy to stimulate. We know roughly what works and most people want a product they enjoy that fades into the background so they can have a *human* experience, rather than a technological experience.”

Virtual reality and AI, says Rafe, from the Womanizer brand, have “the potential to create more personalised, immersive experiences, especially for folks interested in exploring sexuality, fantasies and kinks they might not feel ready to explore with others”.

But she warns they may also “portray porn-like fantasies with unrealistic bodies”.

James’ forecast for the next big trend in the industry will be in education rather than products. Grace and Wark feel strongly that Normal should play an educational role for its customers.

“Our sex education is focused on a narrow set of risk-based messages around pregnancy and STIs and neglects a huge amount of other topics that are important to fulfilling sexuality, like pleasure and communication,” says Wark.

“We found a lot of [knowledge gaps] would get filled by porn and pop culture representations that were often pretty unrealistic. So part of what we wanted to do was create digital, free, LGBTQ-inclusive sex education.”

For Lovehoney, Plettenberg says the next frontier is finding ways to introduce toys to those who don’t own them.

Rafe says the mainstream acceptance of sex toys has been game changing, adding: “It’s important to also normalise that not everyone wants to be super-sexually expressive, and that’s OK too if it’s not avoidance due to shame, lack of education or fear.

“Every person will have different desires and pleasure needs, which is what makes sex so varied and fun, whether that includes every toy available, or no toys at all.”

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