



THE WALMART OF WANG

THE INTERNET HAS NOT KILLED
IN-PERSON SEX TOY SHOPPING

By Will Kennedy

Birds do it, bees do it, non-binary millennials do it. Human sexuality, in all its variety, is universal. And for nearly as long as humans have been reproducing their own likeness in art, we've been leveraging that most human ability to produce dirty imagery — meant to shock, inspire, titillate or simply get us off.

Whenever there's behavior as ubiquitous as sex, commerce tends to get involved; capitalists seek to make money off explicit pictures, toys, clothing and all sorts of other sex gadgets and fetish accessories.

Such products used to be — and in many cases still are — confined to adult shops or behind the curtain at your local video rental store.

But a little like the music industry, the internet unzipped the fly on smut's manufactured scarcity a while ago. These days it's just as easy to find whatever turns you on with your phone as it is to know the weather forecast in Boca Raton.

While it's true the internet has disrupted many other sectors of retail, Lisa Stephens says the digital age has been, paradoxically, a positive development for her business.

"The internet has vastly increased the acceptance and open use of adult products, which has increased

our customer base," she writes me in an email from Castle's corporate offices in Arizona.

Stephens is director of sales at Castle Megastore, a chain of large adult stores with 16 locations all over the U.S., with a location on West 11th in Eugene.

Service is what keeps customers loyal, she says. "Castle offers personalized customer service," helping to ensure that customers make the right selection for their intimate needs.

This is in keeping with national statistics. According to market research firm IBISWorld, "Globally, the sex toy industry is predicted to grow by \$9.9 billion between 2019 and 2023." And the firm says widespread acceptance of sex paraphernalia, increased portrayals of sexuality on TV and books like *50 Shades of Grey* have "helped boost demand for industry stores."

Step into a Castle Megastore, and it's clear they aim to be like a big box equivalent to a traditional sex shop — the Walmart of wang, if you will — no identity-concealing trench coat required.

The stores are big and well-lit, and on a recent visit to the Eugene location, flesh surrounded me on all sides, focused on the usual suspects — muscular men and curvy women — but also more bare feet than a Tarantino movie.

The product mix at Castle caters to all orientations and carries fetish items, bondage boards, paddles and handcuffs with brand names like Spank Provocateur, Metal Wand and Metal Pleasure Plays.

There are also relatively benign bachelor or bachelorette party supplies. Penis-shaped gummy candy anyone?

The store still sells dirty magazines and DVDs, as well as lingerie and costumes, with a large selection of lube and vibrators, in all colors, shapes and sizes, exhibited on the sort of fixtures that you might see displaying iPhones at a different store.

Sexuality is as diverse as humans are individual, so representation is a priority for Castle, Stephens says.

"The demographic of our teams is extremely diverse, representing all races, creeds and orientations. Our teams know these communities and what product lines to suggest to serve these diverse communities."

Stephens says that 80 percent of Castle customers are women and couples, and Castle hires sales associates from the diverse communities served by the store. Many Castle employees are married with children, she says.

"Our stores offer a clean, modern retail experience just like you would find at the local mall shopping at the best retailers," she says.

While at Castle, I found myself gazing for a time into the empty eyes of a mannequin wearing nothing but a fake leather dog mask on its head, with zippered ears, eyes and mouth.

I searched the depths of my libido. What was I missing? Then again, I did leave Castle wondering how much I had actually lived. ■