

# **Immoral Geographies and Soho's Sex Shops: Exploring Spaces of Sexual Diversity in London**

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**Ackn: N**

**CN: Y**

**Word count: 7328**

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## **Abstract**

London's Soho, situated in the urban heart of the city has long been understood as both a cosmopolitan and diverse space where transgression and deviance, particularly in relation to the sex industry and sexual commerce, are constitutive of this area. Drawing on three years of ethnographic fieldwork, we add to some of the existing debates on sexual spaces in Soho by documenting the changes to the social/sexual landscape of sex shops in this area, and look to geographers interested in the spatial politics of gender and sexuality to understand the importance of this particular place. Looking at two particular sex shops in Soho, we argue that the spatial practices in this very specific part of the city encourage a disruption of traditional hierarchies that often govern gender and sexed practices, and invite women, LGBTQ and kink communities to inhabit more inclusive spaces of sexual citizenship.

**Keywords:** BDSM and kink; erotic retailing; LGBTQ; London; sex shops; Soho

## **Introduction**

For centuries Soho has been an important part of London's urban life, attracting a diverse group of people to a place known for its unique character. French Huguenot's fleeing persecution from Catholic France arrived in the seventeenth century, with other Europeans following well into the nineteenth century. While some of these migrant populations were attracted by the employment opportunities presented by the burgeoning culinary and tailoring trades, others escaping religious or political persecution found refuge in this cosmopolitan urban area in the heart of central London (Walkowitz 2012, 18-22). Perhaps because of its diverse and cosmopolitan nature, by the early twentieth century Soho had a reputation for encouraging

dissidence, deviance and transgression (Royle 1984, Walkowitz 1992, Thompson 1994, Smith 2007, Mort 2010, Walkowitz, 2012).

In his work on the history of London, Mort (2010) describes the emergence of what he terms the ‘pleasure economy’ of Soho in the early 1900s, and he highlights the emergence of risqué nightclubs and cabarets that ‘brought together many of the contemporary themes of West End nightlife: upper-class rituals of heterosociability, modern dancing, drugs, same sex encounters and discreet prostitution’ (Mort 2010, 221). Houlbrook’s (2005) history of queer London has also highlighted the uniquely naughty nature of Soho noting that ‘As an enduring locus of immigrant, underworld, and working-class sociability, Soho represented a nocturnal space in which the contraventions of respectable urbanity could be discarded’ (2005, 87). He argues that Soho allowed for a ‘distinctly queer urban culture... Different modes of queerness – different ways of understanding sexual difference – converged at the same sites’ (2005, 266).

The lurid nightlife and the transgressive character established in this distinct urban zone continues to be associated with non-conformity and deviance; Soho is still well-known for its notorious sexualized past and the history of sexual commerce in the area, to such an extent that many have argued that its sexualized qualities help constitute its inimitable sense of place (Kent 2005, Kent and Berman Brown 2006, Mort 2007, Tyler 2012a and 2012b). Soho’s enduring reputation contributes to a racy night-time economy, as Melissa Tyler notes in her study of Soho in 2012: ‘Binge drinking and drug dealing are rife; there are many sex shops remaining... and the area continues to be associated primarily with commercial sex, the iconography of which shapes Soho’s “social materiality” (Tyler 2012a, 903). It is clear from even this brief history of Soho that the area has a tawdry past – drawing in a range of people who

would normally have been considered licentious, deviant or even dangerous, yet Soho has allowed for transgressive expressions of sexuality to live and thrive – the unique, cosmopolitan nature of Soho is still, we argue very much a part of its current character.

In an attempt to understand the distinctive enduring character of this London area, we focus on one particular element of Soho's sexual economy that we argue contributes to its transgressive quality: sex shops. Between the 1950s and the 1980s, sex shops had a significant presence in this part of London, and these venues were well known for their seedy, smutty, masculinized air (Royle 1984, Thompson 1994, Tyler 2012a, 2012b). Thompson notes that 'between 1976 and 1982, almost anything was available in Soho, at a price determined by the customer's shrewdness. There were 54 sex shops, 39 sex cinemas and cinema clubs; and 12 licenced massage parlours' (1994, 44). From 1982 things changed significantly when the Miscellaneous Provisions Act came into effect; anyone wishing to open a sex shop had to apply for a license, and later amendments to the Act gave Councils the right to determine what might constitute an 'appropriate' number of shops in the area. While the number of shops reduced significantly (there are now 12 licensed sex shops in Soho), there is still a high concentration of sexual retailing, with most of the sexual commerce located in the north and eastern quarters of the area; this means that almost all of the sex shops, erotic boutiques and strip clubs are located within half a mile of one another. This dense concentration of sexual activity sits in contrast to other parts of the UK, where much of the licencing legislation and moral concerns about respectability has relegated sex shops in to peripheral locations far away from main shopping areas (Royle 1984, Tweksbury 1990, 1994, Thompson 1994, Hubbard et al 2009, Coulmont and Hubbard 2010, Hubbard 2016).

We argue that the transgressive nature of Soho has allowed sex shops to thrive in ways that are unique to this area. We are particularly interested in the ways in which sex shops in this part of London have moved away from being masculine, seedy spaces, to places where new possibilities emerge for a wide range of people seeking out sexual pleasure. In the next section, we outline some of the literature around sex shops (in both the UK and the US) to explore the extent to which retailing strategies have changed in relation to sex shops, and how this shift has, in some cases, opened out sexual commerce to a wider range of people, including women. We then provide our own empirical evidence from our ethnographic study of Soho to argue that the co-location of sex shops in Soho and the attendant history of the area allow sex shops to appeal to a diverse, heterogeneous group of people. We argue that these shops push back against heteronormativity and ‘respectable’ norms, in ways that most other sex shops do not (and indeed, *cannot*), and as such offer new possibilities to the people who live, love, visit, and inhabit Soho.

### **What counts as a sex shop?**

A sex shop in the UK is defined by Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982, Schedule 3, Paragraph Four as: ‘any premises, vehicle, vessel or stall used for a business that consists to a significant degree of selling, hiring, exchanging, lending, displaying or demonstrating sex articles or other things intended for the purpose of stimulating or encouraging sexual activity or acts of force or restraint which are associated with sexual activity’ (cited in Coulmont and Hubbard 2010, 193). We suggest that this legal, technical definition ignores the affective politics that complicate such a neat categorization. Lynn Comella’s (2017) work on feminist sex-toy stores highlights the ways in which definitions of ‘sex shops’ are complicated by

the meanings we attach to certain items, objects or practices, and argues that the social construction of sex needs to be considered when thinking about how we might understand what counts as a 'sex shop' outside of a narrow legal framework.

Comella (2017) argues that common understandings of 'sex shop' are often associated with dark, dingy, seedy shops that sell unsavoury, smutty things to (heterosexual) men. The foil to the 'sex shop' is the relatively new 'erotic boutique' based on a retail model that is 'wholesome and women-friendly, not sleazy and male-oriented; clean, not dirty; classy, not crass' (2017, 92). The US model is based originally on shops like Good Vibrations, a feminist, sex-positive erotic retailer that opened its doors in San Francisco in the late 1970s and focused on selling vibrators to women. Comella argues that the feminist entrepreneur who started the shop 'was convinced there needed to be a sex shop for people who hated sex shops, a place where women in particular could get the vibrators they wanted without the feeling of distaste that often accompanied their visits to more conventional adult stores' (Comella, 2017, 44). The model for this new sex-positive, women-friendly shop (a shop that did not originally sell lingerie, dildos, or pornography) spread to other cities, creating a 'sex positive diaspora' (2017, 84) across the US.

Licensing laws that regulate the number and location of sex shops and erotic venues are predicated on gendered ideas about sexual desire, and Comella (2017) notes that women-friendly erotic boutiques often rely on aesthetics to help make these spaces more palatable for local residents who might object to seedy sex shops. By creating glamorous spaces with high quality merchandise, these spaces are less likely to be objectionable to local planners. At the same time, and just as importantly, this strategy also makes these spaces 'safe' for women to visit; pastel coloured walls, discreet signage, plush furnishing, and a layout that 'encourages sexual curiosity

while minimizing feelings of emotional or psychological discomfort' (Comella 2017, 96) are all part of the plan to sanitize sex shops to make them acceptable.

In the UK, there are an increasing number of sexual retail outlets that have successfully developed marketing strategies that appeal to female customers, encouraging more women to seek out and visit sex shops (Malina and Schmidt 1997, Storr 2002, Kent and Brown 2006, Evans et al. 2010a, 2010b). Ann Summers was one of the first erotic boutiques open out sexual commerce to women. The first store opened in London in 1970, and sold lingerie, novelty items and a limited range of sex toys to women. Critically, Ann Summers did not sell any items that required them to obtain a license as a sex shop, and the presentation of the store (pink was used as a way of making sure women felt safe accessing this new retail experience) helps explain why this retail approach proved so successful with female consumers. Other stores that mirrored this female-friendly marketing strategy in the UK started to open and as these retail outlets flourished, a gap emerged between these new female-friendly shops and more traditional 'sex shops'. This disparity increased when the 1982 licensing laws came in, many old-style sex stores were forced to black out their windows and doors to ensure that they complied with standards around decency. Ann Summers and other erotic boutiques, however, were able to keep their windows clear, allowing women (and other potential customers) the chance to look in and see the merchandise inside.

### **Geographies of respectability**

Geography also played a part in widening the gap between the old and the new, as many of the old shops, no longer welcome on the high streets, had to close or to move to isolated retail parks far away from main shopping thoroughfares. Moral concerns

resulted in the ‘physical segregation’ of sex shops, as they were increasingly found ‘in the periphery of shopping areas and appear to be sealed off to those outside them’ (Evans et al 2010a, 216) as a way of protecting women and young children from the dangers of seeing sexual commerce (Thompson 1994, Coulmont and Hubbard 2010, Hubbard and Colosi 2015). Smith (2007) argues that marginalizing ‘sex shops’ (either by removing them from high street or by blackening their windows to obscure the sexual interior) serves to reify their image as dirty, masculine spaces. Ann Summers, on the other hand, were able to capitalize on their ‘feminine’ colouring, lighting and their obvious female customer base to open stores on the British High Street and in areas with very visible commercial spaces. The juxtaposition of the remote, dirty, seedy sex store and the bright, light, clean erotic boutique became increasingly clear.

However, while the success of today’s erotic boutiques relies heavily on sustaining this division, there is more than just geography and aesthetics that make these two types of sex shop different. As Comella (2017) notes, respectability is key to maintaining this image: ‘This distinction [between dirty sex stores and clean erotic boutiques] is on the one hand symbolic: prurient, titillating and hypersexual representations of sexuality are frequently rejected in favor of what is thought to be more wholesome woman-friendly and ostensibly tame version’ (2017, 100). Erotic boutiques rely on heavily gendered tropes and are grounded in a reading of male sexuality whereby ‘men are perceived as needing specific kinds of sexual stimuli, experiences and environments to turn them on (2017, 100). These dirty, seedy desires must, therefore, be spatially relegated to ensure that the sanitized, respectable spaces of the erotic boutique are not confused with these distinctly less savoury masculine zones. Indeed, Hubbard (2016) argues that shops like Ann Summers have been able to thrive on the High Street *because* they rely on gendered assumptions about sexuality –

namely that male-centred ‘sex shops’ encourage sleazy, dirty sexual activities from men with questionable morals (and as such have no place on the High Street), while erotic boutiques, because they cater to a cleaner, more respectable female client-base, are thus less problematic (and can occupy prime retail locations without polluting innocent women and children who would be tainted if subjected to dirty sex shops).

Comella (2017) notes that many women-friendly sex stores in the US strip away overtly sexual elements like this in order to ensure that women feel *safe*. According to Crewe and Martin (2016), many UK stores use pink and overtly feminized decoration to achieve the same feeling of safety that we see in the US, while Wood (2016) notes the importance of feeling ‘safe’ in a sex shop or erotic boutique is achieved by using particular colours (often pink) and muted, soft lighting. This sense of safety comes with a cost however – as in order to ensure that women who would not normally visit a sex shop feel safe enough to enter, erotic boutiques become desexualized in the process. Another attendant problem comes with the sanitization of these spaces, she argues, in that the target demographic of these very clean, very safe spaces is predominately upper-middle class white women – the kind of women retailers assume would be put off completely by entering a typical sex store. By sterilizing sexual spaces to cater for this group of women, other groups (e.g. women of colour, queer women, and working class women) are at risk of becoming disenfranchised as a result. The politics of respectability benefit a very narrow subset of women, allowing them the freedom to explore their sexual desires safely, but while doing so, leave Other women outside the boundaries of inclusive sexual citizenship.

In her work on erotic retailing in the UK, Clarissa Smith (2007) speak to what she calls the ‘pushing up’ of sex; in line with the development of sex retail models in the US, erotic boutiques have had to introduce high-end, luxury products in an

attempt to move symbolically away from the sleazy, cheap items and objects the dirty, grubby 'sex shops'. Newer retailers like Coco de Mer and Shh! have taken some of the female friendly elements that Ann Summers originated, but extended them with a much more exclusive and expensive line of products. While these stores use similar lighting and colour schemes to Ann Summers, they sell designer toys that are 'visually and materially more attractive than cheaper toys and thereby signal a move away from overtly technological forms of sex and orgasm' (Smith 2007, 178). Ann Summers might have revolutionized the industry, but new erotic boutiques have extended this highly feminized model by appealing to an even more respectable woman who can afford to buy objects that mark them out as 'good' sexual citizens. In these high-end erotic boutiques working class women are intentionally marginalized here as the brands aim their merchandise at middle to upper-middle class women by excluding items that are not 'tasteful' or 'classy' and by ensuring that only the elite can afford to buy extravagant items (you could, for example, buy a gag and cuffs from Coco de Mer for £850 or a bra from Myla for £110 – prices clearly meant to appeal to an exclusively wealthy clientele).

The spatial layout of these stores reiterates the politics of respectability; Wood (2016) notes that in Ann Summers for example, 'safe' products like lingerie and candles feature prominently at the front near the entrance to the shop, while 'slutty' or 'dirty' products such as vibrators or dildos are located at the back of the store. There is a particular gendered framing of what objects are considered 'safe' and the spatial configurations of the shop interiors suggest that some items are more respectable than others. Hand blown glass dildos can be bought at high-end erotic boutiques for hundreds (and sometimes thousands) of pounds, and serve not simply as sex toys but as designer objects to display in one's home (Smith 2007). By focusing on luxury,

crafted sex toys, erotic boutiques can be assured that *all* of their items are safe and do not require a spatial layout to defend respectability. As such, the spatial regulation of sexual commerce reinforces existing hierarchies about what kinds of stores are understood as socially acceptable and geographically desirable, and reinforces the idea that erotic boutiques in the UK ‘are imbued with symbolic capital that ensures they are deemed to be part of a thriving, and even gentrified, retail offer’ (Hubbard 2016, 128). This symbolic capital is based on normative ideas about what counts as ‘respectable’ in relation to sex and femininity; these assumptions are not just built around gender, but also on ideas about sexuality, race, and class.

### **Immoral geographies: Soho’s sexual retail landscape**

While many sex shops in Soho were at one point comprised almost exclusively of the dingy, highly masculinized spaces associated with the ‘sex shop’ (Royle 1984, Smith 2007), the emergence of ‘new-style’ sex shops over the past three decades has shifted the market considerably, with many stores now trying to cater to a more diverse clientele, including women. By attempting to engage the (heterosexual) female consumer, the material landscape of sexuality has also shifted (Hubbard et al. 2009, Hubbard and Coulmont 2010, Crewe and Martin 2016, Martin 2016). Kent (2005) suggests that in Soho, these new female-friendly design concepts have ‘turned an area previously perceived as sleazy into one that is both acceptable and desirable’ (2005, 437). However, we argue here that while many of the shops in Soho have changed their marketing strategies and seek to appeal to women as sexual consumers, the specific space of Soho and its history as a place of ‘deviance’ has created a more diverse sexual landscape. The hierarchies seen in other places – with high end erotic boutiques and female-friendly stores geographically dominant in the shopping areas,

while dirty, seedy, ‘sex shops’ that cater for men removed from the public eye and relegated to the isolated, remote retail spaces – are disrupted in the transgressive spaces of Soho.

Our arguments are drawn from 3 years of ethnographic research conducted in Soho, and focuses on the 12 existing sex shops and two erotic boutiques (Ann Summers and Agent Provocateur) in the area. From January 2015 to January 2018, we have visited all the sex shops in Soho at different times of day/night, on different days of the week, observing what happens in these spaces and carrying out ethnographic interviews with staff and customers (names and some identifying details have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants). We present data here that highlights the distinctive nature of sexual retail outlets in Soho. Some spaces *seem* to be presented as sanitized, women-friendly stores from their external image, while others are perhaps more in line with stereotypical, seedy, male-oriented sex shops; in reality, many of the stores are far more diverse in their orientation and defy a straightforward reading. We look at two stores in particular that cater to a wide range of sexual consumers by incorporating elements of both the safe/clean with the dirty/seedy in the same space, as well as offering a wide range of objects and items (some cheap and tacky, some classy and expensive) that make it possible for everyone to find something that speaks to their sexual imagination. We argue that by troubling normative codes that enshrine particular modalities of *either* respectable femininities *or* sleazy masculinities, new possibilities emerge. Further, we suggest that the transgressive history of Soho facilitates this queer disruption, and equally, maintain that the *immoral* geographies that have historically shaped this area of London allow discursive and sexual practices that unsettle hegemonic forms of sexuality to take hold.

### *Harmony and Simply Pleasure*

This section draws on data from two sex shops in Soho: Harmony [Figure 1] and Simply Pleasure [Figure 2]. As the images show, both stores use pink colouring and distinctive lighting to appeal to female consumers. Harmony using neon pink and lingerie in most of their displays, with clear windows and wide-open doors allowing customers to see directly into the shop. If you were to peer through the double doors of the shop, you would see some novelty items, scented candles and oils, a wall of brightly coloured vibrators out of their boxes and on display, as well as a wide range of women's lingerie hanging in the windows. There is textured velvet wallpaper adorning the walls, and glamorous light fixtures casting a warm glow over the products on display. In an interview Aisha, a shop assistant originally from the north of England, we ask about the clients Harmony normally attract:

Aisha: We get all sorts really. We get some sleazy men sometimes, but not that often. A lot of women, a lot of couples. We get hen parties in, and stag parties too sometimes but they don't really come in to shop – they just grab sommat from the table [points towards the table at the front of the store with novelty items] and leave again, they aren't buying anything special.

Author 1: Do you have any regular customers? People that you see over and over again?

Aisha: Uh, not a huge amount upstairs really, but downstairs yeah.

Author 1: And what kinds of customers do you see downstairs?

Aisha: Literally everyone. I have trans customers, sex workers from down road come in sometimes, we have lesbian and gay couples... actually we do get quite a few male regulars who would come in on their lunch-break and browse the porn, but we get loads of other people too, so it all balances out.

While the upstairs of Harmony features products that are clearly meant to draw in female customers, downstairs at the back of the store is a neon-lit staircase that leads to the basement [see Figure 3]. This large room is obviously darker (no windows) and has a more utilitarian feel – the lighting is dimmer and the walls and floors are drab concrete. However, on display is a wide range of products for a more sexually daring consumers. These include hard-core BDSM items, a wide selection of porn DVDs, masturbatory aids for men, and fetish gear (see image 3 for a layout of the store). During our visits to the store, we have seen a diverse group of shoppers – we have been weirded-out by a clichéd rain-coated man following us around during one visit, overheard a lesbian couple quietly asking about how to use specific vibrators, listened to groups of international tourists laughing and giggling at the risqué party favours, and seen a Muslim women flipping through the porn DVDs with a man we assumed (rightly or wrongly) was her husband.

When asked about why she thinks people decide to come into Harmony, Aisha tell us:

I'm not sure, I guess for some people, particularly people who go downstairs, I think they come in because they want to touch stuff, see what it feels like – I mean, you can't tell what something feels like if you're buying it online – people who buy expensive bondage gear want to feel it before they buy it. And they can do that here (Aisha, Harmony)

This idea of engaging with items sensorially and materially was something the shop assistants we spoke frequently noted – if someone is buying a vibrator, they want to touch it to see how the silicone feels, to assess the strength and length of different settings. As Aisha says, this was particularly true for customers in the downstairs area who are purchasing items that hold more social taint – these items could be easily bought on the internet to avoid contact with anyone who would potentially make

judgment about one's sexual interests, but at Harmony customers can feel the weight of a butt plug, they can test the springs of a nipple clamp, or see the multi-coloured variety of fisting gear before they buy – without being judged.

A few streets away at Simply Pleasure [Figure 2], female customers are often drawn into the store by the use of bright pink lettering and heart shaped logo etched onto the cloudy, white windows; while Simply Pleasure does not use lingerie in its windows, they often have images of brightly coloured vibrators on display signalling that this shop is a space where women are encouraged to enter. The clientele at Simply Pleasure is as diverse as Harmony, but the inside of the store is configured rather differently [see Figure 3]. The floors here are concrete and the lighting more industrial. There are no scented candles or oils here, and the lingerie is at the very back of the store making it difficult to see when you walk in the door. The entrance to Simply Pleasure is bifurcated, with the front half of one side of the shop offering a wide range of pornographic videos and magazines, while the other front half stocks vibrators, lubricants, and dildos. The objects in the store are ultimately very similar to those offered in Harmony, but there are fewer 'feminine' aesthetics here to make the safe feel 'safe'. Our interview with Andy, a gay man from Scotland who has been working at the store for over a year, revealed a similar perspective to Harmony in relation to their client-base.

Author 2: So who would you say make up the majority of your customers?

Andy: Oh well it's really varied – this morning I've spoken to a couple looking for something to wear to Torture Garden [a large fetish event held regularly in London that attracts many BDSM practitioners], I had a lady in wanting to know about butt plugs and anal lube, I had another lady in wanting help with a vibrator. There were lots of other people who come in and wander around and walk out – I don't pay as much attention to people who don't want to be

bothered, but we get everyone in here asking for everything you could imagine. Anything and everything goes here.

Despite the different feel and layout of the shops, both Harmony and Simply Pleasure offered a wide array of products for straight men and women, but also for the LGBT, kink, and fetish community (c.f. Glick 2000 and Landridge 2006 on conceptualizations of kink communities). Both stores had dedicated sections for bondage and fetishist objects, and we were invited to feel the weight of dungeon irons, to stroke smooth, cool latex ass-chaps, to smell dozens of different flavours of anal lubricant. Our engagement with staff in these stores was always friendly and positive, and our observations suggest that the wide range of people we have encountered in these stores over the past three years feel safe asking about the more deviant items available in Soho.

While some women may feel more at ease going into the more obviously feminized space of Harmony, our observations and our conversations with staff do not suggest that women are any less likely to come to one store over the other. This safety is not exclusionary however – there are spaces for ‘respectable’ women who want to venture slowly and carefully into the world of sexual commerce by buying scented oils or candles, but there are also spaces for bull-dykes who want a three-foot long double-ended black fisting dildo. Both stores also sell products at a wide range of price points – you can buy a vibrator for £10 or a vibrator for £200; you can buy bargain bin porn for £5 or high-end porn (including feminist porn) for £30; you can buy cheap plastic handcuffs or handmade leather cuffs that are much more expensive. There are items here for BDSM aficionados who are able and willing to pay thousands to build a collection, but there are also items for people who just want to have fun or get off without spending too much money. Respectability, femininity, and

classiness are closely related (Skeggs 1997, 2004), and the fact that many upmarket erotic boutiques in the US and the UK often refuse to sell these ‘tacky’ or ‘trashy’ items (Smith 2007, Comella 2010, 2017) makes clear how the spaces of consumption are wrapped up tightly with notions of appropriate femininity.

The sensorial element is, we argue, an important factor that helps explain why people still want to visit bricks-and-mortar sex shops; while online retailing has also opened up unimaginable possibilities for people unwilling to enter a ‘typical’ sex store (c.f. Maginn and Steinmetz 2015, Voss 2015), Soho offers a sensorial, material experience for those wanting to know more about the products they are buying, who may want help or advice on how to use certain objects, or may find comfort in meeting with people who share the same sexual interests. Knowing about the vast range of products on offer is something that is necessary to work in any Soho sex shop, and handling questions and queries from people who may feel nervous requires a great deal of emotional labour. This is very much in line with Melissa Tyler’s (2011, 2012a) study of sex shop staff working in Soho; she argues that ‘as a consequence of the meanings attached to the setting and the sector and to the landscaping of the spaces within and around Soho’s sex shops, a high level of presumed intimacy shaped the sales-service encounter’ (2012a, 908-909). This was true for many staff that we engaged with at both these stores and others, and echoed in the US examples provided in Comella’s (2010, 2017) work as well.

Tyler notes, however, that while there were difficulties associated with performing this kind of emotional, sexualized labour in a place in the city well known as a sexual hub, the space of Soho itself, and the co-location of sex shops and sexual commerce in such a small area, allowed those working in the area to create communities of support. One of her participants noted the ‘staff from the sex shops

and sex workers constituted a working community’, while another noted that ‘Everybody, especially the businesses, everybody practically knows each other and everyone looks after each other’s back, so it is a little community’ (Tyler 2012a, 913). In this sense, those working in various sectors of the sex industry and sex retail are held together through material and spatial connections, but also through the sexual imaginaries attached to Soho that enable networks of community and support for one another to be created and maintained.

This is particularly important if we consider the proximity of both shops to Old Compton Street, which emerged in the early 1990s as the ‘gay commercial district’ of London, a ‘queer space’ where the LGBT community felt safe expressing their sexual rights (Binnie 1995). Many of the shops still cater to a largely gay male clientele, but these shops also sell items for the BDSM community (including women and transfolk) and Soho is still seen as a safe space for those whose sexual desires are often seen as deviant (Bell 1995). Herman (2007) argues ‘[g]iven the stigmatized, pathologized and legally troublesome status through which BDSM is widely viewed as immoral, if not outright sick, BDSM practices are therefore, *spatially* marginalized’ (Herman 2007, 94). For Herman (2007) online spaces offer BDSM practitioners the chance to purchase items discretely and privately, without having to reveal themselves. However, the wide range of BDSM objects on offer at both Harmony and Simply Pleasure (amongst others) suggests that Soho might also be a ‘safe’ area for BDSM practitioners to shop.

The inclusion of such diverse populations in these two stores – including women, but also queer and trans folk, sex workers, LGBT and the BDSM community – suggests that these two sex shops in Soho defy the bounded hierarchies that still exists in many other places – demarcating upscale, bourgeois feminine spaces from

the sleazy, dirty sex shops that have occupied social and sexual imaginaries. We argue that the disruption of normative framings is possible because of the particular space and place of Soho. We conclude this article by turning to feminist and sexual geographies as a way of complicating and, in fact, upending normative views about the moral and gendered geographies of sex shops.

## **Conclusions**

Over the years, the geography of sex shops in Soho has been altered by licensing strategies and more recently by gentrification and corporatisation (Tyler, 2012b; Sanders-McDonagh, Peyrefitte, and Ryalls, 2016). As for sex shops in other locations, these have also been affected by broader capitalist imperatives generally conveyed by a tamer, 'pushed up' and feminised commodification of sexuality. However, there remains in Soho a cluster of shops that offer a unique assemblage of differentiated types of sexual retailing. Using the example of two sex-shops that cater for a diverse clientele in London's Soho, the article moves beyond a reductive understanding of sexual consumption as either 'good' or 'bad', old or new, and demonstrates the ways in which sexual fluidity is part of the urban fabric of this area, one that diversifies desire and creates a space for sexual Others that might normally be marginalized or pushed to the periphery. Their concentration and co-location in an area with a long history as a sexualised and transgressive space further marks the possibility to adopt a more nuanced reading of gender and sexed practices in relation to sex shops.

Feminist geographers have been fundamentally important in contributing to contemporary understandings of the city, particularly the ways in which urban spaces are shaped by norms that govern gendered and sexed practices, but also in the way that certain spaces can alter these morally-constituted terrains. Many have argued, for

example, about the ways in which cities reproduce the moral/social order particularly in relation to gender norms related to women and respectability (Driver 1988, Walkowitz 1992, McDowell 1997, Skeggs 1999, Bondi and Rose 2003), while geographers interested in sexualities have made similar claims about the inclusion/exclusion of queer communities from certain public spaces (Bell 1995, Binne 1995, Valentine 1996, Domosh 2002, Browne 2006, Oswin 2008). Indeed, Knopp (2007) argues that feminist and queer geographies encourage a reimagining of space, including deconstructing established gendered and sexed hierarchies that inform spatial practices, allowing for example, the reconceptualization of cities, and of ‘boundaries, borders and other spatial demarcations in terms of their roles in constructing socially meaningful group differences and categories’ (Knopp 2007, 23).

The importance of difference and resistance is a key theme to emerge in feminist geography and the geography of sexualities. Podmore (2001) argues for example that the inner-city offers the possibility of heterogeneity – in some urban locales groups that might be marginalized in other settings are able to co-exist in the city, free to some extent from the hegemonic norms that might normally dominate these spaces. Many geographers, writing on gentrification note the threats to these liberatory spaces in the guise of neoliberal urban agendas (Lees 2012, Marcuse et al. 2012, Neville and Sanders-McDonagh 2018). This article adds to these important feminist foundations and considers how normative ideas about respectability often govern understandings of sexual spaces and places. Here we present Soho as a spatial alternative to other *immoral* geographies of sexuality where different a wide range of sexual citizens (including women, LGBTQ and the kink community) can access sex shops without being threatened with the restrictive norms that govern ‘appropriate’ patterns of sexual practices. As other Red-Light Districts in Western Europe (Liempt

and Chiementi, 2017), Soho is being sanitized as part of larger gentrification processes (c.f. Sanders-McDonagh et al. 2016) and the worry is this diverse space will be stripped of its unique, cosmopolitan character. Our work on Soho hopes to challenge the modes of hegemonic gentrification that are altering the queer terrain of Soho, with the hope of keeping some of Soho's queer possibilities alive.

## **Acknowledgements**

### **Notes on Contributors**

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