

Engaging with Sex Retail Culture

George D. Dranichak

Counselor Education Program, Saint Bonaventure University

CE 639

Dr. Heidi Henry

6/29/25

Introduction

Sexual culture encompasses the diverse ways people express, explore, and find meaning in their sexual identities and behaviors. While often confined to the margins of public discourse, these cultures play a vital role in many individuals' lives and wellbeing.

For this reflection, I had the pleasure of interviewing Shannon O'Neill, the manager of *Exotic Dreams* in Pennsylvania, to explore the complexities of adult retail spaces and the sexual culture that surrounds them. My intention was to learn about the dynamics of sexual culture within such a space and reflect on the implications for mental health professionals. The conversation spanned topics including education, sexual identity, kink, stigma, trauma, and personal transformation.

I structured the interview into five thematic sections: introduction, culture, counseling relevance, ethics, and reflection (see Appendix). To prepare for this interview, I purchased lapel microphones and a tripod that were compatible with my phone. Thankfully, voice memos on iPhone to Mac could create a transcript of the interview that I could skim through and reference back to. I was not able to record video of the shop, but it seemed like a standard, yet mild adult shop, filled with vibrators, dildos, lingerie, and clothing for dancers. Prior to the interview, I had reached out to multiple shops to conduct interviews surrounding sex culture, but *Exotic Dreams* was the only one that was willing to participate in the discussion. Shannon was welcoming, insightful, and offered candid, thoughtful responses throughout.

While often dismissed or stigmatized, adult retail environments represent a meaningful intersection of identity, pleasure, community, and self-exploration. Engaging with this culture revealed the ways in which spaces like *Exotic Dreams* not only reflect evolving attitudes toward sexuality, gender, and kink, but also serve as informal centers of education, affirmation, and

emotional healing. For counselors, understanding this culture is recognizing the diverse, represented ways people seek connection, agency, and healing. Exploring this community challenged preconceived assumptions I didn't even realize I held and highlighted the critical need for mental health professionals to approach clients from sexually diverse backgrounds with informed, nonjudgmental care.

What I Learned

Through this interview experience, I discovered that adult stores like *Exotic Dreams* are far more multifaceted and affirming than I had previously assumed. Instead of being sleazy or unprofessional, the store's environment (largely shaped by Shannon's leadership) was warm, educational, and rooted in respect. One of the most surprising insights was how much emotional labor and empathetic listening her role requires. Shannon shared stories of helping individuals reclaim sexual agency after trauma, navigate age-related barriers to intimacy, and explore complex identities. She does this not through formal clinical training, but through compassion and experience.

I also learned how education is central to the mission of adult stores like *Exotic Dreams*. Shannon repeatedly emphasized that her goal is not just to sell products, but to help customers feel empowered and informed. We even discussed the bleak state of traditional sex education and the rebellious side effects of abstinence education from parents. She noted that many people come into the store with little knowledge about their own bodies, or with questions they've felt too embarrassed to ask elsewhere. This educational support was especially important for older customers, first-time toy users, and individuals navigating gender or sexual identity transitions. Mayr (2022) writes, "Sex toys, such as vibrators, may have a (self-)transforming potential that has become central to the way women perceive having power of their own bodies." I had never

considered that sex shops could have an empowering or educational aura, but while drafting questions for and conducting the interview, I began to realize just how common that sense of empowerment really is. Johns & Bushnell (2024) extend this argument, noting that the rising visibility and popularity of female sex toys reflect a cultural shift toward destigmatizing women's sexual agency.

I also came to understand how adult shops can act as informal therapeutic spaces. Shannon's stories about shy newcomers, longtime regulars, queer clients, dancers, and couples working through relationship issues brought this idea to life. These weren't isolated cases, but recurring examples of how the store supports people in reclaiming and redefining their relationships to pleasure and identity. On adult shops, Barnard (2023) writes, "They offer places to accomplish two things at once: they allow the person to engage in the familiar act of shopping when they need items of a more personal nature, and they provide a place where one might find the education and skillfully recommended products to help them meet their needs for exploring or improving their sexual health and intimacy." Shannon's approach clearly embodied this dual purpose: she met each customer where they were, offering just enough guidance to empower their choices while respecting personal boundaries, consent, and comfort. This reframed my understanding of what it means to "work retail" in such a space. It's less about pushing products and more about providing affirming, consent-based education.

Finally, I became more aware of the subtle ways shame and stigma persist around sex and pleasure, even within the minds of people training to support others. My own assumptions and nervousness about the interview revealed internalized beliefs I hadn't consciously questioned. This experience reminded me that as a future counselor, I will need to examine my blind spots regularly and approach each client's experience with humility, curiosity, and openness.

Counseling Implications

Interviewing Shannon reinforced how crucial it is for counselors to be affirming and culturally competent when working with clients from diverse sexual cultures. Many clients carry shame or trauma, and for some, sexual exploration is not a sign of dysfunction but a path toward healing and autonomy. Shannon shared examples of her clients reclaiming their bodies after trauma, couples salvaging intimacy through products and guidance, and individuals finding new confidence through respectful treatment and inclusive practices.

As Barnard (2023) highlights, clinicians must avoid moralistic assumptions and instead meet clients where they are, especially when sex and identity are intertwined with trauma, recovery, and empowerment. Shannon emphasized the need for counselors to truly listen, not just to what is said, but to what is left unsaid, and to approach sexual identity with curiosity rather than judgment. When I asked Shannon whether she thought people felt safe talking about sex with mental health professionals, she responded with hesitation. She suggested that while people should be able to, many don't. This could largely be because of fear of judgment or misunderstanding. Her response aligned with what I've observed in counseling as a student and as a client: sexuality, kink, and pleasure are often treated as fringe topics in therapy, if they're addressed at all. Many clients hesitate to bring these topics up unless explicitly invited, often due to previous experiences of shame, misgendering, or pathologizing language.

From an ethical standpoint, boundaries are vital. Shannon outlined how staff cannot demonstrate how to use certain products due to liability, and how she fiercely protects customer privacy, even when encountering them outside the store. I was shocked when she told me that a female customer bought an item from the store, and their partner came in asking what she purchased. Thankfully, Shannon reinforced customer confidentiality and privacy, refusing to

disclose the purchase. That moment struck me as a solid ethical stance in a retail context, as well as a direct parallel to what we must uphold in clinical practice. As counselors, we must be prepared to protect clients' sexual autonomy, even in the face of external pressures, especially from partners or family members. Mayr (2020) reinforces this point, noting that "privacy and self-determination are key components" in how people, particularly women, relate to their sexual wellness. Sexual agency is deeply personal, and our commitment to confidentiality must extend to all areas of identity and wellness, including sexual behavior and expression.

When I asked Shannon about her views on sex therapy, she shared that a local sex therapist occasionally refers clients to *Exotic Dreams* for specific items or resources. "As far as I'm aware, they say it helps," she noted. "I think people should talk about it more because it's going to be more of a helpful tool than anything, really." This casual endorsement from someone outside the clinical world shows just how underutilized, but clearly valuable, sex therapy can be. It also points to a need for greater collaboration between clinicians and community spaces that support sexual wellness.

For counselors, this means recognizing that sexual concerns are not separate from mental health. Instead, they are intertwined with issues of self-worth, trauma, communication, and identity. Shannon's perspective reinforced the idea that therapy should not shy away from conversations about desire, pleasure, or kink. Instead, we should normalize and explore them as meaningful aspects of the human experience.

Ultimately, this interview reminded me that counseling must evolve alongside the people it serves. As cultural attitudes toward sexuality become more open, counselors have a responsibility to meet that openness with knowledge, empathy, and humility. Spaces like *Exotic Dreams* are already providing informal education, validation, and healing to people who may

never have felt safe enough to bring these conversations to therapy. If we fail to integrate sexuality, which includes kink, pleasure, and non-normative identities, into our understanding of client well-being, we risk missing a fundamental part of who they are. Rather than viewing sex as a clinical “issue,” we should recognize it as an important dimension of health, expression, and connection. In addition, we should be prepared to engage with it thoughtfully and without shame.

Expectations

Going into this interview, I had expectations that it would be somewhat sleazy and make me uncomfortable. I expected dim lighting, inappropriate customers, and a general air of awkwardness, perhaps shaped by stereotypes perpetuated in media and my own unfamiliarity with adult retail spaces. However, these expectations were quickly shattered. Before I even arrived, Shannon was warm and enthusiastic over the phone. During the interview, I observed male customers casually inquiring about sex toys in a way that felt surprisingly normal, respectful, and devoid of the creepiness I had anticipated.

Exotic Dreams had a neighbor store right next to it called *Condoms Galore*, which, according to Shannon, had more “hardcore” sexual toys, equipment, and paraphernalia. Something about the hardcore lore of the store next door, as mentioned before, made me not want to explore *Condoms Galore*. Rhymes aside, I genuinely felt more at ease in the milder, more open setting of *Exotic Dreams*. The idea of seeing equipment related to BDSM and kink culture made me internally recoil. This discomfort, I now recognize, stems from social conditioning that views certain sexual practices as only acceptable if kept private; Nocella & Chiaro (2023) critique this notion when examining the public stigma of BDSM. In their analysis, they explain how society tolerates kink “only when it is out of sight,” reinforcing cultural discomfort when such practices are visible, even in clearly consensual and adult-centered

environments (p. 189). My own hesitation reflected that same bias, revealing how even a relatively open-minded perspective can still be influenced by deeply internalized stigma.

For someone who avoids the back section of Spencer's Gifts, *Exotic Dreams* was surprisingly approachable. The store layout had nothing that was shocking, the staff was kind, and the atmosphere was welcoming. Being in an environment that was more "what you see is what you get" instead of being in a cramped mall store was affirming and made me more understanding of the culture of adult stores.

Several of my interview questions explored how customers navigate shame, trauma, or embarrassment when shopping for intimate items. Shannon shared that many first-time customers come in nervous but leave more self-assured, sometimes even transformed. She described moments of education and empowerment that echoed Huff's (2018) argument that sex-positive spaces can support healing and identity development, particularly for marginalized individuals or those with complicated sexual histories.

By the end of my visit, I realized how much my expectations had been shaped by myth, not reality. Adult stores like *Exotic Dreams* are not inherently sleazy or shameful. They can be safe, educational, and even therapeutic spaces for people seeking not just pleasure, but self-understanding and connection. This experience opened the door to a more nuanced and respectful understanding of sexual culture and reminded me how important it is to confront our own assumptions.

Growth

In writing this reflection, I've come to realize that the stigma surrounding sex, or seeing it as taboo, is a bit misguided. Shannon stated in our interview, "it's not a sin to have this body" and "as a society, we've kind of moved and grown away and realized, like, no, sex is pleasure

and there's nothing wrong with pleasure." Her words stayed with me. They pushed me to examine the lingering discomfort I still held around topics of sexuality, even as someone pursuing a career in a helping profession.

This experience helped me recognize how often sex is framed as something shameful unless hidden or clinical. It also challenged me to be more aware of the biases I carry; subtle biases that may otherwise go unacknowledged in a counseling setting. Talking with Shannon helped me see that pleasure, exploration, and bodily autonomy are not only valid but essential aspects of many people's emotional and psychological well-being. I had never given much thought to how affirming and healing a sex shop could be, or how important it is to create space for conversations that normalize intimacy and curiosity.

I also assumed that kink and BDSM-related materials were intimidating or excessive, which was something I didn't want to engage with or even see. The fact that I avoided entering *Condoms Galore* out of discomfort revealed more about my own social conditioning than the store itself. Nocella's and Chiaro's (2023) analysis helped clarify this tension: we're often taught to accept sexuality only when it remains private, sanitized, or heterosexual. My discomfort wasn't just personal, it was cultural.

From a clinical standpoint, this experience made me more attuned to the need for counselors to be well-versed in the diverse ways people experience and express sexuality. The more I listened to Shannon describe her customers' vulnerabilities, needs, and breakthroughs, the more I understood how much overlap exists between her work and mine. While I may never work in an adult store, I can learn from the way she offered nonjudgmental support, affirmed people's identities, and made them feel safe asking difficult or intimate questions.

I've grown more open, more curious, and more compassionate through this process. Most importantly, I now see sexual wellness as a legitimate and essential part of holistic care. Mirroring how I should approach counseling, this care should be welcomed, not avoided, in therapeutic work. In short, my view of adult stores changed from "awkward" to "educational," and my view of sexual culture shifted from deviant to deeply human. These changes have made me more aware of the subtle ways bias can affect how I listen, empathize, and validate others, especially when their experiences differ from my own.

Conclusion

Engaging with the culture of adult retail through my interview with Shannon O'Neill challenged my assumptions, expanded my perspective, and deepened my understanding of how sexuality intersects with mental health, identity, and empowerment. What I initially expected to be a shallow or awkward experience instead became a powerful reminder that spaces like *Exotic Dreams* offer more than just sex products. They offer affirmation, education, and healing. As a future counselor, I now recognize how essential it is to create room for open, informed, and shame-free discussions about sexuality. Clients deserve to be seen in their full complexity, including the parts of themselves that society often silences. By stepping into a space I once misunderstood, I've gained insight not only into sexual culture, but into my own growth as a clinician. This experience reaffirmed that true therapeutic work requires curiosity, cultural humility, and the courage to talk about what's often left unsaid.

Maybe one day I'll feel comfortable enough to go into *Condoms Galore*, too. For now, I'm proud to have taken the first step toward confronting internalized discomfort, and grateful for the lessons this experience gave me, both personally and professionally.

Appendix

① Introduction

- Tell me about your role here, how did you come to work in this environment?
- What kind of people typically come in the store?
- What range of needs/interests do they express?
- Stores' mission values? Promotion of any messages or values?
(body pos., consent, edu.)
- Did you have any hesitations or expectations before starting this job? How did they change?

②

- Describe the vibe/atmosphere of this store compared to others like it?
- Do you have regulars/recurring customer (types)?
- Are there specific groups (e.g. LGBT Q+ MN indiv., ppl exploring kink, couples,) that you feel especially supportive of?
- Do you notice generational trends in how people shop for and talk about sex?
- Do you feel society is becoming more open about sex? Or is there still a strong stigma?
- What kind of language/terminology is used^{respectfully} within this culture?

② Culture

- Do you feel there is a sexual culture or community that forms around adult stores?
- Misconceptions about people who shop here? Work here?
- How do you navigate helping customers who struggle to talk about sex and their desires?
- Are there particular sexual subcultures/communities that are well represented in your clientele? (BDSM, Queer, Poly, etc.)

②

- Have you ever witnessed moments where shopping here was empowering/healing for someone?
- Do you feel this store helps people explore their identity and overcome shame?
- What challenges do you face? ★
- Do you feel this space holds educational value? Thoughts on traditional sex ed? ★

③ Counseling Relevance

- Do customers ever share their emotional / relational concerns with you? What about mental health stories?
- What do you think mental health professionals misunderstand about people who engage with adult stores and products?
- What would you want counselors to know about this space and the people who use it?

③

- Do you think people feel safe talking about sex with MHL professionals?
- Why do you think people hesitate to bring up sex, kink, etc. in therapy?
- How could a counselor be more affirming and knowledgeable in this area of their client's identity?
- Do you think adult stores play an indirect counseling role?
↳ Validation, education, or empowerment?
- Thoughts on sex therapy?

④ Ethics

- How do you ensure boundaries and safety for you & your customers?
- Do you think that adult stores play some kind of ^{conversational} role in sex ed, trauma recovery, or consent?
- Do you think there's enough training in MH programs about sexual diversity, pleasure, and st. sex communities?
- Importance of privacy + confidentiality?

④

- How does the store handle questions of power, safety, & boundaries, particularly for new or nervous customers?
- From your perspective, what ethical obligations do counselors have when working with clients in non-normative sexual communities?
- Ethics of sex work?
- How could counselors stay informed about sexual cultures without making assumptions?

⑤ Reflection

- How has working here changed your views on sexuality, identity, or intimacy?
- How do you handle judgement?
- What brings you joy or satisfaction in this work?

Reference

- Barnard, E. (2023). When Clinicians Have No Time, or Training, Sex Shops May Be the Answer. *Generations Journal*, 46(4), 1-5. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/when-clinicians-have-no-time-training-sex-shops/docview/2811271544/se-2>
- Huff, A. (2018). Liberation and Pleasure: Feminist Sex Shops and the Politics of Consumption. *Women's Studies*, 47(4), 427–446. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2018.1454923>
- Johns, S. E., & Bushnell, N. (2024). What Drives Sex Toy Popularity? A Morphological Examination of Vaginally-Insertable Products Sold by the World's Largest Sexual Wellness Company. *Journal of Sex Research*, 61(2), 161–168.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2023.2175193>
- Mayr, C. (2020). Beyond plug and play: The acquisition and meaning of vibrators in heterosexual relationships. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 45(1), 28–37.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12601>
- Mayr, C. (2022). Toy stories: The role of vibrators in domestic intimacies. *Sexualities*, 25(7), 962–980. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607211000194>
- Nocella, R. R., & Chiaro, D. C. (2023). Laughing in the Face of the Law: Humour as a Thermostat Activating Social Change for Porn Workers. *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, 21(2), 175-204. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17438721221124470> (Original work published 2025)