

“America Unzipped”

A series of essays concerning America’s sexual culture by MSNBC reporter Brian Alexander.

[A. One preacher’s message: Have Hotter Sex 09/28/2006](#)

[B. Adult superstores seduce a whole new crowd 09/29/2006](#)

[C. Sex in the Suburbs 10/15/2006](#)

[D. All Dressed up ... in Latex and Dog Collars 10/27/2006](#)

[E. On-Line Exhibitionists 11/09/2006](#)

[F. The Morning After 11/16/2006](#)



Brian Alexander is a California-based freelance writer and MSNBC.com's *Sexploration* columnist. He is traveling around the Country to find out how Americans get sexual satisfaction.

Alexander -- also a *Glamour* magazine contributing editor -- is chronicling his work in the MSNBC.com special report "America Unzipped" and in an upcoming book for *Harmony*, an imprint of Crown Publishing.

One preacher's message: Have Hotter Sex

Minister Joe Beam says good Christian marriages walk on the wild side

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/13834042/>

by Brian Alexander MSNBC 09/28/2006

SAN DIEGO — About 100 evangelical Christian couples stand in the convention hall of a Four Points Sheraton, bow their heads, and thank God for their lives and the new day. Then they sing the old-timey hymn *"There's Not a Friend Like the Lowly Jesus."*

I have come here expecting exactly this scene. The occasion is a seminar called "Love, Sex, and Marriage" being given by Joe Beam, a Southern preacher out of the old school, a self-described "book-chapter-and-verse guy" who runs an outfit based in Franklin, TN called Family Dynamics. So I'm anticipating condemnation of American culture -- especially America's sexual culture -- that has made conservative Christians feel besieged.



But then Beam -- a portly, silver-haired basso profundo dressed in khaki slacks, a sweater vest, and brown tasseled loafers that make him look like a retired country-club golf pro -- walks to the front of the room and proceeds to tell the men in the audience how to make their semen taste better.

Sweet stuff works, he says, which provides a built-in excuse because "then you can say, *'I'm eating this cake for you, baby!'*"

Welcome to the world of hot Christian love.

The San Diego Church of Christ is Beam's sponsoring group today. But as far as he is concerned, it could be any conservative Christian denomination. The message would be the same: Married Christians ought to be having more -- and **hotter** -- sex!

You could be forgiven for thinking "conservative Christian" and "hot sex" are oxymoronic. The missionary position has a real history, after all. But Beam is part of a burgeoning trend among evangelicals to bring sex out of the shadows, educate believers, and relieve their guilt.

"For years, Christian publishing would not publish on sex," says Michael Sytsma, a Christian sex therapist with the Sexual Wholeness Ministry based in Duluth, GA. "If they did, it was so heavily edited nothing of value was left. Now, more and more pastors are preaching about it on Sunday, though you still do not see classes in seminaries. We are seeking to do that."

Sytsma thinks preachers like Beam have seen -- and even felt themselves -- the impact of the sexual revolution, and realize the church has been left behind as a source of sexual information.

"Sex is a sacred subject," he says. "The church generally prefers not to talk about it. But that has a dual impact. It keeps it shrouded in ignorance and the implication is that since you are not talking about it, it's bad."

God's 'most wonderful gift'

Beam sees this attitude every day. Women tell him: "I feel like I am sinning when I make love to my husband."

"They want help," he tells the assembled crowd at the Sheraton. At least a score of heads nod in recognition. "It's hard," he continues, "to make the transition from 'sex is bad' when you are young and single to 'sex is good' when you are married." In fact, "Sex is the most wonderful gift God ever gave Christians."

Beam -- who is studying for a sexology Ph.D. from the University of Sydney in Australia -- is all about shining the light. He and a few others like him have concluded that conservative Christians can cope with America's hyper-sexualized culture by being given permission to pluck much of its fruit.

The information he dispenses is a mix of scriptural interpretation and mainstream sexology. He does not speak in euphemisms or metaphors. And his plain-spokenness makes a few listeners squirm at first. But Beam is also part entertainer with a patter that is almost vaudevillian in its timing: "Why can women be multi-orgasmic and men not? Well, I've decided God just likes you better! ... What's the difference between a woman with PMS and a Doberman? Lipstick."

The humor and the brazen talk -- coming from a man who is not only one of them but also a leader who rubs elbows with James Dobson and Jerry Falwell -- gives them permission to relax and hear his message.

It's a simple one: Sex is good. Good sex makes people happy. It deepens relationships. So it helps marriages last and that pleases God and makes society better.

There are rules many in the secular world reject. You have to be married. You have to be heterosexual. Other prohibitions include no sex with animals; no incest; no lust for people other than your spouse; no adultery (and that includes consensual threesomes and group sex); and no porn, rape, or prostitution. You can't harm the body. And you can't have sex during a woman's menstrual period.

If that last one seems like an outlier -- there is no particular health reason to avoid sex during menstruation among monogamous, disease-free couples -- you don't understand Beam's world view.

Scripture is his authority. Like other evangelicals, he believes the New Testament is the literal and infallible word of God. So when the book of Acts says "*You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality*", that's all he needs to know.

No inhibitions

This literalist view cuts both ways. Beam has been attacked by some conservative Christians for his liberal take on certain subjects. Much of what he preaches contradicts the teaching of other sects, such as Roman Catholicism. But he argues that if the Bible does not forbid it, you can do it. So bring on masturbation. Try any position in the Kama Sutra (but refer to drawings, please, and not pictures of real people). Wife away on business? Have phone sex. Birth control is good. Even anal sex is okay if (and Beam believes this is a big IF) it does no harm to the body.

If you are a married Christian, not only can you do all this but you also should be doing it.

“Christians should be having great sex lives! We should be having better sex than anybody else! So drop your inhibitions at the door of your own house,” Beam urges.

The crowd is obviously ready to do just that.

“Our church has tried to be more open about sex, and to be more real about it,” Mary Wadstrom, a member of the San Diego church and -- along with her husband Jeff -- one of the organizers of today’s sessions, tells me half-way through Beam’s lecture. “There are lots of hang-ups ingrained on you every day.”

That’s very clear after Beam takes a break, giving time for attendees to fill out question cards. They’re supposed to be free to ask anything that’s been on their minds. When Beam returns, he flips through the cards and says, “I am looking at your questions and let me say: you are a sick group of people!”

Everybody cracks up yet again. He begins reading:

Can you give us some techniques for oral sex?

He does and -- using his hand and arm as props -- describes it in detail (“...creating suction and warmth with your mouth, your tongue here...”) complete with sound effects.

Is mutual masturbation okay?

"Yes."

Which sex toys are good? And can we use them at all?

“I usually get the question this way,” Beam answers. “‘*What does the Bible say about vibrators?*’” More laughter. “‘*Can we use a vibrator?*’ Sure you can if you want to.”

What can you do if your wife is having trouble reaching orgasm?

“Try having sex doggy-style and simultaneously masturbating.”

He offers another suggestion: “You’ve heard of the proverbial ‘69’?”

Some in the audience return blank stares. He stares back open-mouthed and gently mocks them. “Huh? Is that in Acts?”

Unburdened — and eager to get home

The explicitness causes some jaws to drop, but not because people are offended.

“What is new for me is not that kind of talk,” Wadstrom says. The church has had some sexual conversations before, but always in classes segregated by gender.

"What was new is having men and women together in the same room," she says. "That was very helpful because everybody knows what's being said to the others."

Beam's presentation has a liberating effect on these couples. About 4 hours later when it's all over, many appeared unburdened. Either they were experimenting anyway and feeling miserable about it. Or they were restricting themselves to acts they thought were godly and feeling miserable about that.

"I was raised to think sex was bad," 23-year-old Kym Blackburn recalls of her religious upbringing. She forced her husband Matt -- a U.S. Navy enlisted man -- to attend. But now he is glad he did. He is awaiting a second deployment to Iraq, and thinks their marriage will grow stronger in the weeks before he leaves.

Jose and Marta Ochoa echo that sentiment. "My whole life I thought certain things were wrong or not Christian," Marta, 47, tells me as her husband Jose, 52, nods vigorously in the background.

He'd spent years asking her for more variation but now, finally, "she understands we can share all this freely, and it's not a sin like she thought. It is gonna happen more!"

That, Marta tells me, makes her very happy.

Then they excuse themselves. They're in a rush to get home.

Hot Christian sex? Amen!

Many readers like the sound of one minister's preachings

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14931577/>

MSNBC

Updated: 10:12 a.m. ET Sept 21, 2006

In our 1st installment of "America Unzipped", Sexploration columnist Brian Alexander profiled Joe Beam, a minister who preaches that good Christian marriages should walk on the wild side.

Hundreds of readers responded, many to say: *'Go Joe!'*

"I agree that within a God-ordained marriage, in the privacy of your own home, your bedroom is your amusement park," said one reader.

A pastor wrote in to give "Brother Beam" a big Amen.

"YES!" exclaimed a "Bible-thumping Baptist."

Not everyone supports Beam's brand of religion, though. One reader said he is just cashing in on our sexualized culture. Another is worried about opening "moral floodgates that only move in one direction."

One woman said she buys into Beam to a point -- she's still searching for the part of the Bible that says vibrators are okay.

Read on for more comments:

"I believe Joe Beam is right on when it comes to sex and marriage. My husband and I have had a wonderful sexual relationship with no guilt because scripturally. That's how God intended us to be. We are born-again Christians and never went outside our marriage because we -- together -- have all we need. I believe God created sex for procreation but also for enjoyment between a husband and wife. We have been married 19 years; 3 children; and have a great, great sex life that gets more interesting as time goes on." -- *Annette, Niagara Falls, N.Y.*

"Absolutely! God created sex for our great pleasure within the context of the marriage relationship. We shouldn't cheat ourselves out of the full and free pleasure of this relationship because the World twists and perverts that which is beautiful into something meaningless and ugly."
-- *Christine, Midwest City, Okla.*

"I think his message is awesome! It is about time that someone stepped up and said that 'hot sex' within a Christian marriage is acceptable. So many marriages are in turmoil because the sex is boring, no longer interesting. Now, Biblical proof that we should kick it up a notch and have fun? Absolutely!!!" -- *Jenny, Fort Worth, Texas*

"My judgment is that Joe Beam has not made it as a 'Gospel preache' and has looked for years for something different and special that he can capitalize on. Sex is a 'hot' topic now. And when a so-called Bible believer can open new doors, go for it. In my wildest imagination, I cannot believe that Jesus or Paul would ever commend what Joe the sex expert is saying."
-- *Jim, Paducah, Ky.*

"I may not be qualified to answer this, being Jewish. But I think that he is definitely headed in the right direction. By talking openly about sex, he is encouraging people to be open with themselves and with each other. Beyond the mental health benefits that this would offer, it creates an environment in which it is okay to ask about sex -- even for children and teens. This in turn prevents misinformation about contraceptives, sexually-transmitted infections, and sex in general from being given to them. Which in turn decreases the likelihood of them engaging in risky behavior."
-- *Nathan, Missoula, Mont.*

"I think this guy sends a great message to people: 'Sex is not bad'. If you love that person, what would you not do to please them? God did not say 'Thou shalt have boring sex only in missionary.' Have a little imagination!" -- *Andrea, Batavia, Ohio*

"Thank the Lord! At last a spokesman for the good in sexual life. And of all places, from the church. Wonders never cease." -- *Charlotte, St. Louis*

"I agree with what he is telling his couples. But I am resistant to the fact that he's telling them so openly. I don't know why. It just seems so vulgar to a conservative Christian. But I don't know who else should be telling these couples to have fun in their marriage if not their pastor."
-- *Meli, San Antonio*

"Thank you so much for publishing this. I am trying to work up the nerve to e-mail this to my wife. She considers herself to be uber-Christian (I think it's hypocritical myself) and we haven't had sex in 4 years. When we did, it was really lame. Once every 2 months or so. And then it was strict

missionary and 'Hurry up dear' and 'Don't muss my hair'. Now she says since we can't have kids ... it's a sin ... and I'm like 'What am I supposed to do?' I think it's unfair to make decisions inside a marriage like that without consulting your partner. I don't understand how she thinks it's so holy to leave your husband out in the cold. I am a man and I just can't stop thinking about sex altogether. I've slept in another bedroom for 2 years now (at her insistence) and feel like a stranger at home." -- **Eddie, Chicago**

"YES! ... And I am a Bible-thumping Baptist! These are the PERKS of marriage, folks! It is our God-given gift. Christianity is not about being bored and miserable. Just the opposite -- it frees us!"
-- **Tim, Hohenwald, Tenn.**

"Mr. Beam appears to believe Christians have some super-human sort of self control just by virtue of their creed. In reality, Christians are human beings, too. And he's giving them permission to open moral floodgates that only move in one direction. Like anybody else, Christians who give up some sexual inhibitions will proceed to give up others until they're breaking not just the rules Mr. Beam allowed them to break, but the ones he forbade as well." -- **Steve, Salt Lake City**

"I really appreciate his approach. Growing up this is what you hear: 'Don't have sex, it's bad, you'll get diseases, you'll get pregnant, you'll be sinning, you'll this and that.' Then you get married and it's: 'OK, have sex'." -- **Lanette, Georgia**

"His belief system does not jibe with Roman Catholic teaching which is also Bible-based. It seems he has 'selective reading' when it comes to scripture!" -- **Kim, Omaha, Neb.**

"I belong to the Church of Christ. I am glad he is doing this. However, I think our ultra-conservative congregation would have heart failure if he were to address a mixed-gender group about sex. They don't agree with mixed swimming of all things, so you can imagine. If churches truly don't want couples divorced, then maybe they should pay attention to this guy!" -- **Anonymous**

"For centuries, Christians were taught that the pleasures of sex were all bad. Mr. Beam is helping people to see that God didn't make sex that way. For this, he should be thanked."
-- **David, Creedmoor, N.C.**

"This is very refreshing and it is about time! It is about permission to love your wife and or your husband fully. I think Joe Beam can only help save marriages by this message. I am from Omaha, Neb. -- the Bible belt of the Midwest. You go, Joe Beam!" -- **Kate, Omaha, Neb.**

"I am the prayer and spiritual freedom pastor of a mega church in Grove City, Ohio (Grove City Church of the Nazarene). And I believe that Joe is absolutely right on. The Bible tells us that the marriage bed is undefiled, and this literally means that anything consensual between a MARRIED MAN AND HIS WIFE is no-holds-barred! All the Christian world would have to do is take a look at the Songs of Solomon and they would see that we serve a God that is all for the intimacy and steamy passion in the marriage bed. So to answer your question, I give Brother Beam a huge AMEN!"
-- **Chad, Grove City, Ohio**

"I applaud Mr. Beam. This is a much healthier approach to sex. I attended private Christian schools most of my life, including college. There were people on either extreme of sex: (a) too much with too many partners or (b) scared of the wedding night. My good friend was in a wedding and the bride called her from the honeymoon hotel room bathroom, too afraid of having sex to leave the bathroom. I agree that within a God-ordained marriage, in the privacy of your own home, your

bedroom is your amusement park. It is unfortunate so many feel the 'pleasures of the flesh' are off limits to believers when the reality is that God made those pleasures for everyone."

-- T. Bunner, Murfreesboro, Tenn.

"Although I agree that married people should have sex and it is God's gift to a married couple, I have not found anywhere in the Bible where a vibrator is permissible. So that part of it I am not so convinced on yet." -- **Missy, St. Paul, Minn.**

"I have always felt like a sexual creature; my husband loves me that way. As Christians, we have viewed sex as the ultimate expression of our commitment to each other in marriage. No hang-ups, no feeling guilty. We have tried to impart this to our 20-something sons. We pray that sex in their marriages will be as great as ours is!" -- **Rebecca, Columbus, Ohio**

"Joe Beam's take on sex is liberating and refreshing -- desperately needed by many in the Christian faith. Sex has been demonized for centuries by the church, which leaves believers feeling guilty for the desires they naturally have that God gave them. Hopefully his message will help the church adjust to the modern world." -- **Timothy, Chicago**

"That sex even exists as a recreational activity is proof that God is good! It is a sad fact that many Christians have been taught (knowingly or not) that sex is best left tucked in a corner, unenjoyed and undiscovered." -- **Heather, Durham, N.C.**

"Hey, I'm Jewish and I can't agree more with Joe. I think the title for his 'sermons' should be '*Cum All Ye Faithful!*'" -- **Peter**

Not your father's sex shop

Adult stores clean up their act, seduce a new crowd

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14061438/>

by Brian Alexander MSNBC 09/29/2006

TEMPE, Ariz. — I am taking lessons on **sexual lubricants** from Trista Windels. And it's disconcerting.

Windels is a pretty, waifish 19-year-old blonde with startling green eyes who was raised in the tiny town of Detroit Lakes, MN. I am older than her own father. Yet despite her growing up on a dairy farm and never having seen sex lube before last year, she has already told me at least 3 things (mostly having to do with the sensual opportunities presented by silicone) that I didn't know before beginning my training as a salesperson in the *Fascinations* "romance superstore" here.



I'm temping at the store to experience what it's like to peddle erotic goods for a living and find out who's shopping for them. At the moment, though, I am in the back stock room with my 5 fellow trainees (all under 25) -- all of whom have decided working in an adult store selling toys, lotions, lingerie, porn, and bondage gear would be a great way to make some money. None of them are fazed by the idea. Not one bit.

In fact, if it weren't for the shelves and boxes full of penis-shaped vibrators, a row of floggers, and stacks of DVDs with titles like "The DaVinci Load", Windels' lecture could easily be taking place in the back room of a Nordstrom or a Lowe's or a village antique store, for that matter. "This whole store is about customer service," she drills between sips of Red Bull.

Wear your uniform (maroon polo shirt, black-or-khaki pants, and black shoes) whenever you are on the floor. Name tags always. No freaky piercings that show. Be professional. "We are," Windels tells us, "romance consultants."

The message is clear: **This is not your father's sex shop.** It certainly doesn't look like those old, scary joints. There's a big, well-lit parking lot out front. The corporate headquarters of T.W. Lewis -- a luxury home builder -- sits next door. The rest of the street has mini-malls, a Wal-Mart, a Quiznos.

Satisfied customers

Inside, the 11,000-square-foot store -- run by manager Rachel Miller -- is white-glove clean and brightly lit. Except for the merchandise, it appears to be like any other business in any other heavily stuccoed mecca of suburban consumer culture.

Which is precisely the idea. Adult stores -- including chains with names such as *Priscilla's* in the heartland states, *Hustler Hollywood* in urban centers, and soon-to-open franchise outposts of the *Adam&Eve* mail-order empire -- are trying to go mainstream because they have realized America loves the products but hates the dark, dank stores staffed by questionable characters.

And though it is little acknowledged, that strategy is succeeding. While nobody seems to keep a reliable count, industry insiders say the trend is up, evidenced, for example, by the fact that Fascinations already has 14 stores, with more on the way. Adam & Eve is hoping to open 27.

Shoppers aren't just the stereotypical dirty old men. "64 percent of our customers are female," Windels tells us. "58 percent are in a committed relationship. 21 percent are dating. And 40 percent are college-educated."

Still, when Windels takes us out onto the floor to begin our merchandise training, I can't help thinking that if this is mainstream, we've taken a few twisty bends.

"BDSM [Bondage, Discipline, and SadoMasochism] DVDs do not generally have sex in them," Windels -- who has a rather restrictive definition of "sex" -- explains as we wander the video aisles. "I did not know that. And then I rented one and was scared out of my mind." She points out a few customer favorites. "Belladonna's 'My A** is Haunted.' That's a good one."

The thrill of a new toy

When we turn to the toy section, she explains how each one works, what it's used for, and who buys it. Pros and cons of each model are discussed. Usually we get the idea right away -- most sex toys aren't complicated. But certain models do confuse us. And when Windels explains them, her clarification is often some variation of "*OK ... now this goes in your butt.*"

We have other questions: How, exactly, do adjustable nipple clamps work? Do people really use the 'Violet Wand' -- a static electricity generator and the store's most expensive item at \$449? (*Yes -- usually practitioners of BDSM.*) What should we tell customers about the scented love oils? Are they edible?

An entire wall is filled with at least a hundred different vibrators. Glass cases contain stainless steel and glass dildos. Another wall has every conceivable kind of lubricant with flavors from several food groups.

Mild items such as lingerie and lotions are placed at the front -- we're told -- so that the further into the store you go, the more explicit the merchandise becomes. That way it's possible to buy a sexy nightie and platform stripper shoes without ever catching sight of the rubber vaginas molded from porn stars.

The next day when I'm ready to hit the sales floor, I find that while a particular customer may not personally approve of one item or another (e.g., the comic books featuring incest plots generate some objections), nobody is outraged. Most people seem perfectly comfortable.

Ken Baker -- a 40-year-old electrical engineer -- comes in once in awhile with his girlfriend. "I'd buy stock in it if it was a public company," he tells me. "They have a good selection, the people are pretty good, helpful ... This is not sleazy. That is why I like this store."

Kimberly Pikna-Nyhof, -- 32, a corporate training consultant and frequent Fascinations customer -- says she often talks to her friends about new purchases the way she might exult over a great bargain on Jimmy Choos.

“I am proud of my vibrators and the trips I make to *Fascinations!* I am excited about it! You know when you get a new toy when you’re young? You’re excited to play with it. Same thing when you’re an adult,” she says.

Over the next several days and nights, I wait on a 60-year-old woman looking to replace her Pyrex dildo (“*They last a long time if you don’t drop them on the tile of the kitchen floor,*” she tells me); a man and woman firefighter couple; a deputy sheriff; an elected school board official from a nearby town; several military veterans; and a guy named “Artie” who has a disturbingly encyclopedic mind for porn-video trivia.

I help self-described Christians, Mormons, Catholics, the daughter of a preacher, and one Episcopalian. All explain why they shop here with reasons like “*It enhances my life*”, “*It deepens our intimacy*”, and “*It’s fun.*”

“I’m trying to expand my knowledge about sex,” explains Linda Wurzbacher, a 52-year-old, semi-retired pharmaceutical salesperson. She strolls the aisles in her black dress, a Dooney & Bourke bag over her shoulder, and says that as she has gotten older she doesn’t much care what anybody thinks about her life and that she has become more sexually experimental. “I see it as an extension of my physical fitness.”

Yet despite trying to project a squeaky clean image and attracting a seemingly desirable clientele, *Fascinations* -- like other such stores around the country -- often faces a lot of community opposition.

This year, citizens in nearby Tolleson, AZ were furious when the city council approved a *Fascinations*. The store was protested. But according to news accounts, about 500 customers showed up the first day anyway.

The store I’m in (where I am quickly becoming a top lube salesman) was vigorously opposed by the home builder T.W. Lewis and other community members. But now, says Pat Jagos -- *Fascinations*’ corporate general manager -- his company has proven the store makes a good neighbor. He and T.W. Lewis are even discussing a joint parking lot expansion.

A spokesperson for T.W. Lewis did not dispute that account but declined to comment further, seeing no particular advantage in saying anything either positive or negative about an adult store.

Shhh, don’t tell

Some customers feel the same way. While they defiantly say that there is no stigma attached to being here, they won’t be quoted by name. What they really mean is that they don’t think there should be any stigma attached because walking into a sex shop -- no matter its size or lighting or the moniker “*romance superstore*”, this is a sex shop -- is their right. But they acknowledge that not everyone feels this way. Much of America is not ready to own up.

“Everybody does it,” a female software engineer tells me after buying a new sex toy. “They just don’t want to admit it.”

Just as I have the creative director of a Phoenix advertising agency and his wife convinced to buy a pricey silicone lube made in Germany (\$42 a bottle), a young man and woman walk in. My customer recognizes her. She spots him. They pause awkwardly for a moment and laugh.

“Isn’t it something to see somebody that you work with in this store?” she says.

“I just hired her as my administrative assistant,” he tells me.

“This is one of those secrets, okay?” she says, laughing.

“I don’t care,” he says.

“Well I do,” she replies. And then she and her companion lock arms and head for the DVDs.

Shop at adult sex stores? Sure, readers say
One likens it to 'walking into a Target, but with dildos'
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15047019/>

MSNBC

Updated: 3:44 p.m. ET Oct 5, 2006

The 2nd installment of our "America Unzipped" series explored how adult stores are cleaning up their act and seducing a new crowd. So we asked readers if they would go to one of the newer adult superstores or any other sex shop.

Many of the readers who responded said they don't see what the big deal is. Some said they are regular shoppers.

"Walking into a romance superstore is a freedom-inspiring experience. And I have no shame in admitting I shop at them," wrote one reader.

Another said: "I go to sex shops every few months with my boyfriend to look for a new vibrator or to stock up on lube. Sometimes we just go and window shop."

But some readers aren't sold. "I think searching for new ways of self-satisfaction is just another means for filling the great void that one is missing within their life," one reader said.

Read on for more responses:

"Everybody does it! I admit I like going to see what is new and what can give pleasure to my wife (other than me, that is). I say if it makes you happy and doesn't hurt anyone else, why not do it?"

-- Thomas, Plain, Pa.

"I shop at Sex World about twice a year. Being a single mother, toys are safe. My toy won't give me a disease, knock me up, cheat on me, or leave me. Also, I can replace it without strings attached."

-- Kara, Saint Paul, Minn.

"Yes, I would shop at an adult store even though it feels awkward and embarrassing. We shouldn't feel this way because sex and intimacy are so important in our life. And whether you're a couple or single, God created us to explore as sexual human beings. This is necessary in keeping the fire in

relationships and helps with stress better than anything. We buy clothes to look good. And so we buy adult accessories to feel good." -- **David, Costa Mesa, Calif.**

"Not that it's a bad thing, but if I shop through the Adam&Eve catalog, nobody has to see my face! I would prefer to do it anonymously." -- **Anonymous, Boulder, Colo.**

"I absolutely would. And do. It is a fun experience to take your partner and talk about different things each of you might like. And I've even discovered some things that my fiance wanted to try that -- under normal circumstances -- might have been uncomfortable to talk about. Walking into a romance superstore is a freedom-inspiring experience. And I have no shame in admitting I shop at them." -- **Kevin, Palmetto, Ga.**

"I already do! I personally think everyone should give it a try at least once! You never know what you might find or if you'll like it or not until you try! Being experimental is part of our nature as curious human beings!" -- **Mandy, Mobile, Ala.**

"No, I would not. I find it sad and disturbing. I am sure many people see it as innocent or that I'm just intolerant or a prude. In actuality, I think searching for new ways of self-satisfaction is just another means for filling the great void that one is missing within their life." -- **Anonymous**

"I have shopped at various sex stores, but mostly for lingerie as they usually have a large selection and are helpful when you need advice. My husband and I have gone a couple of times to see what type of toys they have available. And we were happy to find things that have enhanced our sex life. I think that there is nothing wrong in exploring one's sexuality, regardless of what the government thinks!" -- **Sara, Austin, Texas**

"I go to sex shops every few months with my boyfriend to look for a new vibrator or to stock up on lube. Sometimes we just go and window shop." -- **Brittany, Denver**

"I would go into an adult superstore without giving it a thought. Of course, I used to go into the little sleazy ones, too, when I needed something they had. I always wondered what it was in the American psyche that seemed to insist that sex stores be dark and dingy. I think it was a physical manifestation of the shame and dysfunction that Americans had with regard to sex. I hope this new explosion of adult superstores is an indicator that America is finally over its Puritan squeamishness." -- **Kraig, Chicago**

"I've shopped at plenty of sex shops over the years. Hey, I'm an adult! I'm perfectly comfortable with my sexuality. And I really couldn't care less what anyone else thinks about it because it's my life! America has such a weird love-hate relationship with sex: You see it EVERYWHERE, yet so many people are so hung up about it. It's the 21st Century, folks. Get over it and enjoy yourselves. I do!!!!!" -- **Jonathon, Ann Arbor, Mich.**

"My boyfriend and I would love it if we had an adult superstore in our area if it was like Fascinations. The only ones around here are built on the interstate. And you never know what you'll find there, so we don't want to go and find out. I don't see anything wrong with them. I think it's their location and the ways they present themselves on dark roads that just scream '*Here's the porn perverts!*'"

-- **Jamie, Marble Hill, Mo.**

"Absolutely, land of the free!!!!" -- **Tracy, Charleston, W.Va.**

"As a Christian, I fully believe that you sometimes must do something to keep your intimacy alive and well. However, you can take it too far by purchasing pornography videos. You also should not be purchasing things in a sex shop if you are not married. This is my Christian view of things after being educated by my church. Things in sex shops are okay to use if you are married and keeping them within the marriage. But there are also things in there (pornography) that as a Christian you should stay away from as stated in the Bible." -- *Anonymous, Missouri*

"I do shop -- online and in person -- at sex shops. And I applaud the change over from the "red light district" sticky-floor store to a place where you can actually read the labels on the products and can get information without the greasy looking guy behind the counter snickering and leering at you. What consenting adults do in the privacy of their homes ain't nobody's business but their own. Period! -- *Kate, Deering, N.H.*

"I already do. And have for at least a decade if not longer! I think it's great that shops are going more mainstream. What a silly world we live in that people freak out by sex toys!!"
-- *Bren, Pasadena, Md.*

"Yes, my boyfriend and I have visited the local Love Boutique a couple of times. Although there are quite a few things that make us a little squeamish or we would never try, I have no shame in being seen in there. It's not dirty. It's to enhance our intimacy." -- *Kellie, Holt, Mich.*

"I would love to have an adult superstore in the area. Buying online is so difficult because you can't see the merchandise before buying. Also, I have a latex allergy and it's hard to find warning labels online shopping." -- *Terri, Bel Air, Md.*

"I work across the street from that Fascinations in what is an upscale part of Tempe. The store is impeccably clean and organized, so I can't imagine anyone would feel sleazy going inside. It's like walking into a Target, but with dildos." -- *Margot, Tempe, Ariz.*

"Why shouldn't I? There are shops for just about everything else. It is unfortunate that most of America has a stigma towards openly discussing sex and sexual-related activities as natural activity. America -- while claiming freedom -- is one of the countries most concerned about what people do in their private lives. It makes people uncomfortable here to think of sexual subjects -- particularly subjects that go against conservative religious morals and values. I choose to let the schools of social thought advise me but not rule me. My sex life is mine, so I should think for myself and not be embarrassed to experiment and have a little fun with it." -- *Jennifer, Smyrna, Tenn.*

Tupperware parties with a *twist*

Sex toys are for sale at these ladies-only gatherings

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14061667/>

by Brian Alexander MSNBC 10/15/2006

GRAIN VALLEY, MO — On the evening that I visit Julie Bunton’s new house in this small farming town that seems to grow more tract homes than crops, family is gathered inside the living room -- mothers, daughters, cousins, in-laws -- along with a few friends. There is diced fruit, vegetable crudités, and a tray with marshmallows ready for dipping into a chocolate fountain.

Brooke Reinertsen -- a saleswoman for one of those multi-level marketing home-party outfits -- is giving a sales presentation. But it sounds nothing like a Tupperware or Mary Kay event.



“OK, ladies. Now rub, lick, blow. Rub, lick, blow. Feel that? You can just about breathe your partner to orgasm with this!”

Reinertsen -- a no-nonsense 30-year-old suburban mom from Shawnee, KS -- goes on to demonstrate “Gigi” -- a male masturbation sleeve -- by squeezing a generous amount of lubricant into it, then sliding and twisting it up-and-down the penis-shaped lube bottle.

“This is going to make your job so much easier!” she says, sounding a lot like a vacuum salesman who’s just spread topsoil on the carpet.

At that, 15 women turn to look at me as if to say “*Well?*” It’s then I realize that being the only man at a *Passion Party* can be uncomfortable.

But in this room, I’m the only one blushing. Which is saying something because Cathy Pearson, 44, is here with her 2 daughters, 18 and 24. Not only is she not embarrassed, she also regards the sex toy party as a chance for some **mother-daughter bonding** -- a deliberate effort to change the sexual conversation she heard as a girl.

“I was so sheltered ... I was very naïve,” she tells me. Like many in the area, she grew up Southern Baptist, got married out of high school, and “all I knew was this little world. When I got divorced 10 years ago, I felt so stupid.” She doesn’t want her daughters to feel the same way.

Sizzling market

This is exactly what Pat Davis, the president of *Passion Parties* -- the Las Vegas-based company that supplies Reinertsen with her products and training -- calls the company’s mission. “We are really helping educate women, helping them to have better relationships,” she says.

If my 3 nights of Passion Partying in small-town Missouri are any indication, Davis has tapped into a very receptive audience -- and one quite willing to pay for vibrators, dildos, lubricants, and other products that boost their sexual pleasure.

Reinertsen's sales network -- which includes herself and those she has brought into the fold -- made more than \$1.2 million in sales in 2005. She took home more than \$100,000 in personal income. She'll do better in 2006. Most of those sales will come from small towns and rural locations in eastern Kansas and western Missouri.

Nationwide, the company does more than 128,000 parties a year, reaching more than 1.2 million women.

"This year we will have 38 women whose organizations will do over \$1 million," Davis says. "At least 3 women will do over \$5 million."

Davis won't give out the private company's gross sales. But I did some math and suggested to Joanne Harvie (the vice-president of finance) that the corporation sells something like \$100 million dollars worth of sex-related products per year.

"You could say that, rest comfortably, and sleep very well at night," she says. Sales are growing at a double-digit pace.

Competitors like *Pure Romance* based near Cincinnati are also seeing big gains. So much so that adult industry veterans like mail-order giant *Adam&Eve* are getting into the home-party act, too.

Sex and the Suburbs

While the adult home-party industry exists everywhere, the bulk of the sales occur in small towns and suburbs. "We do well in the small communities," Reinertsen says. "Having a *Passion Party* is like a night out."

Most women I meet don't fit the convenient boxes into which the noisiest combatants in our culture wars would place them. Viewed through the prism of a *Passion Party*, stereotypes like "red state" and "Bible belt" become meaningless. They want the same excitement, orgasms, and variation as the women they see on "Sex and the City". And they are surprisingly tolerant of the ways others might seek the same.

During my stay, I hear:

"That's a new thing I learned in tantric..."

"My doctor told me, 'No food products any more.' No more bananas!"

"Well, officer, if you drop your drawers, I'll show you what it does..."

"Shoot, practice'll teach ya that you do not have to gag."

"I was raised very strict Southern Baptist," says a woman at my second party (where most of the women worked for a police department in a nearby town as officers or dispatchers and so requested I not use their names). "As a child, there was no dancing, no cars, no kissing. My mother told me that you get pregnant from French kissing. That was my 'sex talk' lesson."

She hadn't let her own husband see her completely naked for the first 2 years of her marriage, she says. But while she described herself as "very conservative" and not especially sexually experimental,

“I don’t care what anybody else does. Bondage, threesomes, I would not look down on anybody else for it. Don’t pressure me, I won’t pressure you.”

Along with every other woman in the room, she had watched porn (usually with their husbands). Several had shopped at an adult store (though they drove to another town to do it so neighbors wouldn’t see their cars in the parking lot).

That’s why they like these parties so much. And they clearly do like them. Once the front door closes, they don’t have to worry about what anybody else is going to think.

On my last night with Reinertsen, I see how powerful the lure of these parties can be. We drive down a country road looking for Tanya and Matt Willoughby’s place. When she spots a couple of balloons tied to a mail box and a pickup truck for sale in the yard, we turn into the gravel driveway.

Inside the small house, 2 photo portraits of Tanya Willoughby’s brothers sit on a bookcase. One brother is in his National Guard uniform, the other in his Marine Corps dress blues. A copy of "The Open Bible" -- a popular study Bible -- sits on the coffee table, and baking dishes of sweet butter cake and other snacks are spread on the kitchen counter.

Once again, this party turns out to be multi-generational. When I tell 48-year-old Peggy Frizell -- whose daughter is one of the hostesses -- that I’m surprised by the sight of mothers and daughters talking sex toys, she laughs at me.

“We’ve had these parties before, and they are usually multi-generational,” she explains. “People are going, ‘That’s your mom? That’s your aunt? Your cousin?’ My sister would be here, but she’s working ... There’s a joke in our family: ‘Who gets the toys when we die?’”

Reinertsen begins her presentation. But unlike the other parties, about half the women here are weirdly subdued. A young woman in a John Deere T-shirt (“Been there. Cut that.”) eyes me nervously. Reinertsen sweats like a stand-up comic working a tough room.

After a few minutes, I ask for an explanation and they tell me it’s my fault. They have no desire to be exposed attending a Passion Party. They may be eager to expand their sexual menus ... but they don’t want the rest of their community to know.

But they do loosen up a little and begin cracking a few jokes about vibrators and talking about where to go for a bachelorette outing the next weekend.

Somebody suggests *Shaft* -- a gay nightclub in St. Joseph. “I like it there. The gay guys know how to dance, they’re fun, and they don’t try to pick you up.”

Her first time

After her presentation, Reinertsen and I sit in a tiny back bedroom with a half-finished Winnie-the-Pooh wallpaper border (Willoughby is expecting) and wait for orders. (In what seems like a quaint practice -- given the freewheeling talk at most parties -- all ordering is done in private.)

After a few minutes her first customer -- a 26-year-old single woman -- walks in.

"I come from a small town," she says by way of explanation for why she won't give me her name. "My graduating class was 18 people."

She's reluctant to buy or -- more precisely -- to be seen buying. It would be her first sex toy, "so this is a big deal," she tells me.

"I want the Pulsating Orbiter," she decides.

Let's talk about sex, readers say

Society needs fewer inhibitions, less guilt and more education

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15320609/>

MSNBC

Updated: 9:16 a.m. ET Oct 19, 2006

In the 3rd installment of our "America Unzipped" series, we wrote about ladies-only sex-toy parties and asked readers if they thought society should be more open about sexuality so that women -- and men -- would be less inhibited in their love lives.

Most readers wrote in to say that when it comes to sex, it's time for society to loosen up.

"It is not something shameful to know your body and what brings you pleasure," wrote one reader.

"Once America comes to terms with sexuality and the importance of being honest with their children, teen pregnancies will go down as will sexually transmitted diseases," said another.

But one reader called discussions of sex "*the Devil's work*".

Read on for more responses:

"It's about time that the United States cast off its Puritanical attitude toward sex and relationships. Once the taboo aspect is eliminated, we'll see fewer sexual assaults and more equality among the sexes."

-- Lee, Kissimmee, Fla.

"Too often women -- whether they come from a big city or a small town -- are taught to be subdued, submissive, and conservative. It's time to break out of that vicious cycle and educate, experiment, and enjoy!" -- **Mellissa, St. Louis, Mo.**

"Yes, we absolutely need to loosen up when it comes to sexuality. And not so much to facilitate inhibition in just women and men, but to get things out on the table in the family sense. My parents never sat me down and talked to me about sex or sexuality in general. It was a very uncomfortable subject, so it wasn't discussed. I'd rather have openness with my kids so I can know that what they learn (and they'll learn it one way or another) is the right thing. It's time we were more comfortable with our sexuality." -- **Rob, Cleveland, Ohio**

"Absolutely! We no longer live in a society that is ruled by men and their likes and dislikes. We as women are equals in the boardroom. So why not in the bedroom! It is our job to teach our

partners what we like too. After all, if we don't know what feels good, how can we expect them to know?" -- **Becky, Rosharon, Texas**

"I think Americans maintain a very juvenile attitude about sex. It's either 'locker room bawdy' or 'private'. All nudity must have a sexual overtone in advertising, which is our primary source of sexual stimuli. We fear differences (defined as 'perversions') and deny their existence as if only a small segment of society engages in sexual behavior other than Victorian."

-- **Christine, Sacramento**

"Once America comes to terms with sexuality, and the importance of being honest with their children, teen pregnancies will go down as will sexually transmitted diseases. If women feel comfortable discussing sex, they will feel comfortable demanding a condom and birth control."

-- **Jessica, Wyoming**

"The United States is, sadly, still a man's world. While it is perfectly acceptable for men to buy porno mags and blow-up dolls, it's still considered so very taboo (and shocking!) for a woman to explore what 'gets her off'. Desire, stimulation, the need to feel good -- these are all natural, normal things. Whether you act on these with a significant other or spouse doesn't matter. We should never feel ashamed to try out something new and exciting ... Go GIRL!" -- **Tracy, Nashville, Tenn.**

"Society should be more open about sexuality. Men and women should experiment with each other's bodies and women should experiment with their own bodies as well. I was married for 13 years and thought that sex toys were awful. After my divorce though, I decided to buy a toy. And now that I am married for the second time, it has brought more pleasure to myself and my husband. It is not something shameful to know your body and what brings you pleasure."

-- **Anonymous, Georgia**

"I think if it were a more open subject, many parents wouldn't have such a hard time talking to their kids about sex and perhaps we would see a decrease in pregnancy and STDs. I also think that sex is a barrier in many relationships and -- let's face it -- many have fallen apart due to lack of proper info and lack of communication on the subject. Women have come a long way. But many still don't know they have a say in how things are done in their sex lives or just don't know how to approach it with their partner." -- **Amber, Brooklyn, Mich.**

"Between the mortgage, the utilities, the groceries, Iraq, North Korea et al, I just don't have time to wonder what others are up to! Although I would like to see LESS of everyone! COVER IT UP PEOPLE. SOME OF US ARE JUST NOT THAT PRETTY!! (And yes, I'm including myself.)"

-- **Patti, Springfield, Ill.**

"Sex and sexual freedom and self-exploration are as natural as the sun coming up everyday. However, we are a most repressed society in sexual matters. It doesn't make sense. The more knowledge and openness we have about sexual matters, the less pressure and guilt will be felt about such natural activities." -- **Gary, Portage, Mich.**

"Why not learn more about each other's bodies and keep your relationship happy in your own bedroom? If people are happy sexually, they will not stray. I believe if sex wasn't so taboo and people weren't so uncomfortable talking about sex, we wouldn't have so many misinformed ideas about sex. It's sad to hear many women have never had orgasms or don't know where their clitoris is. How would you like to be the husband of one of those women? Everyone wants to know that their partner is satisfied sexually. Being open about sexuality doesn't mean being promiscuous or even

having sex at a younger age. It's about knowledge. Knowledge of yourself, knowledge of how to please your partner, and knowledge of keeping your marriage strong and satisfying. As they say, knowledge is power! Now go home and take your 'power' back in the bedroom!

-- *Azure, San Diego*

"I certainly do think that society should be more open about sex. I attended a 'Passion Party' several months ago and loved it. I bought a toy that my husband and I could enjoy together. But guess what? -- he hates it! I have always been more open and aggressive about sex than he has. And he just feels that this toy -- or any toy, for that matter -- isn't right. It seems that the older he gets, the more conservative he becomes. However, the older I get (nearing 40), the more adventurous I am becoming." -- *Anonymous*

"This is the Devil's work." -- *Anonymous*

note from Kelli: Perhaps this article from a mainstream reporter will serve to introduce the way to what is “Reality” (and should be illegal) and “Fantasy” (role-playing between consenting adults). The purpose of the archived images in the hotlegslove.com’ *Erotic-Art Collection* is to give ideas for such love-play to those who need a break from ‘vanilla sex’. Certainly one can misuse anything in the real world. But that doesn’t mean that those in authority should quickly condemn what a few bad apples in the barrel have spoiled for everyone else.

All Dressed Up -- in Latex and Dog Collars

For fetishists, it's as much about the costumes as the sex

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14061671/>



Former bodybuilder Christine However, 47, of Los Angeles is now a professional fetish model with the stage name 'Goddess Heather'

by **Brian Alexander**

MSNBC contributor

updated: 8:00 p.m. ET Oct 25, 2006

TAMPA, Fla. -- While it's not every night you find yourself stepping off a bus behind a 6-foot man dressed as “Little Bo Peep”, that's not why I'm staring at him.

This bus is full of people going to a party at a club here called “The Chambers” after spending the day at the Hyatt Regency for "FetishCon" -- an annual convention that is part trade show, part classroom, part nighttime scene for fetish aficionados and the merely curious.

In a little while, some of the several hundred people in attendance will be chained to large steel Xs and flogged with leather “cat-o-nine” tails. Men will crawl on all fours and lick the feet of the women who brought them. One topless girl -- her skin painted with a mural by a professional artist named Pashur -- will dance for hours in a pair of giant boots that make her 7-feet tall.



Mimi Guzman displays body paint by artist Pushur.

So compared with this phalanx of PVC, leather, and latex, “Bo Peep” looks practically normal.

No, I’m staring because I’m pretty sure I interviewed this guy the day before on the trade show floor. On my tape of our conversation he talks about being an occasional transvestite; how it helps him land girlfriends; and a little about the whole fetish philosophy. (Some words on my recording are tough to hear because somebody in the background is cracking a bullwhip.)

But I can’t be positive this is the same guy because -- no kidding -- he looks a lot like “Little Bo Peep”! He’s wearing makeup, a blonde wig, a bonnet, a blue skirt with petticoats ... the whole “Bo Peep” she-bang including the shepherd’s staff.

Yesterday, sitting on a couch inside the hotel, he looked all-the-world like what he said he was: a middle-aged, upper middle-class IT manager for a major international charity. He wore a pair of Bermuda shorts and a polo shirt, his hair cut sensibly short like one of those guys from the 1960s’ glory days of IBM. He told me he was a Republican.

After spending 3 days and nights with bondage enthusiasts, submissives and dominants, a man mummified in duct tape, a huge pink bunny (who refused to speak to me because he was a bunny, and bunnies don’t talk), people dressed as ponies complete with actual tack, and a 52-year-old North Carolina housewife turned Superhero fetish icon named “Super Becca”, I have learned to check my preconceptions at the door.



Once a medical secretary, "Super Becca" is now a bondage & escape artist with a fan base on the Internet.

A mental illness?

No one is sure just how many Americans are into fetish; there aren't any good surveys. The publisher of one fetish magazine says he figures about 7 percent of us could be called fetishists. But he's guessing. Everyone here, however, thinks it's growing. And if you believe the business people manning the booths selling everything from stainless steel slave collars to medical-grade speculums, it is.

But there are no hard-and-fast rules about what a fetish is. Is bondage a 'fetish' or a 'practice'? How about wearing whole-body rubber suits? Being spanked with a leather paddle? Nobody seems able to define it, so everything tends to get lumped into it.

Supposed authorities aren't much help. For example, the World Health Organization and psychiatry's DSM-IV manual classify "fetishism" as a mental illness. The WHO says it is a "reliance on some non-living object as a stimulus for sexual arousal and sexual gratification." The fetish object might "simply serve to enhance sexual excitement achieved in ordinary ways (e.g., having a partner wear a particular garment)."

In other words, every woman who ever imagined her man in a pair of butt-less chaps, every man who thinks baby-doll nighties are the greatest invention since the centerfold, could be a fetishist.

"Occasionally somebody will find out what we do," says Melissa, a 33-year-old engineer for a civilian defense contractor in Florida who is newly married to Bob, 34, a corporate controller. (She tells me this as she holds a leash attached to a collar around Bob's neck. Bob is wearing a leather hood that covers his head.) When somebody does find out, Melissa continues, "Often they have done some form of it, too. Maybe not to the extent we do, but they say, '*Oh yeah, we do handcuffs.*' Lots of people have tried it."



While fetish can come to seem like any sexual practice that makes the "vanilla" world (the slightly derogatory name that fetishists use for anybody who's not into fetishism) uncomfortable and while there may be no such thing as a typical fetishist, a few commonalities have emerged over the past few days as I wandered the convention, attended the classes, and went to parties.

To See and Be Seen

Fetish is an aesthetic statement -- not just a sexual one. For example, though some fetishists might be into swinging and group sex, neither of those activities are a big part of fetish. In fact, some fetishists refer to "lifestylers" (meaning swingers) with a bit of a sneer.

Sex at fetish parties in public spaces is frowned upon, partly because it can be illegal but also because it's considered a breach of etiquette. (In private or in small gatherings, people sometimes do have forms of exhibitionist sex if that's their fetish.) Here the idea is to see and be seen (imagine a sex-oriented Star Trek convention).

For most fetishists, privacy is critical. Even at fetish events like this one, a young woman tells me, "You do not walk up to somebody and say, 'Hi, my name is Joe, I am a corporate banker.' You do not give out personal details because there is a risk involved. We value our jobs." She happens to be a microbiologist who works in wastewater treatment for a Florida municipality.

Many trace their interest in alternative sex practices to youth or even childhood. "My earliest memory -- I didn't even know about sex -- was the warm feeling a spanking would give me," a woman named Rita, who works at the Kink Shop in Shreveport, La., recalls. "When I couldn't sleep as a girl, if I thought about spanking, I could drift off." She was married to the same man for 31 years "but I could not get my husband to hit me for anything." She's now involved with a "master" who obliges.

Media often provide a first introduction to the fetish world. Some fetishists cite comic books, sci-fi movies and fantasy art like that of Frank Frazetta, famous for his hugely muscled barbarian men and voluptuous, mostly naked women.

"I was 8 years old and up late and saw a movie on HBO," Melissa says. "A man fully clothed man spanked a partially nude woman in a hallway and it spoke to me. I thought, *'There is something about this I like. I have to know more about it'*"

The Internet has been a powerful force in the mainstreaming of fetish. For example, the day Rita got a connection, she typed "spanking" into a search engine and realized for the first time "that I was not the only person in the World."



"Dude, it started off with, like a 300-baud modem," James, a 27-year-old electrical engineering student from Knoxville, Tenn., tells me. "Even as a little kid before I even knew anything about sex, I used to really like tying people up. Then my dad went back to school to study computer science and we had like, an old 286 computer. It took 5 minutes to download one picture! But I could look up whatever I wanted."

Once a taboo is overcome, a new world opens. "You cannot turn back," James says.

“That’s true. You can’t go back to ‘vanilla sex’ once you taste this,” agrees Anastasia Pierce, a professional fetish model, actress, and movie producer based in Los Angeles. “It’s a very adrenaline thing. You try stuff constantly and go *'Oh, this feels good! I never tried that!'*”

But as much as fetishists love what they do, many express mixed feelings that fetish has gone mainstream. Fashion layouts in *Vogue* and big budget movies like "The Matrix" use fetish clothing. And thousands of “goth” kids show up at clubs dressed in fetish attire.

“Yes, they’re being rebels,” Pierce says sarcastically of the young arrivistes.

On the other hand, many fetishists I talk to here have been among the most thoughtful people about their sex lives I have ever encountered. They have to be.

“What a lot of people in the ‘vanilla world’ do not understand is that this entails an extreme amount of trust,” a “lifestyle master” who works as a Realtor tells me. Part of his job is to dish out just the right amount of pain to his girlfriend. “It is a trust that goes beyond what a lot of people in everyday ‘vanilla’ relationships have. Left and right, they are lying to each other, doing things behind each other's back. A lot of that does not happen here.”

Abuse, Degradation, and Love

Some say the very nature of participating in fetishes like bondage, sadomasochism, and humiliation requires a level of communication between partners that many other couples never experience.



They also argue that the ‘vanilla world’ misunderstands the practicalities of fetish. While some do seem to immerse themselves in it as an almost full-time way of life, most don’t.

“A lot of times you come home after a long day and you’re tired and you really do not feel like spending 30 minutes tying somebody up,” says James, the engineering student. “Then it’s like *'Can we just have sex?'*”

“What we do is a very big part of our lives,” Bob explains from behind his leather hood. “But it is not strictly this. We have a normal life. We have ‘regular’ sex. This is part of our sexual relationship, but it is not who we are. We are very much in love.”

His wife Melissa describes one way they express that love: "I put him in his place. I verbally abuse him. I degrade him. I spit on him, urinate on him, absolutely anything I can think of to take that smug little look off his face."

And then she looks at Bob ... and they both laugh the warm laugh of affection.

Fetishists aren't freaks, (most) readers say

As long as nobody gets hurt in the act, what's the big deal?

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15503155/>

MSNBC

Updated: 7:50 p.m. ET Nov 2, 2006

In the 4th story [above] in our "America Unzipped" series, we wrote about fetishes and asked readers if they thought people with a fetish were mentally ill (as some psychiatric experts would say) or just having some fun.

Most readers wrote in to say that *no, fetishists aren't crazy, thank you.*

"Mentally ill? Lighten up, America!" wrote one reader.

"Everyone has a fetish," said another. "Whether it is an oral fixation with biting your pen caps or enjoying having a woman in high heels. It is normal; we all do it. You can either embrace your fetish tendencies or you can hide behind them and call us mentally ill. I prefer to fly my freak flag proudly."

But one reader said she needed a shower after reading our article: "Yuck! A hundred times yuck!"

Read on for more responses:

"I don't think they are mentally ill at all. Simply honest with themselves and each other. There are natural tendencies to be 'in charge' or to be a 'follower'. And someone who is into a fetish of one sort or another is simply living true to that. What is wrong with saying, '*Hey, I like this or that and it makes me feel really good*' when it is not hurting someone else? -- **Anonymous, Ohio**

"Fetishists are really not all that weird. We might do things a bit different, but we don't force others to do anything." -- **Vicious Vamp, Knoxville, Tenn.**

"The U.S. as a culture is basically sex-negative and fearful. The attitudes of the 'kinky' people expressed in this article sound honest and healthy to me. Sexual behavior between healthy, consenting adults -- no matter how unusual -- is just part of our fabulously complex natural sexual expression. I don't know how anyone could consider these 'mentally ill'. They seem happy and perfectly functional. Whatever turns you on!" -- **Ruthann, Tucson, Ariz.**

"I am a fetishist and cannot imagine any other way to live. I have not always been so. I introduced myself to it via the Internet 5 years ago and am now 49. And I do not consider myself 'mentally ill', either. It is by personal choice and when I found it, I felt like I had come home to something that had been lacking in my life. And for the most part, I feel that those of us who enjoy these

proclivities are more open and honest of our true feelings. And we have no need to go behind our partner's back to experience something some might consider 'taboo'." -- *June, Tampa, Fla.*

"Mentally ill? Lighten up America!!! Fetishes are nothing new. It never ceases to amaze me just how tight a strangle hold our puritanical beginnings still have around the necks of self expression in this country. Why does any strange or different form of sexual self-expression have to be demonized to the point of suggesting that one might be 'mentally ill' if one participates? If you are not harming someone or forcing someone to do something against their will, then I see nothing wrong with a little kinky self-expression amongst friends." -- *Jesse, Denver, Colo.*

"It's a fun and healthy expression of sexuality." -- *Christine, Glendale, Calif.*

"Mental illness interferes with functioning in life and makes it less effective. Fetishism increases the quality of life and enhances the things we fetishists already think are fun!" -- *Anonymous*

"I am a submissive, masochistic woman. And I certainly don't believe myself to be 'mentally ill', nor do I really think of myself as 'just having some fun'. What we do is fun, of course, and I wouldn't do it if it didn't make me happy. But it fills a need in my soul just like sex and intimacy do. Without submission and pain, I get cranky and irritable just like I do if I'm not getting sex regularly. Same principle there. I think some people are just wired to crave more sensation and more intense sensation (aka pain) than others. And some people just prefer to give up control, to obey, to let someone else decide sometimes. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. And I don't understand why it's anathema to so many people." -- *Leah, Houston, Texas*

"They are all sad oddballs." -- *Rick, Sterling, VA.*

"Everyone has a fetish. Whether it is an oral fixation with biting your pen caps or enjoying having a woman in high heels. It is normal; we all do it. You can either embrace your fetish tendencies or you can hide behind them and call us 'mentally ill'. I prefer to fly my freak flag proudly."
-- *Anonymous, Maryland*

"I am a practicing psychotherapist and marital/sex therapist who wrote her masters dissertation on S/M. And personally, I think it's a great way to spice up your sex life and improve intimacy. I think it's highly misunderstood and that most people don't realize is that for most people it's not about pain at all -- it's about the fantasy, escape, and challenge that it offers. For many people, it smacks (*excuse the pun*) of the darker side of sex -- something to shun and be fearful of, almost as frightening as being truly intimate with your partner and looking into his/her eyes while you are having an orgasm... go on, open your mind to the possibilities... you know you want to."
-- *Nikki, Hong Kong*

"Yuck! A hundred times yuck! ... I have to go take a shower now." -- *Ann, Florida*

"What many do not understand is that this is NOT about sex, but about taking you to a place that many need drugs and alcohol to get to. That place where you are floating. And the fact that a flogger or paddle took you there ... well, that just adds to the pleasure of it all. We are one of the strongest and most connected communities out there. We are everywhere -- You just don't know it."
-- *Anonymous*

"My wife and I have fun tying each other up once in a while. You definitely need to trust each other, and it can be a great escape. I spend all day at the office driving teams to reach our business

objectives. And sometimes it's just nice to let my wife take complete control and do with me what she wants. Dressing up and going out in public is something we personally wouldn't do. But a little latex, handcuffs, and collars now-and-again in the bedroom sure is a lot of fun!"

-- Rick, Austin, Texas

"I got involved in fetishism via a boyfriend who had had experience with it. At first, it seemed adventurous and exciting. But as I met more of the people doing it, I began to see that many of them were practicing fetishes (some involving extreme pain) as a way of avoiding dealing with their psychological problems. Many admitted they turned to fetish groups as a way of feeling they were a part of a 'family' as their own family backgrounds were so dysfunctional. I became disillusioned and detached myself from them, at the same time acknowledging my own personal problems that led to my being attracted to those practices in the first place."

-- Jennifer, Cambridge, Mass.

"I think it rocks! Sometimes people have a tendency to pick apart and try to analyze what works. I say, 'Rock on, man!'" *-- Anonymous*

"Thank you for a very well-written, open-minded view of what it is that we do. All too often, mainstream America recoils in shock when they hear about (ohhh my goodness!) fetishes such as what you talk about. I am an active BDSM community member here in Portland, Oregon. And I agree with some of the comments regarding fetishes being more 'out there' than people realize. Meaning that you would be surprised at how many and what kind of people are involved in fetishes/BDSM and such that live right next door to you. I know doctors, lawyers, business owners, even government workers. It is NOT a free-for-all wild sex orgy at all. There are rules of conduct, rules of etiquette." *-- Carol Ann, Portland, Oregon*

"As someone who has enjoyed wearing plastic baby pants for as long as I can remember, I can certainly relate to the people in your article. I am not an 'Adult Baby' -- wearing baby clothes and drinking from a bottle, etc. -- but just your average all-American, competitive male who developed a fetish for plastic pants in infancy and has enjoyed it ever since. Most people seem to automatically assume that people into this fetish are child molesters and pedophiles. That couldn't be further from the truth!" *-- Anonymous*

"FUN FUN FUN ... I mean, really, like you haven't thought about it. Stop thinking about it! I said 'Stop, slave!'" *-- Anonymous, Florida*

[note from Kelli: Or per the old adage: "What is one person's meat is another person's poison". Or per a newer adage: "Whatever floats your boat {as long as everyone involved consents and nobody gets hurt}"]

The Thrill of Putting It All Out There

For exhibitionists, the Internet is an ideal fantasy playground

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14061673/>

by **Brian Alexander**

MSNBC contributor

Updated: 1:35 a.m. ET Nov 9, 2006

BALTIMORE — Not long into my instant message conversation with “Don”, it’s obvious that there is no way to know if he is who he says he is; if he's answering my questions honestly; or if he's playing me for a chump. All I know for sure is that Don placed an image on his IM profile that appeared on my monitor when we began chatting. At first, the image he used to represent himself was that of Johnny Depp as "Captain Jack Sparrow". But he's just replaced that one with another, so now I'm looking at a shot of a torso complete with an erect penis. I assume that’s him. But then again, you never know.

Don -- an American -- says he is on a business trip to Europe and doing what he often does during downtime: firing up his Web cam and exposing himself to the World. The body parts look to be about the right age -- 49 -- and his conversation seems mature enough. Plus I have managed to contact Don through other online exhibitionists that I have met in person. Still, it’s possible Don is actually a lonely retiree in Yellowknife, Canada who's surfing the Internet between glances at "Wheel of Fortune".

This is exactly the point of online exhibitionism and why so many people have started doing it. You can be as free as you want to expose as much of yourself as you want without looking over your shoulder for the county sheriff. This makes the Internet an ideal *fantasy* playground where anybody can launch naked signal flares into the digital sky to announce: “I’m here. And I’m hot!”

Homemade erotica has been around forever. When Polaroid introduced its Model 95 camera in 1948, average people were given the power to produce personal porn on a mass scale because nobody had to develop the pictures. But digital culture has broadened the possibilities. There are dozens of ways to use digital media to expose yourself ranging from the mild to the X-rated.

Bikini retailers host online “customer galleries” featuring women (and sometimes men) wearing thongs and see-through tops ... or no tops at all. On some sites, Web surfers can send e-mails to their favorite bikini-clad woman stating just how much they appreciate the view.

Popular exhibitionist Web sites such as Red Clouds, Watcher's Web, Voyeurweb, and True Voyeur offer the same service -- allowing every man and woman the chance to let the World see what they look like naked on a rubber float in the backyard pool or spread-eagle in the Barcalounger. And to read how excited -- or not -- that makes others. The sites appear to have a strong following. For instance, among users of the Alexa Web search Toolbar, Voyeurweb ranks as the 398th most popular Web site over the past 3 months. In other words, out of every million users, 1,075 go to Voyeurweb and average 17.7 page views.

There also are sex blogs everywhere now. MySpace and Flickr are populated by people posing like porn stars.

Of course, "online exhibitionism" sounds creepily similar to "online predator" and "kiddie porn". And the potential for that kind of abuse is great. But the exhibitionists I contacted all stress that not only

are they concerned parents themselves who closely monitor the Internet use of their kids, but they also regard such use of the technology as a scourge.

The Mom next door

For Susan, Internet exhibitionism has uses of a very interactive kind. I visited Susan in her Maryland home with “Michael” (who asked I not use his real first name) -- a man Susan met online. Susan uses the Net to trade images of herself with individuals and couples she meets through computer chats and online ads. Sometimes she is naked, sometimes she’s performing a sex act.

Susan describes herself “as very much an exhibitionist”. But she’s nothing like the grizzled guy in the trench coat. She is a middle-aged medical professional, a church-goer, and a mother. She is studying for an advanced degree. She calls herself “Rubenesque” and though she is attractive, she does not look like a centerfold model.

“Something I am not interested in is losing my sexuality,” she says. “For a woman, that is more of a fight.” Taking digital pictures of herself, trading them with others, and knowing they appreciate them helps her reclaim her feminine sexual identity.

Michael and Susan met when she answered an ad he placed on **Craigslist** (where ads for sex partners often display the advertiser’s genitals). They exchanged nude pictures, met in person, and have now struck up what Michael -- also a middle-aged professional who works as an executive at a high-tech company and is a father -- calls “an intimate friendship”. Sometimes they include other people they meet online in their lovemaking in threesomes or foursomes.

For Michael and Susan, the digital realm is liberating. “I can be free to think the things I want to think and not only think them but also act upon them,” he says. “How cool is that! **You can dream the dream and then go make it real. This is a portal into a parallel universe. I mean, it’s a wild world.**”

That World has been further fueled by technology. Thanks to broadband connections, webcams, and instant messaging, anybody can carve out a space in which they can act in ways they might not outside the virtual world.

“At church ... or wherever your community is, you cannot be real open and talk about your sexuality,” Susan says. “But you sure can online. And you can very easily find somebody who is interested in the same things you are.”

Many online exhibitionists have no idea who is on the other end of a webcam. And they don’t really want to know. But some -- like Susan and Michael -- eventually drop the anonymity because their ultimate goal is to make online *fantasies* real. “My goal is skin-to-skin,” Susan says.

Don, Susan and Michael do not generally put their pictures up on public Web sites, preferring instead to trade and communicate -- often using instant messaging -- with a more select audience of their own choosing. Susan, for example, has occasionally viewed Don's camming sessions. She says finding an audience is not difficult.

“I do have ads up on a couple of different Web sites. But I think there are networks of people,” Susan says. “If you meet somebody and they know 20 people who know 20 people who know 20 people, it is pretty easy to get an expanded community.”

That is just what Don has created. At first, he surfed the Web looking for still images of naked female exhibitionists. Then around the year 2000 “when I learned that computers could broadcast cams, I watched a few ladies -- usually only topless -- perform for me on the Web ... Eventually I met a woman from Florida who showed me everything and begged me to get a cam. I did ... and soon found myself stripping for her. I looked for others who liked it too. And I didn’t have to look far.”

For Don, “camming” usually means displaying himself masturbating, often with one-or-more women -- and sometimes a man -- as his audience. Often the camming is mutual with Don and a woman using her Web cam to display herself to Don, instant messaging dirty talk back-and-forth.

'Avenue of Escape'

Now, Don tells me that he has about 120 regulars with whom he frequently chats and “cams”. He has had virtual sex over the cam with many more people than that. And he does it most nights when he is on the road.

“The digital world,” he says, “gives me an avenue of escape to secret desires where I can find fulfillment.” He is able to satisfy “a private hard-core lover hidden inside of me” that he can express online in anonymity.

That anonymity is important because Don -- who tells me he is a conservative Republican Catholic and somewhat shy in real life -- is married with children. His wife knows nothing about his online sex life.

“I am basically a moral person. But I am major league flawed when it comes to sex,” he says. “And yet there is this secret side to me that must be satisfied ... I have always had a streak of exhibitionism in me and felt guilty about that.”

He is torn, Don claims. On the one hand, he worries there might be something wrong with him. On the other, he feels release when he’s “camming”.

“I think of online exhibitionism as pure erotic expression of human desire,” he says. “We seek escape from our difficulties, from our routine or pressures. And this gives it to us.”

So far, it's tough to say whether Don's form of escape will continue to grow. Or if the novelty of digitally mediated exhibitionism will wear off. But it's clear that for now at least, many Americans are thrilled by the prospect of being their own porn star.

Readers clash over online exhibitionism

Some call it perverted; Others say it's just another way to have fun

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15716975/>

Online exhibitionism was the topic of the 5th story in our "America Unzipped series". So we asked readers whether they thought the practice was harmless fun or a twisted use of technology.

Twisted? More like "perverted", said one reader. "People need to get a grip and stick to the privacy of their own bedrooms."

"Simply gross," said another.

But others weren't appalled at all.

"Doesn't interest me. But whatever 2 -- or even 20 -- consenting adults wish to do or show to others is no one's business but their own," said one reader.

Others wrote in to defend their own exhibitionist practices. "Online exhibitionism allows us shy and reserved people to live out a fantasy that we cannot in real life," one reader said.

Read on for more responses:

"I personally don't feel the desire to exhibit myself. However, it is a healthy outlet for those who do. It allows the participants to act out fantasies that are unacceptable in nearly any other forum. It is also safer in terms of avoiding disease and even unwanted physical contact." -- *Jerry, Orlando, Fla.*

"I am a member in Red Clouds. I love this site because it satisfies both my voyeuristic and exhibitionist tendencies. I have met some great people here also. Most people think that only freaky perverts go to these sites, but it's not true. Though I have met some people that I wish I hadn't, 95% of the people I have met are great. I will be a member of this site for a long time. I truly believe it is harmless fun." -- *Juan, Rockford, Ill.*

"If you are in a relationship that is supposed to be "committed" and you are naked in front of someone else, that's cheating. If you wouldn't do it in front of an actual person -- much less your partner -- you shouldn't do it in secret either." -- *Nate, Arlington, Va.*

"For an individual such as myself, online exhibitionism is an easy way to explore the otherwise socially unacceptable topic of sexual fantasy -- depending on the type of friends you keep, of course. I'm a 27-year-old guy who has always felt rather unattractive and entirely unable to express his sexuality in its entirety. The risk of alienating yourself from your friends and family is all but eliminated and you're free to explore whatever it is that tickles your fancy.

"I started sharing nude photos of myself online early in college and I've recently graduated to camming. The excitement has yet to fade. I still get the feeling that I'm taking a dangerous leap every time I fire up the cam, that I'm risking ultimate exposure and the discovery of my secret. I might go as far to say that there's even a part of me that wants to be discovered. I guess when you boil it down, I enjoy it because it allows me throw it all out there for the world to see, to take part in something that simultaneously excites and scares me." -- *Anonymous, Cincinnati, Ohio*

It is perverted and a misuse of technology. I worry mostly about the children finding these places ... people need to get a grip and stick to the privacy of their own bedrooms -- WITHOUT CAMERAS!"
-- *Anonymous*

"I have participated in online exhibitionism with people unknown to me and also with people I have been intimate with outside of the virtual world. As long as it's between consenting adults, I believe there isn't anything wrong with it. I have also found that if you are involved in a long-distance

relationship, it helps keep the relationship intimate and makes it easier to handle the distance between two partners." -- **Leah, Texas**

"I love it! It's perfectly harmless. And it allows you to connect with others who may share a similar interest. Through several amateur sites, my wife and I are able to meet other people who share our passion for feet and nylons. While you may not understand that fetish, there are others who do and the Internet makes that connection possible. When someone tells me that pictures of my wife excite them, how can that be a bad thing? It's a compliment!" -- **Daryl, Columbia, S.C.**

"I never knew such a thing exist until I read it here. Now millions of married men out there are going to go to these sites and ruin their marriages." -- **Anonymous**

"It's real-time porn with a selected audience. Everything is the same except the medium used for delivery. I don't see a problem with it." -- **Barb, Michigan**

"Doesn't interest me, but whatever two (or 20) consenting adults wish to do or show to others is no one's business but their own." -- **John, Winston-Salem, N.C.**

"Harmless fun that will eventually cause sex to be so mainstream, people will actually start paying attention to real-world issues." -- **Anonymous**

"I think it's fine as long as you aren't hurting anyone or sneaking around on a spouse or lover, such as Don is. That really isn't fair to his wife. If they were both doing it and it worked for them that way then fine ... It should be fun for everyone and not a hidden secret ... especially from people we're supposed to care about. I hope she finds out. Don sounds like a dirty old man. The other two were going about it the right way; they weren't hurting anyone." -- **Anonymous, Canada**

"In theory, I see nothing wrong with it as long as it is kept between consenting adults. But I have a close online friend (who very well could be "Don" using a pseudonym) whom I know is very addicted to this lifestyle. I believe his compulsion affects his ability to have a normal life, fulfilling relationships and even friendships. Despite the anonymity afforded on the Web, the secretive nature of these sexual practices causes people to become devious and dishonest even with those not involved in their predilections.

"Though he would like me to be, I've never been an "audience" for my online friend. I met him on a website unrelated to his hobby, and he's never pushed me. But I worry that he will never find true happiness for himself, and feel sometimes that he objectifies himself and exploits himself when he has so much more to offer than just body parts. He's an amazing person with an incredible mind. And it hurts me to think this is all there is for him." -- **April, Boston**

"I think this is a VERY healthy and natural release and expression ... The only thing 'wrong' with it is that many people have to lie and hide this beautiful side of themselves to the degree that living in an outwardly puritan society 'demands'." -- **Robert, Asheville, N.C.**

"I find this use of our awesome technology simply gross. Don stating that '*there is this secret side to me that must be satisfied*' is simply lack of self-control. Our culture has taken a turn for the worse and the belief that all desires must be fulfilled and not shamed is to blame. Susan describing herself a 'church-goer' but acting on the desire to have skin-on-skin contact with numerous partners is an embarrassment to the rest of us who PRACTICE our religion. And part of that is treating our bodies with the respect they were created for.

"We are not animals and when we start putting so much thought and energy into filling our desires, we take away time and energy that could be used for other good. How hurt and disgusted would Don's wife and kids be if they found out this was what he was doing on business trips? At the cost of your children's respect, Don, do you **HAVE** to fulfill these desires? They will find out! People always get caught." -- **Sarah, Lynden, Wash.**

"Being a regular Voyeurweb contributor myself, I happen to think that it's harmless adult fun for couples (my husband and I do) or singles. It's also a great way to meet friends that are little more open-minded than most people and aren't afraid to show or tell you what they think." -- **Joliesse, Va.**

"I think that, for the most part, it's harmless fun. The downside is that it can become an addiction. Not such a bad thing for a single person. But for a married person with kids, the addiction can ruin a family. When you would rather sit in front of a computer monitor than interact with your spouse and children, that's a problem." -- **Tony, Prescott, Ariz.**

"It seems like a fairly safe way to experience what many would find offensive. In the privacy of your own home, you should be able to do what you please. Personally, I want to focus all of my sexual energy on my wife, so I've lost touch with porn and the Net. I used to be somewhat addicted and admit it still beckons me. (Hence why this article jumped at me.) If my wife (of 3 months) would ever like to 'surf' with me, I could get back into it quickly. But only if we do it together."

-- **Anonymous**

"I think that online exhibitionism allows us shy and reserved people to live out a fantasy that we cannot in real life. It is also very safe for us married people that still want to be faithful. You get the excitement and something different and still afterwards get to make love to your wife without guilt."

-- **Barry, Memphis, Tenn.**

"Love the thought, though I would never have what it take to do it." -- **Thomas, Plains, Pa.**

Sexual Exploration goes Mainstream

Seems everybody's engaging in once-fringe acts; But are we satisfied yet?

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14061675/>

by Brian Alexander

MSNBC contributor

Updated November 16, 2006

When I set out more than 6 months ago to begin researching MSNBC.com's special series "America Unzipped", I suspected that America's sexual landscape was more peaceful than Pat "9-11-is-God's-wrath" Robertson and other combatants in the wars over "values" (whatever that means) would have us believe.

In fact, Americans of all persuasions are experimenting on a grand scale.

Take for instance, a young couple I met at a [fetish convention](#) in Florida where they were attending a seminar aimed at teaching women how to tie up men. Neither of them knew much about bondage or the fetish world. But they had heard about the convention and thought it might be a fun way to spend a weekend afternoon. And so there they were, young newlyweds, raised in Tennessee and Texas, with strong religious backgrounds, learning how to get kinky the way other young, upscale couples might spend a Saturday learning how to tell the difference between 18th and 19th century sideboards.

Some of us have always experimented, of course. But now it can sometimes seem as if you're a total loser if you're not a dildo aficionado ("*Oh, surgical silicone is just sooo much better than rubber!*") or don't know the first name of the bartender at your local "underground" sex club.

Your bedroom, Your business

While it's true that not everyone is experimenting, even those of us who aren't seem much more tolerant of the adventurous. As a woman in Missouri said, "Don't pressure me, I won't pressure you."

Most of the people I have spoken to so far (and keep in mind I have deliberately spoken to those people who seem to be on sexual quests of their own) have no problem with access to adult porn for adults, sex toys, group sex, gay sex, fetish, bondage, and you-name-it so long as they are not forced to be exposed to it or pressured to take part. Another woman I spoke to said she disapproved of many sexual options ... but then quickly added, "That's just for me and my own standards. I don't want to tell anybody else what to do."

So why the Sex Wars?

Well, America is famous for its guilt. You have to go back -- way back -- to pinpoint the source of this guilt. But here is one, written by a man who probably has had more influence on American sex lives than Hugh Hefner:

"Freedom from all sexual intercourse is ... angelic exercise ... But I am aware of some that murmur: '*What say they, if all men should abstain from all sexual intercourse, whence will the human race exist?*' Would that all would this, only in '*charity out of a pure heart, and good conscience, and faith unfeigned*' much more speedily would the City of God be filled, and the end of the World hastened."

That was St. Augustine -- perhaps the most important “father” of the early Christian church. Augustine didn’t like sex, believing that it inflamed lust and prevented mankind from following the discipline of reason, the path to God. He felt (as expressed in these words) that the truly charitable, the truly holy would forgo sex altogether and -- in an apocalyptic vision -- thus hasten the End of the World. His thinking was so dominant that the Catholic Church eventually overturned a thousand years of tradition and barred priests from being married so they could focus their minds more fully on God.

Lust was a source of shame. Sex, even in the marriage bed, was a sin unless its sole purpose was the begetting of children. Even then, those who remained abstinent, though married, were holier than those who were not.

Now look at what we expect from politicians and other leaders. They have to appear as paragons of rectitude, practically asexual beings. We want to see them in church with a prim wife or buttoned-up husband. And we expect to hear lip service paid to -- yes! -- "values". Then when one slips up (yes you, Bill!), we’re all expected to be shocked at the hypocrisy.

For example, I spoke to several civic officials and public employees [when I worked at the adult store](#) in Tempe, Ariz. They were all shopping there; but most of them told me that they could never, would never, stand up in support of such a store being allowed to open if it were being protested by, say, a local church group.

And so like former evangelical leader Rev. Ted Haggard (or Jimmy Swaggart or Jim Baker or too many Catholic priests) or politicians as far back as our lusty founding fathers, we learned to espouse one thing publicly and do another in private. We stashed our porn behind furnaces, hid our leather corsets under the bath towels, spoke in code to potential sex partners. We created the American sexual cliché of a repressed population that did it all anyway, but felt creepy about it.

When it comes to sex, we created a hypocritical culture.

The "America Unzipped" series and my research for the upcoming book of the same name is showing that this is changing. And quickly. Naturally, change makes some people upset.

So you have a man like [Joe Beam](#) -- a sincere, Bible-believing leader of his faith, advocating the right of married people to enjoy their sex lives ... and catching flak for it. Despite the good he seems to be doing for those who believe as he does, he is frequently criticized -- one blogger labeled him a “heretic” after the Unzipped story about him came out -- for trying to help married people throw off Augustine.

A bourgeois pursuit

But what such combatants do not seem to realize is that an awful lot of people have already done this. For them, the sex wars are over. *Augustine? Who’s he?* Americans are tired of feeling guilty. Sexual exploration has become a bourgeois pursuit.

This is especially true among people under 35. For many of them, sex has become wallpaper -- not a hand-wringing issue at all.

American Apparel -- the Los Angeles maker of clothing aimed at youth culture -- uses a vaguely 1970s' porn aesthetic to sell T-shirts including hiring a porn star -- Lauren Phoenix -- who specializes in anal sex (“Buttwoman Iz Lauren Phoenix”) to model socks and underwear. The kids get the joke.

Abercrombie and Fitch's famous catalogues have featured Bruce Weber-esque nudity and a French clothing maker named Shai goes further by hosting an online video catalogue complete with X-rated scenes of couples in action. You can stop the video and learn about the clothes they are taking off.

Paris Hilton -- a parody of herself as the dissolute heiress preening in the grainy, greenish sex video - has ridden that strategy to create a minor financial empire.

There is a lot of fuss about all this. But Americans vote with dollars. So while church groups protest the opening of adult stores in an effort to "save the community", the community is inside buying vibrators.

Trends like these illustrate something new about American sex and raise a question. We are consumers. If we are to keep up our end of the consumer bargain in the great American capitalist enterprise, we have to buy. To entice us into buying, we are saturated -- flooded, really! -- with media, information, and marketing. In it, we are told that a new Bosch dishwasher, a cold Pepsi, and a BMW will lead to satisfaction. Not just the satisfying feeling of clean dishes, a quenched thirst, or great cornering, but of Life.

In the void left by the banishment of social restrictions on our sex lives, sexual satisfaction is being marketed this way, too. We need window-breaking orgasms, penises the size of a chorizo sausage, and the thrills of the Marquis de Sade or else we're missing out. Women all over the country watched the striving Manhattan sophisticates in "Sex and the City" talking about rabbit pearl vibrators and suddenly had to have them for themselves.

But what, exactly, are we pursuing? Naturally, the details vary from one person to the next. But in the big picture, I think we are seeking satisfaction and not just the obvious kind.

Some of the people I have spoken to so far have clearly found a measure of satisfaction, depending on what they hoped sex could do for them.

Some have found deeper relationships, a more intense connection with a partner. A few have found membership in an extended community. No doubt some find the enforced open-mindedness itself to be liberating now that they are free to express themselves as they choose.

But as the marketing of sex becomes ever more pervasive, some find that handcuffs and a XXX German discipline video just don't provide an escape from the loneliness of an atomized, hyperspeed culture in which entertainment is king.

So, caveat emptor.

Still, all of the people I've spoken to so far -- conservatives, liberals, religious, non-religious, men and women, young and old, satisfied and disappointed -- believe they have every right to take the risk -- to make the choice -- for themselves.