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Female Sex Toy Store Opened in the Shopping Mall - A New Phenomenon in China

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Abstract: This study seeks to examine the influence of Adult Candy, China's first female-focused sex toy retail establishment, on societal attitudes toward sexuality, particularly regarding women's sexual liberty within the framework of China's progressively liberal sexual landscape. A questionnaire was developed to gather public impressions regarding the establishment of a female sex toy store in a shopping centre, encompassing all ages, genders, and geographic locations. The data analysis indicates that the majority of respondents endorse this practice, asserting that it addresses and fulfils women's sexual needs while advancing sex education and sexual health. Nevertheless, certain respondents articulated apprehension that such public displays could adversely affect youngsters. The findings indicate the advancement of Chinese culture regarding sexual openness while also highlighting disparities in sexual attitudes and acceptability among various categories. These findings are significant for comprehending the evolution of contemporary Chinese sexual culture and its potential implications for women's rights.

Keywords: Changes in Sexual Attitudes, Female sexual autonomy, Gender Equality, Chinese Culture

1. Introduction

Throughout the ever-changing history of China, sexual attitudes have predominantly leaned towards conservatism [1]. Nevertheless, younger generations in recent years have exhibited a more progressive stance on gender equality, diverging from the predominant conservative sentiments of the previous century. According to Shu and Zhu [2], research shows that the influence of a college degree on views towards equality has grown stronger over time. Notwithstanding these progressions, conventional principles persistently wield a significant impact on diverse facets of living in China, including sexual conduct. According to Lyu et al. [3], female students tend to have more traditional sexual attitudes and behaviours than male students.

Adult Candy has achieved a significant milestone by being the first business to open a retail centre exclusively for female sex toys in China. Nevertheless, this advancement seems to contradict traditional Chinese culture and has ignited widespread discussion. While certain persons perceive this as a symbol of sexual liberation and the progress of women's empowerment, others contend that it is unsuitable to create a store selling sexual pleasure products within a shopping mall. This study will focus on this phenomenon, examining the cultural and social ramifications of this advancement within the framework of China's changing sexual attitudes.

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2. Literature review

In the 1970s, feminists initiated the establishment of sex businesses specifically targeting women. In a study conducted by Abligail [4] on the Polish pleasure products business, it is demonstrated that although sex toys are becoming more widely accepted, there is still a prevailing social stigma associated with their use, particularly among women. Feminist sex stores have emerged as a response to the lack of locations that specifically focus on women's enjoyment, in sharp contrast to conventional businesses that predominantly appeal to male consumers. Feminist sex stores are essential in disrupting conventional narratives surrounding sexuality by offering inclusive environments for many identities.

The transition from traditionally masculine sex stores to female-oriented erotic boutiques in prominent urban areas is not a recent development exclusive to China. Martin and Crewe [5] examined this trend in England and Wales and discovered that the design and branding of sexual products are closely linked to social class disparities. High-end boutiques cater to affluent women, while traditional stores continue to be marginalised. Although these boutiques may seem to provide avenues for female empowerment, such empowerment is often tied to consumerism and restricted to individuals with economic and cultural advantages.

When analysing the distribution of sex stores in the London area, a comparable perspective is observed. Moral concerns have resulted in the physical separation of sex stores, causing traditional businesses to be pushed to less desirable areas while enabling female-friendly boutiques to thrive in prominent locales [6]. This distinction perpetuates gendered stereotypes around sexuality, with "respectable" establishments catering to women while "seedy" outlets are confined to less prominent locations, often resulting in the marginalisation of other groups.

During the early years, there existed certain foundational elements related to sexual attitudes in China. Ng & Lau [1] offer initial insights into the sexual attitudes prevalent in China during that period. It is important to note that discussions around sexuality were considered highly sensitive, especially in public conversations. This fundamental research aids in uncomprehending the conservative starting point from which modern developments have stemmed.

Between 1995 and 2007, there was a transformative period in China's societal perspectives on gender roles and attitudes towards sexuality [2]. This shift signified a gradual societal opening, marked by uneven changes in opinions on gender and sexuality, and this period laid the foundation for more open conversations and the eventual embrace of retail spaces explicitly catered to women.

In the book "Global Perspectives on Sexuality and Retail" by Lynda & Robyn [7], the authors delve into the geographical aspects of sexualities and how space and place influence sexual experiences. Although not focusing specifically on China, the book provides a comparative framework that can help us understand the emergence of sex toy stores in Chinese malls.

Looking ahead, Riaz et al. [8] highlight the significance of spatial efficiency, layout planning, and sustainability in shopping malls, connecting these factors with stores' success, including those retailing previously taboo products like sex toys.

In summary, there has been an evolution from a period of conservatism and taboo [1] to transitional shifts in gender attitudes [2] and now to the current era where the presence of sex toy stores in malls is becoming increasingly normalized. This transformation is influenced by global factors and the role of contemporary urban spaces in facilitating these changes.

3. Methodology

To investigate the overall public impression of this phenomenon and potential shifts in views, a survey was devised to ascertain the opinions of various demographic groups about women's erotic products and the establishment of women's erotic businesses in shopping malls. To ascertain the

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contemporary public opinion on this phenomenon, we opted for a questionnaire as the means to carry out the poll. The survey initially enquired about respondents' age, gender, and place of residence, followed by their utilisation of and perspectives on female sexual aids. The questionnaire enquired about the presence of female sex stores in shopping malls, including respondents' awareness of these stores, their visitation history, their preference for online or offline purchases, and their stance on the opening of such stores in shopping malls. The questionnaire count had a total of 558 participants, with 297 (53.2%) being female, 260 being male, and 1 belonging to another gender category. The age distribution data reveals that those aged 25-34 years old accounted for the largest proportion, at 28.0% of the total. This was closely followed by individuals aged 35-44 years old, who constituted 27.6%. Furthermore, there was a relatively low number of individuals between the ages of 18 and 24, constituting 13.6% of the population, and those aged 55 and above, accounting for 14.7%. Before conducting the poll, it was hypothesised that the differential in growth years would result in lower acceptance of the phenomena among the older age groups compared to the younger age groups. The survey classified the population based on age in order to study the perspectives of individuals from various generations and see if there is a relationship between people's perceptions and their age. The questionnaire was distributed through WeChat, and due to its distribution being carried out by the questionnaire's creator, the responses were restricted and predominantly originated from the more advanced urban areas in China. Additionally, the questionnaire design is subject to constraints, apart from the potential self-selection bias of the sample. The questionnaire questions specifically addressed the acceptance of female erotic products and the establishment of female erotic product stores in shopping malls. Consequently, these questions were less likely to accurately represent changes in sexual attitudes. To mitigate this limitation, we analysed the responses of individuals in various age groups to identify any variations. Lastly, the store's location will be examined to ascertain the variations in people's impressions across different regions.

4. Data analysis

In order to find out how much people are in favor of women buying as well as using erotic products, the questionnaire was designed with response choices on a scale of 1 to 10, and the final mean score for this question was 6.41, with an NPS value of -22.58%. This shows that people are generally more in favor of female erotic products. And out of 558 respondents, 428 of them have bought female erotic products, accounting for 76.7%. However, after the survey, the proportion of people who tend to buy them online is still higher, reaching 64.34%. The proportion of those who prefer offline purchases and those who will not purchase are 23.48% and 12.19%, respectively. The reasons for the preference for online and offline purchases are analyzed. Among the choices of reasons for choosing to buy online, 217 and 259 people chose “more convenient” and “discounts for online purchase” respectively, and 200 people chose “feeling embarrassed to buy offline”. In addition, 200 people chose “offline purchase feels awkward”. It can be seen that although many people choose to buy online because of convenience and price, there is also a large number of people who still prefer to keep such things private. As for the factors for offline purchase, according to the analysis of multiple response frequency (table 1), “explanation and introduction” is the biggest reason, accounting for 39.2%; followed by “more after-sales protection”, accounting for 32.9%; in addition, 27.5% of the subjects believe that “quality” can be achieved. In addition, 27.5% of the subjects believed that the “sense of quality” was also an important reason for offline purchases. Only 0.4% chose “other” reasons. In terms of the proportion of individuals, the factor of “having explanations and introductions” received the highest attention among all the choices, at 71.8%, which indicates that professional explanations and introductions are the most important factors driving many consumers to choose to buy offline. In addition, “more protection after sale” raised an important image in consumers' decision-making, indicating that consumers pay more attention to after-sale service quality and protection when

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purchasing offline. Based on this data, it can be inferred that while most individuals are usually open to female erotic products, there are still others who maintain more stigmatising beliefs.

Table 1. Reasons for offline purchases by respondents

	groups	respond		percentage of cases
		N	percentage	
Reasons for offline purchases by respondents	The authentic product is visible.	66	27.5%	50.4%
	There are explanations and presentations provided.	94	39.2%	71.8%
	After-sales service that is easier and safer	79	32.9%	60.3%
	others	1	0.4%	0.8%
total		240	100.0%	183.2%

Following the assessment of individuals' attitudes towards female sex toys, the poll shifted its focus towards people's awareness and opinions regarding the availability of female sex toys in shopping malls. Among the 558 participants, 450 individuals were aware that "Adult Candy," a brand of adult toys for women, had brick-and-mortar stores in shopping malls. Additionally, 405 respondents reported having a physical store of "Adult Candy" in their city, while 393 individuals confirmed having visited one of these stores. Physical stores that specialise in selling "adult candy." Put simply, a significant majority of individuals are aware of or have visited these stores. By contrast, 361 individuals support the establishment of physical retail stores in shopping malls, while 110 individuals oppose it, and 87 individuals are indifferent.

Table 2 examines the factors that lead female respondents to visit physical establishments in the mall to purchase sexual merchandise. According to the data, the choice "easier to experience and purchase" had the highest percentage of 35.7% in the analysis of multiple responses. This indicates the significance of having a physical store that offers a convenient purchasing experience for consumers. Furthermore, 33.4% of participants indicated that their endorsement of physical stores is driven by the need to purchase products that are both safe and hygienic, highlighting the significance of health and safety as crucial factors for consumers. Furthermore, 30.8% of the participants expressed their endorsement of women acknowledging and addressing their own needs, indicating the acknowledgement and acceptance of women's demands in contemporary society. Regarding the individual population, 72.9% and 68.1% of the subjects selected "easier to experience and purchase" and "safe and hygienic products" respectively, demonstrating the significant impact of these criteria on the support for physical businesses. These elements exert a greater influence on bolstering physical retail stores. The data indicates that consumers support the establishment of brick-and-mortar retailers mostly due to the benefits they offer in terms of product experience and health and safety. The disapproval stemmed from concerns about potentially misleading minors, the belief that it is a personal matter, the view that it is inappropriate for such establishments to operate in shopping malls, and objections to the use of female erotic products. These reasons were chosen by 44, 59, 59, and 45 individuals, respectively, resulting in a relatively balanced distribution. Based on the research, most people support the idea of opening female sex stores in shopping malls. They acknowledge that these businesses cater to women's needs and offer safe and hygienic products. Nevertheless, there are some who remain opposed to it and maintain more traditional perspectives. This indicates that the reception

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of this phenomenon in China has evolved from a highly delicate past, although the transformation is not yet fully accomplished.

Table 2. Reasons why the respondents agree with the opening of physical stores of female erotic products in shopping malls

	group	N	respond percentage	Percentage of cases
For reasons why physical shops selling sexy goods for women opened in the mall	Support women to address their needs	227	30.8%	62.9%
	It's easier to try and buy	263	35.7%	72.9%
	Safe and hygienic products can be purchased	246	33.4%	68.1%
	others	0	0	203.9%
total		736	100.0%	203.9%

According to the questionnaire poll, over 80% of the population believed that it was necessary to improve public knowledge about erotic products and sexual health. This demonstrates society's desire for a direct and honest approach to addressing sexual matters. Furthermore, a significant majority of 74% of individuals perceive the establishment of women's erotica stores in shopping malls as a tangible manifestation of the advancement of women's rights. According to Jobe's research on Poland, stores that sell feminine items might be widely regarded as a representation of women's empowerment and liberation [4].

Ultimately, a correlation study was performed among various demographic groups to determine if there is a connection between age and the perception of female erotic establishments established in malls. Table 3 examines the variations in the perspectives of various individuals on the presence of physical establishments selling female sexual products in shopping malls using a chi-square test. The cross-tabulation reveals that individuals between the ages of 25 and 34 exhibit the most favourable response, with a percentage of 70.5%, whereas those aged 18-24 have the least favourable response, with a percentage of 59.2%. The proportion of favour is 68.9% for individuals aged 45-54 and 62.2% for those aged 55 and above. Although there were variations in the individuals' attitudes regarding this matter, the outcomes of the chi-square test indicated that these variations were not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). This implies that while age does have an impact on attitudes, the correlation is not statistically significant. Consequently, the initial premise that people's perspectives on sexuality and female independence would vary based on their age is proven to be incorrect.

The survey findings do not align with the hypothesis, which may be attributed to self-selection bias in questionnaire design, the predominance of respondents from more developed regions, and the potential impact of evolving societal norms on individuals' perceptions.

Table 3: Chi-square test

variables	headcount (n=558)	Age					x2	P
		18-24 (n=76)	25-34 (n=297)	35-44 (n=154)	45-54 (n=90)	55 and above (n=82)		

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Table 3: (continued).

Agree or disagree Female interest Supply shop opening Set up in mall								
Agree	361(64.7)	45(59.2)	110(70.5)	93(60.4)	62(68.9)	51(62.2)	10.767	0.215
Disagree	110(19.7)	13(17.1)	31(19.9)	32(20.8)	16(17.8)	18(22.0)		
Don’t care	87(15.6)	18(23.7)	15(9.6)	29(18.8)	12(13.3)	13(15.9)		

5. Analysis of location

Upon analyzing the location strategy of "Adult Candy," a boutique specializing in products for women, fascinating patterns emerge.

Regarding city selection, the brand has prioritized first-tier cities as its primary locations. This decision demonstrates its focus on high-end consumer groups and reflects its strategic assessment of the market. Adult Candy has a greater concentration of stores in Guangdong Province, the Yangtze River Delta, and Sichuan Province. Research by Zhao et al. [9] indicates that regional factors significantly influence attitudes towards sexuality. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the brand chose to launch its first brick-and-mortar store in Shenzhen, Guangdong. Studies show that consumers in Guangdong Province and the Yangtze River Delta (such as Shanghai, Nanjing, and Suzhou), where economic affluence and liberal sexual attitudes prevail, are more open to adult boutiques in major shopping centres. In contrast to some northern provinces, Sichuan Province (including Chengdu and Chongqing) boasts a distinctive cultural ambience and progressive social views, fostering greater acceptance of sexuality-related topics. Therefore, cultural tolerance is a crucial factor influencing the brand's choice of locations.

Women in urban areas often have greater freedom than those in rural areas, as cities serve as crucial spaces for social and sexual liberation [7]. The relocation of adult boutiques from secretive, traditional settings to open brick-and-mortar shops in the vibrant commercial centres of cities is a powerful symbol of women's sexual liberation. Throughout history, women's natural physiological needs have been clouded by societal shame, and the creation of this shame has been intricately intertwined with their physical environment [10].

Traditionally, sex shops in China and other places have been heavily geared toward men, featuring dim lighting, suggestive decor, and tucked away in inconspicuous corners rather than prominent commercial areas [5]. However, by defying these norms, Grownup Candy provides women with a safe and welcoming environment to openly embrace and explore their sexual desires.

The strategic location of "Adult Candy" not only reflects its brand positioning and target customer base but also signifies society's increasing acknowledgement and endorsement of women's sexual autonomy. The rise of this trend indicates that women are gradually gaining more agency and freedom of self-expression in public spaces. Moreover, it suggests that the adult industry is evolving in a more diverse and positive direction, aligning with the empowerment and liberation of women.

The business centre is a diverse and inclusive space within the city, drawing in consumers from various backgrounds and social classes. This diversity presents an opportunity to promote gender equality and sexual autonomy. Leveraging this cultural environment, "Adult Candy" could establish

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a store in the business centre to demonstrate the brand's support for women's sexual autonomy. The business centre is also a hub for fashion, entertainment, and leisure activities, encouraging open and exploratory consumer behaviours and providing an ideal setting for showcasing and selling "Adult Candy" products.

The layout of commercial centres is meticulously designed to optimize business benefits and enhance the customer experience. The store location, its proximity to other shops, and its access to public spaces all play a role in influencing consumer shopping decisions. For "Adult Candy," choosing a prominent and easily accessible location within the business centre can capitalize on shoppers' natural movement and elevate the store's visibility and appeal. Moreover, the robust security and management system in the business centre creates a safe shopping environment, essential for a store like "Adult Candy," which may involve personal or sensitive consumption topics.

Furthermore, the brand store's bright and warm decoration style, combined with survey data analysis, promotes a sense of security and encourages women's regular consumption, thus advancing sexual awareness. Establishing a store in the business centre would enable "Adult Candy" to convey its support for women's sexual autonomy within a natural and open consumption environment.

6. Conclusion

Through an examination of the phenomena of "Adult Candy," a brand of sex toys targeted towards women that has successfully implemented physical retail stores in Chinese shopping malls, it can be inferred that while attitudes towards sexuality may not exhibit a clear correlation across generations, there is typically a greater degree of cultural acceptance of sexual consumption in China. This stands in contrast to the conservative attitudes depicted in earlier literature. Nevertheless, the general cultural receptiveness towards sexual consumption in China surpasses the conservative ideologies reported in earlier work. The observed phenomena can be attributed to the increasing recognition of women's sexual autonomy and the rising societal approval and affirmation of women's sexuality. Although China's shift has been shaped by worldwide trends and urbanisation, it nevertheless faces challenges stemming from deeply ingrained traditional mindsets. Affluent consumers have been successfully targeted by Adult Candy, which has contributed to altering society's view of female sexual consumption and encouraging gender equality by opening physical outlets in commercial areas. Nevertheless, despite the increasing legitimacy and endorsement of this form of consumption, there are still others who possess uncertainties or reservations, therefore illustrating the ongoing clash between conventional and contemporary ideals in the realm of sexual consumption. Hence, it is imperative for future study and practice to give priority to the progress of women's sexual autonomy while also adequately taking into account the viewpoints of other social stakeholders. By doing so, the sustainable and organised expansion of this emerging sector will be guaranteed.

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Shiyi Li and Wenyun Zhou contributed equally to this work and should be considered co-first authors.

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