

Selling Sex Toys: Marketing and the Meaning of Vibrators in Early Twentieth-Century America

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The electromechanical vibrator originated in the late nineteenth century as a device for medical therapy. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, however, marketing of vibrators as consumer appliances became pervasive. Ads appeared in the pages of *The New York Times* and *Scientific American* and plastered street cars. Companies marketed vibrators to grandparents, mothers, infants, and young adults. Vibrators are widely sold today, however, as instruments for masturbation, a use that was rarely mentioned but well known before World War II. How was vibrator advertising able to become so ubiquitous during the early twentieth century, despite draconian antiobscenity laws and antimasturbation rhetoric? This article argues that companies achieved this result by shaping the meaning of vibrators through strategic marketing. This marketing overtly portrayed vibrators as nonsexual while covertly conveying their sexual uses through imagery and the sale of phallic, dildo-like attachments.

Companies positioned vibrators within two major consumer product categories in the early 1900s: labor-saving household appliances and electrotherapeutic devices. By advertising the vibrator as both a labor-saving household appliance and a sexualized health panacea, companies could slip vibrator ads past the censors, while supplying user manuals that clued consumers into specific sexual uses. In household appliance ads, companies drew on traditional gender roles to present vibrators as emblems of domesticity and

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motherhood, whereas in electrotherapeutic ads they presented vibrators as symbols of progressive gender roles, the sexualized new woman and the body-conscious “self-made man.”

For nearly four decades, the Hitachi company marketed its plug-in Magic Wand vibrator as a massager, even though feminist stores had been selling the Magic Wand as a sex toy since 1974. Hitachi did not publicly admit that its device had sexual uses until 2013, a fact already acknowledged by hundreds of Amazon.com reviewers, a dozen manufacturers of sexual attachments, and thousands of pornographic movie websites.¹ There was nothing new about the Magic Wand, though. Vibrators like the Magic Wand had been sold since the early 1900s, marketed in a similarly veiled way. Companies hid the sexual uses of the vibrator behind its multiple nonsexual uses. Some of these uses, like neck massage, were legitimate, whereas others, such as claims of cancer cures, were patently false.

Although the vibrator was a common consumer product in the early 1900s, historians have very little direct evidence for its use, either sexual or nonsexual. No records survive from vibrator companies, and men and women of the time rarely mentioned masturbation, even in their most private writings. Given the absence of direct evidence, marketing materials provide some of the best sources for accessing the meaning of vibrators.²

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, the vibrator was pervasive in consumer advertising. Vibrator ads appeared in mainstream magazines and all the major newspapers.³ Vibrators were displayed in electrical shop windows and featured in Sears catalogs.⁴

1. As of March 10, 2014, there were 1,955 reviews on Amazon.com, about one-third of them sexual (652). Twelve companies were selling openly sexual attachments on Amazon.com. A search for “Hitachi Magic Wand” porn on Google turns up more than 376,000 hits.

2. For more on the problems of historic documentation of sex-toy consumers, see Heinemann, *Before Porn Was Legal*, 24.

3. A search of databases for advertisements from 1900 to 1930 in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, *New York Times*, and *Los Angeles Times* revealed 521 ads for vibrator companies, drugstores selling vibrators, and electric companies and shops promoting vibrators. *Popular Mechanics* ran ads regularly from 1909 to 1916.

4. The *McJunkin Electric Supplement* showed such a display. *McJunkin Electric Supplement*, September 1921, 1. Dorothy Dignam Papers, box 1, folder 18, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin. Sears and Roebuck Company, “Vibrators and Medical Batteries for Electrical and Home Use,” *Sears Electrical Goods Catalog* (Chicago, c. 1918), 6 in National Museum of American History Library Trade Literature Collection (hereafter NMAH-Trade Lit); Sears Roebuck and Company, “Aids that Every Woman Appreciates,” *Electrical Goods: Everything Electrical for Home, Office, Factory and Shop* (Chicago, 1918), 4 in Bakken Library and Museum of Electricity in Life Trade Literature Collection (hereafter referred to as Bakken-Trade).

Vibrator manufacturers targeted all manner of consumers: male and female, young and old, sick and healthy. Suggestive advertisements portrayed vibrators as cure-alls for dozens of diseases, including deafness, malaria, fatigue, and impotence.⁵

Marketing sources show how what we now consider a masturbation device became ubiquitous during a period of draconian anti-obscenity laws and pervasive condemnation of masturbation.⁶ Companies attempted to shape the meanings of vibrator technology through strategic marketing that overtly portrayed the vibrator as nonsexual while covertly conveying its sexual uses.

To support this argument, I examine vibrator ads, user manuals, artifacts, electric company pamphlets, and writings by physicians and moralists. These materials show how vibrator and electric companies transmitted these messages by co-opting two major consumer product categories in the early 1900s—labor-saving household appliances and electrotherapeutic devices.⁷ In household appliance ads, companies presented vibrators as emblems of traditional female gender roles of domesticity and motherhood, whereas in electrotherapeutic ads they used vibrators to represent the progressive gender roles of the sexualized new woman and the body-conscious “self-made man.”⁸ By advertising the vibrator as both a labor-saving household appliance and a sexualized health panacea, companies could slip vibrator ads past the censors while supplying user manuals that clued consumers into specific sexual uses. Medical textbooks demonstrate that some doctors knew that patients became sexually aroused when vibrators were used on patients’ genitals, and moralists’ tracts show that they viewed vibrators as a sexual threat to the social order.⁹ Explicit acknowledgment of the vibrator’s sexual uses, however, remained extremely rare before the late 1960s.

The canonical account of the history of the vibrator was written by Rachel Maines in her 1998 book, *The Technology of Orgasm*. Maines argues that nineteenth-century physicians adopted vibrators as a technology to treat patients for hysteria. She claims that physicians

5. Some of the diseases ads claimed to cure were headache, toothache, asthma, constipation, heart trouble, and Bright’s disease. See Red Cross Electric Vibrator Ad, *Health*, Dec. 1907, 1119. See also most of the Arnold Vibrator Company’s ads—for example, those in the *New York Times*, May 24, 1908, 7; Feb. 28, 1909, 2; most of the White Cross Vibrator Company’s Ads, *Health*, April 10, 1910, 98.

6. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex*, 69–74.

7. Evan and Hays, “Dual-Use Technology,” 105–113.

8. Michael Kimmel describes the new concept of masculinity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as the “Self-Made Man;” see *Manhood in America*, 82.

9. Lowry and Lambert, *Himself*, 67–68; Hirsch, *Power to Love*, 140.

had previously treated hysteria with genital massage, rubbing their patients' clitorises until they had orgasms. However, according to Maines, doctors did not think of their treatments as sexual because of their androcentric bias, which led them to believe that women got pleasure only from sexual intercourse. Thus, when the vibrator was invented, doctors eagerly embraced it as a time-saving replacement for their tired hands. Maines describes the vibrator as a "capital-labor substitution device" that retained a camouflage of nonsexuality because doctors did not use it penetratively. She argues that this medical cover helped popularize the vibrator as a medical device, thus concealing its sexual powers. When vibrators began appearing in pornography in the late 1920s, however, they lost their "social camouflage as a home and professional medical instrument." Once vibrators were exposed as sexual devices, Maines concludes, doctors stopped using them in their practices and mainstream companies stopped marketing them.¹⁰

A thorough critique of this argument would require a separate article.¹¹ Rather than contesting Maines' account, I provide an alternative history of the vibrator. I argue that marketers attempted to shape the meanings of vibrators through marketing. The vibrator's dual-use capabilities allowed marketers to emphasize vibrators' nonsexual uses in advertisements. Vibrators could embody multiple meanings because they had both sexual uses, including masturbation and treatments for impotence, and nonsexual uses, such as treatments for backache, constipation, and sciatica. Vibrator manufacturers followed the same strategy as the era's contraceptive companies, which escaped prosecution by successfully arguing that their devices had legitimate noncontraceptive medical uses.¹²

Vibrators' nonsexual uses allowed companies to manufacture and advertise them, electric companies to promote them, and consumers to purchase them without embarrassment or legal restrictions. Therefore, the history of the vibrator does not follow a straight line from camouflage to openness. Vibrators were not fully camouflaged in the late 1800s and early 1900s as nonsexual devices, nor did they emerge in the 1960s as fully sexual devices. They always contained both sexual and nonsexual meanings.

Both Maines and I make a circumstantial case for vibrators as sexual devices. Before the 1930s, there are no explicit accounts of the use of vibrators for masturbation. Maines herself has described her argument as merely "a hypothesis."¹³ However, it strains credulity to

10. Maines, *Technology*, 20, 108–110, 121–122.

11. Which I am writing.

12. Heywood, *Free Speech*, 1883, 17–19; Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 39.

13. King, "Galen and the Widow," 206–208.

imagine that doctor-assisted orgasm-inducing vibratory massage was widespread at the turn of the twentieth century, without ever being mentioned by physicians. By the 1930s, however, when leading gynecologist and sex researcher Robert Latou Dickinson noted the autoerotic use of an electric vibrator by one of his patients, the practice of masturbation with vibrators was not even unusual enough to provoke comment (see the section “Vibrators and Sexual Pleasure” for more examples). No such evidence exists for doctor-assisted masturbation by vibrator. Unlike Maines’ argument, a marketing-driven account of the vibrator’s sexualization requires no willing suspension of disbelief.

Advertisements and marketing materials provide key evidence for how manufacturers and retailers conveyed the intended uses of the vibrator, sexual as well as nonsexual. The nonsexual uses were explicit. For social, legal, and political reasons, however, advertisers could not explicitly advocate the sexual use of their products. Instead, sexual messages were encoded in ads, and consumers were expected to decode them.¹⁴

Vibrator companies intended their products to be used by both men and women. But the gender of the imagined user depended on marketing strategies. Companies primarily portrayed the users of the device as female when they positioned vibrators as home appliances, and as both male and female when they presented vibrators as medical devices. That they targeted women in the household ads was not surprising. Women were, after all, the imagined consumer for most household products in the early twentieth century.¹⁵ During the early twentieth century, consumption was coded as a “feminine activity,” according to Julian Sikulva.¹⁶ Advertisers, though, understood female roles in the progressive era in the context of making the home more efficient, which explains why advertisers coded vibrators as labor-saving devices for housewives in the early twentieth century.

However, the targeting of men in medical-themed vibrator advertisements is more surprising, given that companies presented vibrators as such feminine devices in their other ads. Such electrotherapeutic ads reflected the changing gender roles for both men and women. Vibrator ads targeted to men frequently touted that vibrators could cure impotence and strengthen muscles, a reflection of the crisis in masculinity that was occurring due to the shift from physical labor

14. Hall, “Encoding, Decoding,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. During, 97–98. On the history of advertising in the United States, see Fox, *The Mirror Makers*; Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*; Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes*.

15. Neuhaus, *Married to the Mop*, 7.

16. Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes*, 44. See also, Sikulva, *Stronger Than Dirt*.

to office and factory work. No longer could men prove themselves in the workplace, so masculinity was increasingly gauged by other measures, such as sexual potency and muscle strength.¹⁷

Reflecting this crisis of masculinity, vibrator and electric companies took out ads assuring men that vibrators were suitably masculine. “Womankind, long since, discovered the health and comfort of the electric vibrator and used it as an aid to beauty,” said an electric company ad. “Today men, too, not through vanity, but because of its stimulation and feeling of well-being ... appreciate the restful application of this instrument.”¹⁸

Similarly, ads for women also co-opted trends in gender and sexuality. They usually featured a young woman who embodied the archetype of the “Modern Girl.” Like the Modern Girls who appeared in ads for cosmetic and hygiene products in the 1920s to 1930s, the Modern Girl of the vibrator ad was young and sexualized and depicted shaping her body through the use of a commodity. Although scholars emphasize that the Modern Girl emerged in full two decades after the earliest electric vibrator ad, a proto-Modern Girl is visible in vibrator ads from 1900 to 1920.¹⁹ As did other ads featuring the Modern Girl, vibrator ads “publicized women’s everyday lives by putting private cares about the body and bodily functions on display.”²⁰ Although ads for cosmetics and other beauty products are usually seen as the site of the Modern Girl, vibrators should be added to the list, as they too were one of the “technologies of the self” that the Modern Girl promoted.²¹

The central role that gender and sexuality played in vibrator marketing was hardly unique, as shown by the extensive literature on the general topic of gender in advertising. However, vibrator marketing also reveals the limitations of this literature, which does not distinguish adequately between gender and sexuality—that is, between concepts of masculinity and femininity on the one hand and appeals to sexual desires on the other. In addition, most of the work focuses on advertising to women, giving short shrift to male consumerism and sexuality. Beginning in the late 1950s, writers like Vance Packard and Betty Friedan noted how advertisers used feminine stereotypes in consumer marketing.²² Similarly, sociologist Erving Goffmann concluded that gendered advertisements depicted the subordination

17. Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 57–62.

18. Thompson Ross and Co. Inc. ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 16, 1927, 22.

19. Weinbaum, et al., *The Modern Girl*, 31.

20. *Ibid.*, 19.

21. *Ibid.*, 50.

22. Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders*, Chapter 8, 95–105; Friedan, “The Sexual Sell,” in *Consumer Society*, ed. Schor and Holt, 42–43.

and infantilization of women. More recent scholars, such as Jean Kilbourne, have argued that ads reify women and create unattainable ideals for female beauty.²³

Although the scholarship on masculinity in advertising is less well developed, several recent works help make sense of vibrator companies' targeting of men in their marketing. Mark A. Swiencicki shows that during the Progressive Era, men were eager consumers of a variety of goods, including sporting equipment, furs, and clothing, and that men were the target for advertisers.²⁴ Tom Pendergast argues that male-targeted ads were directly linked to the male body, encouraging men "to reshape themselves through the various means made available to them: body-building exercises, personality-enhancing books, nice clothes, and an array of personal care products."²⁵

More central to my analysis than the stereotyped depictions of men and women in vibrator ads are the sexual appeals in the ads. Scholars in many fields have examined how advertisers use sexuality. Tom Reichert, one of the few historians to survey this topic in depth, shows that sex has permeated American advertising since the 1850s, being used to "attract attention ... build carefully crafted brand identities, and sell products." Topless women began to appear in ads in the mid-nineteenth century, especially ads for tobacco and patent medicines.²⁶ By the early 1900s, images of semi-nude and bare-breasted women were used in the service of soda companies.²⁷ In the 1920s, sex was used to sell lipstick to respectable middle-class women, even as companies tried to disassociate makeup with prostitution.²⁸ Marshall McLuhan analyzed sexualized advertisements for products like pantyhose, arguing that such ads reduced bodies to "love-machines" and "sex experience to a problem of mechanics and hygiene."²⁹ Reichert, Charles Goodrum and Helen Dalrymple, Rodger Streitmatter, and Pamela Ivinski have analyzed the use of sex appeal to sell perfume, beer, blue jeans, tires, and other consumer goods.³⁰

23. Kilbourne, *Can't Buy My Love*; see also, Hill, *Advertising to the American Woman*; Merskin, "Where are the Clothes?"

24. Swiencicki, "Consuming Brotherhood," 780–783, 792–794.

25. Pendergrast, *Modern Man*, 18.

26. Goodrum and Dalrymple, *Advertising in America*, 70–71. See also, Heller, *Sex Appeal*, xii–xv.

27. Reichert, *Erotic History*, 20.

28. Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 154–155.

29. McLuhan, *Mechanical Bride*, 98–101.

30. Chambers, "Taste Matters," in *Sex in Consumer Culture*, eds. Reichert, and Lambiase, 159–218. McNair, *Striptease Culture*, 78–82; Goodrum and Dalrymple, 71–79. Streitmatter, *Sex Sells*, 115–125. See also, Ivinski, "I See London, I See France, I See Calvin's Underpants," in *Sex Appeal*, ed. Heller, 108–115; Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders*.

There is, however, a profound irony in the marketing of sexual products. Sex appeals were pervasive in the marketing of nonsexual goods such as soda and cigarettes, but sex was rarely used to sell products with actual sexual uses.³¹

Few historians have studied the marketing of sexual products, in contrast to the extensive literature on sex in advertising, and historians who do study the marketing of sexual goods have focused almost exclusively on contraception.³² Nevertheless, there are important historical similarities between the marketing of contraceptives and the marketing of sex toys, as both products had to deal with restrictive obscenity laws. From the late nineteenth into the mid-twentieth centuries, contraceptive companies communicated the uses of their products surreptitiously to avoid prosecution. Andrea Tone shows that birth control companies used coded language in their advertisements to convey the intended uses of their products to consumers.³³ Similarly, Kristin Hall demonstrates that the Lysol company skirted obscenity laws by selling its supposedly contraceptive douches as “female hygiene” products in the early twentieth century. Lysol ads never openly stated that Lysol was a contraceptive, but the company communicated Lysol’s contraceptive uses to consumers through contextual clues, such as including fictional gynecologists in their ads who discussed the importance of “marital hygiene.”³⁴ It was not just products for women that were draped in camouflage, though. As historian of sexuality Angus McLaren argues, marketers of impotence devices also used coded language to allow companies to evade censorship.³⁵ Vibrator companies used similar linguistic strategies for obscuring the sexual nature of their devices. Camouflaged vibrator advertisements communicated sexual information to customers who were “in the know,” whereas the more naïve consumers did not recognize the terms as sexual.³⁶

31. Collier, *The Humble Little Condom*, 197–199.

32. The main historical study that addresses the marketing of sex toys is Maines, *Technology of Orgasm*. For studies of marketing of sex toys in the twenty-first century see, Martin, “*Fifty Shades of Sex Shop: Sexual Fantasy for Sale*”; Comella, “*Selling Sexual Liberation*”; Comella, “*From Text to Context*,” in *Porn Studies*, eds. Taormino et al.; Martsolf, “*On Helping Create the Sex Toys*,” *Naked Ambition*, ed. Milne.

33. Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 31. See also Tone, “*Making Room for Rubbers*,”

34. Hall, “*Selling Sexual Certainty?*” See also Tone, “*Contraceptive Consumers*”; Gordon, *Women’s Body, Women’s Right*, 64–71.

35. McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History*, 126–148.

36. As Chauncey shows, members of early twentieth-century gay subcultures used similar coded language so gay men could “*identify themselves to other gays without revealing their identity to those not in the wise*.” Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 17.

The Early History of the Vibrator

British physician J. Mortimer Granville is credited with inventing the electromechanical vibrator in the early 1880s to treat nervous problems in both men and women.³⁷ He believed that the body's nerves had natural, healthy levels of vibration, and that when these levels got out of balance, disease resulted. Therefore, he created a device to cure off-key vibrations and restore "the normal harmony of rhythm" of the body's nerves.³⁸ Granville's writings reveal that he knew that the device might have sexual uses. For example, Granville instructed doctors to use vibrators to increase sexual power in their male patients by vibrating the perineum.

Although companies marketed vibrators to doctors, many doctors regarded them with suspicion.³⁹ In an 1898 letter to the editor of *Medical News*, a physician wrote:

After many years of vibratory therapy I am now convinced that its value is greatly exaggerated, and depends more on the creation of suggestion than anything else. ... This form of therapy has become so popular with hypochondriacs that a few years ago a company with a large capital was formed here to exploit the "household" vibrator of which nothing now is heard.⁴⁰

Although his statement about the household vibrator market proved to be incorrect, Hamilton's view of the vibrator as an ineffective device largely represented mainstream medical attitudes of the time. It was certainly the view of the AMA, which in 1915 said that the "vibrator business is a delusion and a snare. If it has any effect it is psychology."⁴¹

After the mainstream medical community's lukewarm reception of the vibrator in the late nineteenth century, the vibrator was rebranded as a consumer appliance. The earliest ad for a consumer electric

37. Maines, *Technology of Orgasm*, 11, 15, 93–94, 98–99.

38. Granville, "Therapeutics of the Nervous System," 172.

39. Peterson, "Vibratory Therapeutics," 141.

40. Hamilton, "Vibratory Therapeutics," 248.

41. Journal of the American Medical Association to Adams on February 11, 1915, Historical Health Fraud Collection, Box 243, Lindstrom Smith (File), Folder 3, American Medical Association Archives, Chicago (hereafter cited as Health Fraud-AMA). The AMA wrote multiple letters to consumers and doctors warning them of the inefficacy of White Cross and New Life vibrators. Another letter from the same file (September 14, 1916) is to the consumer Mr. F. R. Lawrence, saying the White Cross vibrator book "Health and Beauty" is "false and misleading." A letter from the Hamilton Beach file contains similar criticisms (JAMA to Dr. J. M. Donelan, December 16, 1912. File Hamilton Beach, Folder 3, Health Fraud-AMA, Box 231).

vibrator appeared in 1899 in *McClure's* magazine. This ad positioned the Vibratile vibrator as both a beauty and health device, suitable for “removing wrinkles” and “curing nervous headache.”⁴² By 1909, Vibratile was joined by at least twenty other companies hawking similar vibrators, including Arnold Vibrator Company, Eureka Vibrator Co., Hygeia Vibratory Co., the Lindstrom Smith Co., and the Swedish Vibrator Co.⁴³

Vibrators and Masturbation

It seems counterintuitive that vibrators would become successful technologies during a period when masturbation was still considered to be highly problematic. However, the concept of the vibrator in the twenty-first century is not the same as that of the early 1900s. Although we now know that vibrators are widely used for masturbation, there is very little evidence from consumers in that era about their use of vibrators or their masturbatory practices in general. Around the turn of the twentieth century, masturbation, or “the solitary vice,” was widely viewed as shameful and remained a major concern for moral reformers and physicians.⁴⁴ These views persisted even though attitudes toward masturbation were liberalizing. Freud, for example, argued that masturbation during infancy and childhood was a normal stage that humans passed through, typically abandoned by adulthood. However, public discussion of masturbation remained taboo in the early twentieth century (and controversial even into the twenty-first).⁴⁵

The strongest evidence about vibrators in this era concerns their intended uses, as portrayed in marketing and promotional materials. These materials clearly show that the vibrator was positioned as a highly sexual product, even though companies could not legally sell vibrators as masturbation devices. Sexual products could not be marketed openly because of the Comstock Act, an anti-obscenity law passed in 1873 that continued to be enforced in various forms through most of the twentieth century.⁴⁶ The Comstock Act was crafted by moral reformer and former dry-goods salesman Anthony Comstock,

42. Vibratile Ad, *McClure's*, April 1899, 158.

43. Arnold Vibrator ads began running in the *New York Times* on May 26, 1908, 5; Eureka Vibrator ads on October 4, 1909; and Swedish Massage Vibrator ads on March 17, 1909. Hygeia Vibratory Co. began running ads in the *Chicago Tribune* on November 16, 1902 and Lindstrom Smith's White Cross Vibrator ads began running in *Health* magazine on December 1907, and in the *Chicago Tribune* on November 4, 1908.

44. Engelhardt, Jr. “The Disease of Masturbation,” 15.

45. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex*, 66, 68, 69–74.

46. See Bailey, “Momma's Got the Pill,” Gamson, “Rubber Wars.”

who even used a nineteenth-century euphemism for sex toys in its title: “Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and *Articles of Immoral Use*” (emphasis added).⁴⁷ Comstock was specifically concerned about “rubber articles for masturbation,” which he believed corrupted youths and the larger society.⁴⁸ Any manufacturer that wanted to promote vibrators openly as masturbation devices would have been risking its livelihood.

Comstock was not only instrumental in getting this law passed, but he also had a major role in its enforcement. In 1873, he was appointed special agent to the United States Post Office “with power to confiscate immoral matter in the mails and arrest those sending it.”⁴⁹ From 1873 until his death in 1915, Comstock regulated the morality of the nation’s mails.⁵⁰ He operated by perusing newspapers for sexually explicit ads. When he found one, he either charged the company that was advertising with indecency for the ad itself, or, more commonly, sent away for the goods in the ad, hopeful that the products would be obscene.⁵¹ The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice bragged about its work in eliminating obscene ads: “Improper advertisements, more than enough to entirely fill one of our largest morning dailies, have been stricken out of various newspapers throughout the country.”⁵²

47. Emphasis added. Text from the 1873 Comstock Act (17 Stat. 599), officially known as “Act of the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use,” says that “that no obscene, lewd, or lascivious, book, pamphlet, picture, paper, print, or other publication of an indecent character, or any article or thing designed or intended for the prevention of conception or the procuring of abortion, nor any article or thing intended or adapted for any indecent or immoral use or nature, nor any written or printed card, circular, book, pamphlet, advertisement, or notice of any kind giving information directly or indirectly ... shall be carried in the mail, and any person who shall knowingly deposit [any of these things] ... shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor.”

48. “Speech of Honor C. L. Merriam of New York in The House of Representatives, March 1, 1873 on the Bill (S. No. 1572) for the suppression in trade of obscene literature and articles of immoral use,” House of Representatives, 42nd Congress, 3rd Session, *Appendix to the Congressional Globe*, 168.

49. Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*, 381.

50. When he died, his successor, John Sumner, continued the campaign through the 1950s.

51. Not only was advertising mentioned in the text of the national Comstock law, but it was also written into the mini-Comstock laws of 30 states, according to Bailey, “Momma’s got the Pill.” In addition to Bailey and Tone, *Devices and Desires*; Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*; and Dennis, *Licentious Gotham*, also detail the Comstock law’s advertising bans, as do Comstock’s biographers Trumbell, *Anthony Comstock, Fighter* and Broun and Leech, *Anthony Comstock, Roundsman*. Finally, Comstock’s contemporary, Bennett, *Anthony Comstock, His Career*, and Comstock himself, *Traps for the Young* and *Frauds Exposed* (528), also discuss the advertising bans.

52. “Private and Confidential: Improper Books, Prints, etc.,” 5, New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, January 28, 1874, Ralph Ginzburg Papers, Box 14, Folder 9, in Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

The law banned sending through the U.S. mail any “obscene, lewd, or lascivious” print material along with “any article or thing intended or adapted for any indecent or immoral use or nature,” as well as any advertisements for such items. The law covered sex toys in general, but in practice Comstock and his investigators confiscated mainly dildos and nubby rubber penis adornments called “French ticklers.” Such toys were clearly intended for sexual use only.⁵³

A device with both a medical and a sexual use, however, was more difficult to prosecute as immoral under the Comstock Act. Sellers of such devices could defend themselves by claiming to supply a medical appliance. For example, anarchist and free-speech advocate Ezra Heywood used this tactic in the late 1800s when he baited Comstock by advertising a vaginal “Comstock syringe,” ostensibly for contraceptive douching, in his magazine. Comstock arrested him, but Heywood won the case in court. As Andrea Tone says of the case: “The crux of Heywood’s defense was the multiple uses of a vaginal syringe. There was nothing about the technology of a syringe that made it inherently a preventative.”⁵⁴

When vibrators became a consumer product around the turn of the twentieth century, most manufacturers marketed them as medical and household appliances, not sexual appliances, shaping the meaning of the technology. However, nearly all vibrator companies made phallic attachments, which would have been considered obscene if sold as dildos. However, because the phallic devices were marketed as simply adjuncts to a neutral, nonsexual device, their manufacturers were free from prosecution. Vibrator companies gambled on the fact that Comstock would be more enticed by the French tickler ads in the back of seedy gentlemen’s magazines than by promotions for vibrators that ran in family magazines like *The Youth’s Companion*.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Comstock did sometimes coerce newspapers into discontinuing their “massage and electrical advertisements,” even though Comstock’s main targets were purveyors of single-use devices like dildos.⁵⁶

53. “Names and record of persons arrested under the auspices of The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice during the year 1872 Continued,” Ralph Ginzburg Papers, Box 14, Folder 5, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin; “Business in the Other Courts,” 6.

54. Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 17–18, 37–38.

55. New Life Vibrator featured as “Winner’s Gift Number 10–23.” *Youth’s Companion*, October 17, 1918, 538. Midget Vibrator Ad., *Christian Observer*, January 27, 1909, 24. Vibrator ads also ran in *The Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, and *Los Angeles Times*.

56. “N.Y. World notified by Anthony Comstock to discontinue lottery advertisements; also to be notified to exclude massage, electrical and personal advertisements; also French remedies,” *NY Commercial Advertiser* article, n.d., circa 1900. Ralph Ginzburg Papers, Box 18, Folder 12, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

Selling Vibrators

Despite the hostile legal environment that Comstock had created, by the early twentieth century numerous manufacturers had transformed vibrators into common consumer appliances. The size of the vibrator industry is difficult to gauge. Between 1905 and 1920, more than sixty vibrator patents were issued in the United States. According to the McGraw Electrical Directory, there were thirty-four vibrator manufacturers in 1909, and the EMF Electrical Yearbook counted thirty-one vibrator manufacturers in 1921.⁵⁷ Some companies, like Hamilton Beach, were major producers of electric home appliances. Although aggregate data on the industry's sales are not available, one manufacturer, Star, reportedly sold 800,000 vibrators in 1921 alone.⁵⁸ And Star was not the most popular brand, suggesting annual sales in the millions.⁵⁹

Another way to estimate its size is through advertising. From 1900 to 1930, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, *New York Times*, and *Los Angeles Times* carried 521 ads for vibrators, averaging about seventeen ads per year, with spikes in 1908 and 1909, when the *New York Times* alone ran an average of forty-eight ads per year.⁶⁰ It was a boom industry, with companies attempting to differentiate their products through branding and grandiose claims. In 1918, Hamilton Beach spent \$150,000 advertising its small appliances (including vibrators) nationally, in addition to providing electrical shop owners with free “folders, circulars, street car cards, and lantern slides.”⁶¹

In the first decade of the twentieth century, vibrator companies targeted upper-class men and women, the customers most likely to be able to afford their products; such customers were also the most likely to have electricity in their households. The average unskilled worker earned less than \$2 per day in 1910, whereas the average cost of a vibrator was \$16, not including special attachments.⁶²

57. McGraw Electrical Directory, 241; EMF Electrical Yearbook, 789–790.

58. “Ingenious ‘Helps’ Overcome Dealer Inertia,” *Printer's Ink*, 114.

59. The most popular brands as evidenced by advertising were Arnold Vibrators. Arnold ads represented 45% of *The New York Times* ads for vibrators from 1900 to 1930 (86 Arnold ads/192 ads total). Only one drugstore ad promoting the Star vibrator appeared in the *New York Times*, but 16 ads in *Los Angeles Times* were for drugstores selling Star vibrators, a total of 16% of the ads overall (total ads 103). Drugstores ran ads featuring Star vibrators in 19% of ads for vibrators in *The Chicago Tribune* (27 out of 141).

60. A search of ProQuest databases for *NYT*, *CDT*, and *LAT* revealed this information. See the appendix for more detail.

61. “Trade Activities,” *Electrical Review*, 896.

62. Average cost of vibrator calculated from advertisements in *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, and *New York Times* from 1900 to 1919. Annual Wages in the United States Unskilled Labor and Manufacturing Workers, 1774–Present, <http://www.measuringworth.com/datasets/uswage/result.php>

As David Nye has shown, early adopters often embraced electricity in the home as a form of conspicuous consumption. Furthermore, half of all urban households were still without electricity as late as 1920, so electric appliances, including vibrators, remained unavailable for most working-class families. However, by the 1920s, the average cost of a vibrator had dropped 42 percent, to a little under \$10, making them accessible to a wider range of middle-class families.⁶³

Vibrator companies reached their target market through ads and promotional materials that both communicated and hid the sexual uses of the device.⁶⁴ As noted in the introduction, historians have for some time recognized the importance of advertising in the diffusion of consumer technologies. Advertisers layer cultural meanings on material artifacts, co-opting and corrupting themes collected from popular culture, religion, and politics.⁶⁵ Like all advertised products, the meanings of technologies can shift depending on how they are marketed. Vibrator advertising provided a way for companies to attempt to orchestrate the cultural shaping of the technologies they were trying to sell, and thus provides insights into how companies wanted the vibrator to be perceived by the public. A close reading of vibrator ads reveals widely displayed sexual themes over a twenty-year period from around 1900 to 1930.

In the early twentieth century, as Pamela Laird argues, advertisements shifted from promoting technological progress to spotlighting consumer choice.⁶⁶ Vibrator companies' advertising took part in this shift. Vibrator companies used an impressive variety of advertising styles. They placed ads in family newspapers and magazines as well as specialized health publications, solicited celebrity endorsements, and featured their vibrators in films, an early form of product placement.⁶⁷ By the late 1940s, even the Rural Electrification Administration was

63. Average cost of vibrator calculated from advertisements in *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, and *New York Times* from 1920 to 1930. Nye, *Electrifying America*, 147.

64. Ads for the Hygeia Vibratory Appliance and the Electro-Biohemic and Hermetic Vibrator Cure were openly sexual (in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times* respectively), whereas ads for White Cross Vibrators frequently featured images of phallic stimulators.

65. Laird, *Advertising Progress*; Lears, *Fables of Abundance*; Fox, *The Mirror Makers*; Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes*, Chapter 3. Staudenmaier and Laird, "Review Essay: Advertising History."

66. Laird, *Advertising Progress*, 83.

67. The 1919 *Bill Henry* starred a popular actor, Charles Ray, who played an electric-vibrator salesman. See Lancaster and Birmingham, "Bill Henry," 8. The Fitzgerald Manufacturing Company, which produced the Star Vibrator, hired famous actress Betty Blythe to promote their vibrators. See Star Vibrator ad, *McClure's Magazine*, April 1919, 58.

promoting them.⁶⁸ Companies sold vibrators in every location imaginable: via mail-order catalogs and door-to-door salesmen and women, through drug and department stores, using product demonstrations, and in electrical-goods stores. In fact, most vibrator advertising appeared in ads for shops that carried them, not ads from the vibrator companies themselves. The electric industry, drugstores, and department stores produced 64 percent of ads featuring vibrators, whereas vibrator company ads accounted for only 22 percent. However, stores often reprinted vibrator companies' ads in their own promotions.⁶⁹

The closing of the patent medicine era in the late nineteenth century helped create a market for a new health panacea like the vibrator. The passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906 exposed patent medicines as simply alcohol- and morphine-filled concoctions, and respectable newspapers and magazines stopped carrying ads for them.⁷⁰ Vibrators were not covered by the 1906 FDA law, and vibrators in a sense became new patent medicines, advertised with similar cure-all claims.⁷¹ Because newspapers had been dependent on advertising income rather than circulation revenues for their profitability since the 1870s, they eagerly accepted vibrator ads, probably as a replacement for the patent medicine ads.⁷²

Although early twentieth-century advertisers often used sex to sell nonsexual products, vibrator ads could rarely address sexual uses directly, because it was illegal to sell a masturbatory device. As a result, vibrator companies needed a discreet way to convey sexual purposes without running afoul of the Comstock Act. Vibrator companies clued consumers into these sexual uses through ad copy filled with sexually charged words such as "quiver," "penetrate," and "stimulate." Companies paired this ad copy with sexualized drawings of men and women in an attempt to convey the sexual uses of their products. Together, this coded language and sexualized imagery signaled the arrival of a new electrically powered erotic device.

The specifically sexual content of vibrator ads becomes clear when comparing them to the patent medicine ads that preceded them. Taken

68. "John Oster Manufacturing Co. Demonstrators' Manual," 18 December 1949, Louisian E. Mamer Rural Electrification Administration Administration Papers 1927–2002, Box 4, Folder 4, "Demonstrator Scripts." NMAH-Archives.

69. Data from survey of ads from 1900 to 1930 in *New York Times*, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, and *L.A. Times*. The other ads were for places like hairdressers promoting vibrator treatments. The electric industry produced 29% of vibrator ads, whereas drug and department stores produced 35% of them. For more details, see the appendix.

70. Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century*, 60; Bok, *Edward Bok*, 340.

71. Westervelt, *American Pure Food and Drug Laws*, 18–28.

72. Harvey Young, *Toadstool Millionaires*, 226–242; Laird, *Advertising Progress*, 22–23; Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News*, 3–9.

as a whole, vibrator advertising featured more young, sexy women than patent medicine ads, which, in contrast, were more likely to feature matronly women. The most famous female patent medicine company, Lydia Pinkham's, was represented by images of the dowdy, older, buttoned-up Miss Pinkham (Fig. 1).⁷³ In comparison, the woman used to advertise White Cross vibrators was young and scantily clad, exposing her cleavage and holding up one of her breasts (Fig. 1). She had a full smile, unlike Miss Pinkham, and she looked sexually available. She was emblematic of the Modern Girl, a girl in charge of her sexuality. The vibrator was thus commonly coded as a feminine, youthful appliance. There certainly were some men and older women in vibrator ads, but when companies featured only one image it was almost always of a young woman.⁷⁴

The vibrator represented more than just a sexual device, however. Carolyn de la Peña has argued that electrical products in general symbolized industrial progress in medicine, a meaning reflected in vibrator ads.⁷⁵ At the same time, electrotherapeutic devices could intimidate potential customers because they were one of the first mainstream consumer electrical products designed to be applied directly to the body. Carolyn Marvin shows that electrical technologies created considerable unease when first introduced. Many were afraid of electricity because fatal electrical accidents were common at the end of the nineteenth century; electric chairs were also being introduced at this time, demonstrating the power of electricity to kill people.⁷⁶ Electrical fears were exacerbated when electrical currents were applied directly to the body—for example, with products like the men's electric belt, a battery-powered low-current device that was worn around the waist and created a "tingling sensation."⁷⁷ Belts usually contained a pouch for a man's testicles and were marketed as cures for impotence, "nervous disability," and general weakness.⁷⁸ Electric belt companies addressed "electric fears" in their advertisements by "portraying electricity as dominated by the physical body."⁷⁹ Vibrator companies had to assuage

73. Fox, *Mirror Makers*, 17–19, 24.

74. Eighty-five percent of advertisements featuring illustrations of only one gender using a vibrator chose to use illustrations of young women only (*New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *LA Times*) (34 ads featured one gender/29 were of young women only).

75. De la Peña, *The Body Electric*, 110–112. Not all vibrators during this time were electrical. Some, like the Veedee Vibrator, were hand-cranked.

76. De la Peña, *The Body Electric*, 113.

77. *Ibid.*, 111.

78. Sears Roebuck and Company, "Giant Power Heidelberg Electric Belt," Sears Roebuck Catalogue No. III (Sears and Roebuck Company: Chicago, 1902), 476.

79. De la Peña, *The Body Electric*, 112–114; Marvin, *Old Technologies*, Chapter 2.



LINDSTROM, SMITH COMPANY, CHICAGO

ADVERTISING



This attractive cut-out of the White Cross Electric Vibrator Girl is lithographed in ten attractive colors. The size is 22 by 28. Is furnished with easel so that it may be placed in show window.

Figure 1 Advertising Card for Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound (1888). Source: From Helen Cushman Trade Card Collection. Wilmington, DE, Hagley Museum and Library. Lindstrom Smith Co., "Health and Beauty," 1916, Box 243, File Lindstrom Smith. Historical Health Fraud Collection, Courtesy American Medical Association Archives.

similar fears, domesticating the device while simultaneously alluding to sexual uses.

Vibrator companies addressed these complex and conflicting goals by relying on the fact that vibrators were dual-use devices, with both sexual and nonsexual uses. Vibrator companies in effect relied on nonsexual uses to align their industry with two major trends of the time: the small electric appliance and electrotherapeutics. Forty-two percent of ads relied on a small home appliance approach, whereas 36 percent used the electrotherapeutic approach, and 22 percent used a combination of both approaches.⁸⁰ Vibrator companies positioned their devices as electrotherapeutic or household appliances, not just because of the Comstock Act, but because this strategy allowed them to incorporate potential sex toys into pre-established consumer goods categories.

The bifurcation of vibrator advertisements into two types of appeals—domestic appliance and electrotherapeutic—mirrored the shifting gender norms of the time. Women were still expected to hew to a domestic ideal of motherhood and wifeness, a gender norm depicted when vibrators were sold as domestic appliances. However, a number of women were rebelling against this norm and reveling in singlehood, independence, and expressions of their sexuality; these “new women” were featured in ads when vibrators were sold as medical devices. Similarly, medical vibrator ads reflected changes in male gender roles, featuring the “self-made” athletic man who spent time actively shaping his body.

The Vibrator as Household Appliance

When the vibrator was sold as a nonmedical household appliance, women were not the only target market. Companies marketed vibrators to nearly every member of the family: as a home appliance for the housewife, a Christmas gift for grandfathers, and a beauty device for sisters and daughters.⁸¹ In short, companies aimed their vibrators at a wide swath of the population, probably in the hopes of selling to as many potential customers as possible. The most common theme in

80. These numbers exclude ads that used no marketing approach, or sold their devices as barbershop vibrators. More on the methodology is available in the appendix.

81. For ads promoting vibrators as Christmas gifts for grandfathers, see Marshall Field and Company ad, *Chicago Tribune*, December 12, 1923, 9. For ads promoting vibrators for beauty purposes to girls and young women, see White Cross Vibrator Ad, *Chicago Tribune*, March 21, 1911. For home appliance ads, see discussion later in this section.

ads, however, was the vibrator as an appliance for housewives, a trope that desexualized the technology.⁸²

This marketing to housewives is not surprising, as vibrators used the same small “universal” electric motors as other common household appliances, including blenders, hair dryers, and vacuums, which were already branded as “female” technologies that could assist the housewife in her chores. The universal motor was able to run on both alternating and direct current, so companies did not have to produce separate versions of their products for the type of current supplied by the electric utility.⁸³ AC eventually won out, but in the early 1900s many households were still supplied by DC systems.⁸⁴ When companies sold vibrators containing these universal motors, they simply added the vibrator to newspaper advertisements for their other household appliances, attributing to it the same labor-saving claims that they used to sell vacuums.

As Trevor Pinch and Wiebe Bijker argued some time ago in their analysis of the social construction of technology, technologies have varying meanings for different social groups. These meanings are related in part to how the artifact solves a problem.⁸⁵ For small-motor companies, the vibrator was just another market for their electrical technology, and the easiest and cheapest way to sell vibrators was to fit them into existing marketing strategies for other appliances. Thus, small-motor companies had an incentive to position the vibrator as a labor-saving appliance, not as a sexualized device. The only problem was that vibrators did not save any labor—or at least any labor that could be mentioned in a family newspaper. Housewives were not complaining of massage-induced hand injuries or spending hours massaging themselves or their husbands. Instead of saving domestic labor, marketers were trying to convey the idea that vibrators gave women pleasure, without specifying what type of pleasure it was. They conveyed this message both visually and through language. For example, a Hamilton Beach promotional pamphlet featured the headline “Why Miss the Super-Pleasures of Life?” below a drawing of a sexy woman in red ink.⁸⁶ Advertisements also commonly depicted female vibrator users with broad or suggestive smiles on their faces (Fig. 1), and ad copy suggested that a vibrator “thrills your whole body” (Fig. 2).

82. The housewife trope was the most common one in ads from 1900 to 1930 in the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *LA Times*.

83. Kimpball, “Small Electric Motor.” “Good things Come in Small Packages: Racine’s Small Motor Industry,” Pamphlet from the Racine Heritage Museum, obtained in March 2010. “Hamilton-Beach Company (Racine, Wisconsin),” circa late 20th century, Racine Heritage Museum Archives, Box 338, File 250.

84. Hughes, *Networks of Power*, Chapter 5.

85. Pinch and Bijker, “The Social Construction of Facts and Artefacts,” 399–341.

86. Hamilton Beach Type C Vibrator Promotional Booklet, circa 1920.

VIBRATION ROUTS DISEASE

Health for Women - - Health for Men

THE WONDERFUL
White Cross Electric Vibrator
 BRINGS YOU
Health, Beauty and Happiness

**Life and Vigor—Strength and Joy
 Disease and Weakness Banished**

**Scientists have found that your very life
 itself depends upon vibration—that vibration
 is the source of all life. This wonderful electrical
 instrument vibrates your whole system; your
 muscles, nerves, blood vessels; dispelling disease
 and all matters which clog your vitals and
 prevent good health and strength.
 It sends the red blood surging through your**



Figure 2 White Cross Vibrator Ad. Source: *Health* 31 December 1908, 258.

By pairing the vibrator with other home appliances in advertisements, companies aligned them with chaste housewives. More advertisements featured the home-appliance approach than the electrotherapeutic one, probably because, in addition to desexualizing the vibrator, it also added little to companies' advertising costs.

Vibrators were a part of the general trend of introducing new technology in the home during the Progressive Era. They were a response to the “servant problem,” a phrase referring to the increasingly scarce, unreliable servants who preferred factory work to domestic labor. In contrast to human servants, appliances were marketed as always dependable “electrical servants.”⁸⁷ However, because household chores had been the province of low-class, low-paid workers, the introduction of electrical appliances shifted the meaning of housework from a demeaning task to a job respectable enough for the lady of the house.⁸⁸ Appliance companies changed the meaning of housework through ads that “treated household tasks as expressions of emotion.” For example, women who used electrical appliances were portrayed in ads as good mothers and wives because such appliances saved time on household tasks—time that could then be given to their children and husbands.⁸⁹ The introduction of the electric range and other small household appliances into the home paved the way for electric health devices like the vibrator. Consumers, already used to small appliances, could more easily be persuaded to add another to their collection.

87. There were one million servants in 1870—or “one for every seven or eight households”—increasing in number to 1.7 million in 1920—but not proportionally to the increase in number of households. There was one servant “for every fourteen or fifteen households” in 1920, according to Cowan, *Social History of American Technology*, 193.

88. Cowan, *More Work For Mother*, 174.

89. Strasser, *Never Done*, 78; see also, Day, “Capitol-Labor Substitution,” 307.

Manufacturers were not the only social group defining vibrators as necessary home appliances. Electric companies and electric shops pursued a similar strategy in their quest to domesticate electricity and promote its use in the home. Electric utilities sought to increase home electricity consumption by convincing housewives to buy small electrical appliances, in part by hiring home economists to go door to door extolling the virtues of hair dryers and electric stoves.⁹⁰ They also made attempts to sell vibrators as home devices for men, promoting them as “Practical Gifts for Men” and “Gifts for Husband and Son.”⁹¹

Another strategy was to create electrical shops that featured shiny, beautiful appliances as symbols of modernity. Some of these shops displayed vibrators, including utility magnate Samuel Insull’s showroom. Electric companies or electric shops ran 29 percent of the newspaper ads for vibrators. Vibrators did not represent sexuality to electric companies; they represented the electricity customer. Electric companies featured vibrators in their pamphlets as just another application of electricity that benefited the housewife or husband.⁹²

One artifact from the era exemplifies this small-appliance trope: the Duntley Vacuum Cleaner that also doubled as a vibrator. A 1910 ad in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* trumpets the multiple uses of the Duntley vacuum cleaner, including its use as vibrator. The vacuum cleaner was the epitome of the household appliance.⁹³ Vacuum cleaners were the top-selling domestic appliance in the first few decades of the twentieth century. They were marketed as technologies that reinforced traditional family structures and values, sold as devices that could help mothers protect their children from germs.⁹⁴ By 1926, 80 percent of upper class households in major U.S. cities had a vacuum cleaner.⁹⁵ That a vacuum cleaner came with a vibrator attachment shows how fully the vibrator was viewed as a domestic device.⁹⁶

Because small-electric motor companies were so successful at branding vibrators as desexualized, quotidian tools, electric companies could safely promote vibrators in their ads without appearing as if they were promoting a sexual tool. Electric companies used vibrators as a rhetorical device to depict the labor-saving properties of their other appliances.

90. Goldstein, “From Service to Sales.”

91. Electric Shop ad, *Chicago Tribune*, December 21, 1910, 7. See also Thompson and Ross Company ad, *Chicago Tribune*, June 16, 1927, 22.

92. Twenty-nine percent of the ads from 1900 to 1930 in *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *The L.A. Times*. See appendix.

93. It also had a “lint nozzle ... curry comb and brush for cleaning horses ... and disinfectant for fumigating purposes.”

94. Strasser, *Never Done*, 78–80.

95. Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother*, 173.

96. “Marshall Field and Company. Duntley Vacuum Cleaners Have a Wide Field of Usefulness,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 5, 1910, 20.

A 1925 New York Edison ad in *The New York Times* illustrates how seamlessly electric companies incorporated vibrators into their strategy of increasing electricity consumption to balance the load. The ad is a paean to “electrical housekeeping,” with a happy housewife shown going about her womanly duties with aplomb while using all manner of electrical appliances. Although the ad copy says that “little servants of the home” will bring women “more leisure,” many of the images show women hard at work: ironing, washing clothes, and cooking.

Depicting the labor saved from using electrical appliances was difficult. For example, even though electric irons supposedly sped up clothes pressing, the illustration simply showed a woman ironing the same way that she would have with a non-electric iron. The picture did not make ironing seem faster or more enjoyable. However, by placing the picture next to an illustration of a young woman in a nightdress, massaging her cheek with a vibrator in her boudoir, the vibrator served a rhetorical purpose, implying that the time saved ironing allowed the “electrical housewife” to relax.⁹⁷ Unlike the laboriousness of cleaning, for which machinery would provide a welcome respite, self-massage carried no such similar burdens. However, the cloak of domesticity shielded vibrators from vice inquisitors. This ad strove to drive women into New York Edison showrooms to see vibrators and other domestic appliances, while other Edison ads encouraged men and women to install more electrical outlets in their homes to power vibrators and other small electrical devices.⁹⁸

Similar ads appeared in major mail-order catalogs. A Sears ad described the vibrator as an “Aid That Every Woman Appreciates,” simply an adjunct to the home motor. Underneath the title of the ad, a demurely clad housewife in an ankle-length dress mends clothing with a Sears home motor. Various motor attachments are shown: beater, mixer, buffer, fan, and vibrator. The vibrator was priced like the other appliances; both the vibrator and the household mixer sold for \$5.95.⁹⁹

97. “More Leisure in Electrical Housekeeping,” The New York Edison Company advertisement in *The New York Times*, May 25, 1925, 9.

98. “Additional Electrical Outlets,” The New York Edison Company advertisement in *The New York Times*, March 13, 1917, 4.

99. Sears Roebuck and Company, “Aids that Every Woman Appreciates,” *Electrical Goods: Everything Electrical for Home, Office, Factory and Shop* (Sears and Roebuck Company: Chicago, c. 1918); Sears Roebuck and Company, *Electrical Goods: Everything Electrical for Home, Office, Factory and Shop* (Sears Roebuck and Company, Chicago, c. 1918), 4 in Bakken-Trade. “Hamilton Beach Electric Labor Savers” ad from *United Commercial Travelers 1920 Convention Souvenir Book* (Racine, 1920), Ref. #183.02—Racine County history, 250H. Racine Heritage Museum Archives. Racine, Wisconsin.

Although the home appliance advertisements for vibrators desexualized them, the design of vibrator attachments, along with and details in consumer manuals on inserting vibrator attachments into the rectum, conveyed the sexual uses of vibrators. Therefore, companies marketing vibrators as home appliances were able to maintain a sense of propriety, and consumers could learn about the sexual uses after they purchased the vibrator and read the manual.

The Vibrator as Medical Appliance

When companies marketed vibrators as small home appliances, their sexuality was muted. The goal was to disguise the vibrator as another innocuous device, not highlight its sensuality. When companies sold vibrators as medical appliances, however, sexual uses could be hinted at so long as they were given a sheen of medical legitimacy. That is where the dual uses of the vibrator became especially important. A single-use sex toy like the dildo was difficult to disguise as a medical device. Vibrator companies, however, could claim, without being wildly dishonest, that their consumers were purchasing sex toys to treat sciatica. When vibrators were sold for male sexual disorders, vibrator companies' promotional books could be quite explicit, given the sexual double standard of the time. For example, Hamilton Beach marketed its vibrators with *Health and How to Get It*, which was promoted in ads as a "Free Book ... which illustrates with actual life photographs, just what this wonderful vibrator will do."¹⁰⁰ This book featured detailed instructions on treating impotence: "Using the special rectal applicator, give a rectal treatment of five minutes. With the brush applicator treat the genitals, and give prolonged vibration to the perineum, the space just in front of the anus."¹⁰¹

When companies sold vibrators as medical devices, they tried to sell them to every possible target market for nearly every possible use. They positioned them as panaceas that could cure both sexual and nonsexual ailments in men, women, and children.¹⁰² For example,

100. Hamilton Beach New-Life Vibrator ad, *Hearst's Magazine*, November 1913, 18.

101. Bryson, *Health*, 209.

102. For ads featuring young men and boys using vibrators, see Southern California Edison Company, *Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 1928, A6; Commonwealth Edison Company ad, *Chicago Tribune*, May 26, 1915. For ads featuring middle-aged men using vibrators, see the Sun Drugstore promotion for the Polar Cub Vibrator, *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 1920, 19. For ads promoting vibrators for girls and young women, see Star Vibrator ad, *Chicago Tribune*, December 24, 1924, 7; Chicago Electric Company ad, *Chicago Tribune*, March 12, 1907, 6. For ads featuring both genders, see the Lindstrom Smith Companies White Cross Electric Vibrator ads, *Chicago Tribune*, November 14, 1915, January 9, 1916. For ads featuring a baby using a vibrator see, Lindstrom Smith Companies White Cross Electric Vibrator ad, *Chicago Tribune*, September 10, 1911.

a Hamilton Beach New-Life Vibrator ad listed 56 ailments that the vibrator cured, including impotence, obesity, floating kidney, enlarged prostate, fissure in rectum, and spinal curvature.¹⁰³

The vibrator could be sold as a cure for such a wide variety of ailments because it emerged from the electrotherapeutic device industry, and could easily be linked to pseudomedical goods such as electric batteries, violet rays, and other electrified health goods. Vibrator companies co-opted themes from the electrotherapeutic industry, which traded on the magical and miraculous mystique that electricity had in culture. As Nye explains, “Electricity ... was a mysterious power Americans had long connected to magnetism, the nervous system, heat, power, lightning, sex, health, and light.”¹⁰⁴ Electricity had so much cachet that it was used to sell products such as patent medicines (“electric bitters”) and non-electrified household goods (“electric hair-brushes”).¹⁰⁵ Vibrator companies positioned their devices as appliances that harnessed the power of electricity, bringing the vital forces directly to consumers. They tied the vibrator to widespread medical claims that electricity could provide the body with positive energy that would “push out disease and death,” while “driving power directly into the nerves and muscles, leaving the body with more reserve force as a result.”¹⁰⁶

Electrotherapeutic vibrator ads targeted men more often than the appliance ads did because domestic appliances were coded as feminine, so they were more difficult to masculinize. In contrast, an electrotherapeutic vibrator ad declared that “a single treatment will make you feel like a man.”¹⁰⁷ The vibrator-as-health-aid approach catered to men’s anxieties at the turn of the twentieth century. This was a period of crisis for masculinity, as men moved from farm work to factory work, losing autonomy in the process. Factory work was considered emasculating because it required less skill than the artisanal work most men were used to, and in factories men were no longer their own bosses and now became beholden to the whims of others.¹⁰⁸ Sedentary office work had also made men less virile, the thinking went. Therefore, men felt they had to prove their masculinity outside work, and they did so through shaping their bodies. As sociologist Michael Kimmel notes, “the ideal of the Self-Made Man gradually assumed

103. Hamilton Beach New-Life Vibrator ad, *Idaho Daily Statesman*, September 21, 1913, 10.

104. Nye, *Electrifying America*, x.

105. They ran ads with claims such as this: “Vibratory massage acts like magic. It wakes up every cell in your body,” Arnold vibrator ad from the *New York Tribune*, 14 October 1913, sec. A.

106. De la Peña, *The Body Electric*. 9.

107. Hamilton Beach Vibrator Ad, *Manitoba Free Press*, February 18, 1913, 13.

108. Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 57–59.

increasingly physical connotations so that by the 1870s the idea of ‘inner strength’ was replaced by a doctrine of physicality and the body.”¹⁰⁹

This focus on shaping the body to masculine ideals can be seen in many vibrator ads and pamphlets. The Arnold Vibrator Company, in particular, was the most aggressive in targeting its vibrators to men, trading on male body insecurities in its catalogs. “We don’t think the man lives who would not like to feel as big and strong as Sandow, and we know that if you have a reasonable foundation to build upon we can make you a bigger man than you ever hoped to be,” said a 1909 catalog.¹¹⁰ Similarly, a 1913 Arnold ad featured a shirtless young man flexing his biceps while holding up a vibrator to them. The ad copy assured potential buyers that vibrators will make them “strong, vigorous and glowing with vitality.”¹¹¹ Many male-directed ads for vibrators featured men with exposed arms: either shirtless or in tank tops.¹¹² These ads presented vibrators as devices that improved the appearance of men’s bodies by building muscle, curing impotence, or both.

Sexual claims in male-targeted ads were more common than in ads for women, probably because male sexuality was arguably more socially acceptable in the early 1900s than female sexuality. According to E. Anthony Rotundo, the late 1800s was an era of passionate manhood, where man’s “‘animal instincts’ in sexual matters” were celebrated and strong male sex drives seen as markers of virility and manliness.¹¹³

This cultural context made it possible for companies to sell vibrators as impotence cures even though companies never openly marketed vibrators as cures for female anorgasmia. One example is the Health Appliance Company’s Electric-Biochemic and Hermenic Vibrator Cure, which the company marketed as “A Cure for Weak Men.” This phrase was a euphemism for impotence, which was an appropriate phrase for a time when masculinity “had to be constantly demonstrated” because its “attainment was forever in question,” according to Kimmel.¹¹⁴ This vacuum and vibration device looked very similar to the twenty-first-century “penis pump.” With its cylindrical shape, perfectly sized for housing a penis, this device appeared to have one use only. The Health Appliance Co. tried to stave off legal action by providing a list of possible nonsexual uses for its device, claiming that it “restored

109. *Ibid.*, 82.

110. Standard Electric Works Catalog, 1909, 50.

111. Arnold Vibrator Ad, *Health* 63, v.12, December 1913, 259.

112. See Edison Commonwealth Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 26, 1915, 9; White Cross Vibrator Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 10, 1911, K20; White Cross Vibrator Ad, *McClure’s Magazine*, February 1913, vol. XL, no. 4, 171.

113. Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 231.

114. Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 81.

circulation and stimulated the action of the stomach, liver, heart, kidneys and bowels,” cured “female diseases,” and removed wrinkles.¹¹⁵ The primary use, though, was as an impotence cure.¹¹⁶ Efforts to rebrand the vacuum device as a chaste health apparatus failed, however, and the Assistant Attorney General for the Post Office Department issued a fraud order on August 30, 1904.¹¹⁷

Some companies marketed their vibrators as both single-use and dual-use devices. The comparison of both of their types of ads can show how such strategies were employed. The Hygeia Vibratory Co. boldly advertised its vibrating belt with phallic attachment as a “Sexual Vibrator for Men and Women” in a December 1903 edition of *Health* magazine but called a similar device a “vibratory appliance” in a 1902 *Chicago Daily Tribune* ad.¹¹⁸ In the *Health* magazine ad, Hygeia featured an illustration of the phallic device, with claims that the device would restore “nerve tone” and increase “vital power.”¹¹⁹ It is unclear why Hygeia took the risk to run an openly sexual ad in *Health*; perhaps it thought that the magazine’s focus on “physiology, pathology, hydropathy, and physical, moral, and intellectual development” shielded it from vice inquisitors’ eyes.¹²⁰ Hygeia’s 1902 ad in the *Chicago Tribune* was less explicitly sexual, though. Instead of marketing its “Style ‘C’ Vibrator,” it promoted its “Style ‘A’” vibrator, which did not have a phallic shape. Sexual themes also appeared in the *Tribune* ad, but they were relegated to the small print, which noted “the secretion of glands is increased.”¹²¹ Most of the ad was

115. Health Appliance Company Electric-Biochemic and Hermetic Vibrator Cure Ad. *Los Angeles Times*, September 15, 1902, 14. This ad ran six times in the *LA Times* from September 15 to 20, 1902.

116. McLaren, *Impotence*, Chapter 6, particularly 136.

117. “The Vacuum Appliance Company,” Memorandum from Assistant Attorney General for the Post Office Department, March 17, 1905, and “Vacuum Medical Company,” Memorandum from Assistant Attorney General, September 23, 1905, Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1789–2011, Office of Post and Office of Solicitor, RG 28, Box 27, FOCP, National Archives. See also letter from Robert A. Holz to E. Foote, July 1, 1911. Ralph Ginzburg Collection, Box 3, Folder 13, Wisconsin Historical Society.

118. Hygeia Vibratory Co. ad, *Health* magazine, December 31, 1903. Granted, the belt was a different device than the electromechanical vibrators sold by other companies, but Hygeia was using the term “vibrator” to describe it.

119. *Health* was a somewhat controversial consumer health periodical formally known as the *Water-Cure Journal*. It then changed its name to *Herald of Health* in 1893 and finally *Health* in 1900, a name it kept until its demise in 1910. Mott, *History of American Magazines*, 316.

120. Mott, *History of American Magazines*, 441.

121. In other ads for their sexual vibrators, Hygeia used the phrase “secretion of the glands is increased.” See ad in *Suggestion*, Vol. 10, 1903, 284. The full phrase used was usually “organs of secretion and excretion” and also covered the anus; see “Mental Activity Physical Activity,” Hygeia Vibratory Appliance Advertisement. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 6, 1902, 14.

filled with claims that the Hygeia treated diseases such as paralysis, rheumatism and neurasthenia, claims left out of the explicitly sexual *Health* ad. By including such claims, Hygeia disguised its vibrator as primarily a nonsexual medical device, obscuring its sexual uses.

Hygeia's ad copy was nearly identical to that of other companies that sold vibrators as cure-alls. Hygeia's ads show that vague health claims for vibrators were often veiled sexual assertions. For example, Hygeia's ad copy is strikingly similar to that of the Better Health Vibrator. According to the Hygeia ad, "Waves of health are sent speeding through the system ... the blood courses more swiftly through the veins," whereas the Better Health Vibrator similarly promised to "send the blood tingling and surging thru your veins—know the joys of health."¹²²

No other company was as explicit as Hygeia. Instead, the main strategy vibrator companies used to convey the sexual uses of their devices was to combine erotic imagery with sexualized language. Of the ads featuring illustrations, nearly half of them had sexual themes, including sexy women or instructions for users to vibrate their breasts.¹²³ The sexualized ads nearly always featured the Modern Girl, a girl who "no matter where she appears ... is associated with dating, romantic love, and premarital sex."¹²⁴ One example is a 1908 ad for the White Cross vibrator (Fig. 2). A woman is shown reclining in bed, presumably nude under the blanket, implying sexual availability. She, like other Modern Girls, is depicted as "self-aware of her allure and capable of using it to her advantage."¹²⁵ A heading "Health for Men" appears above the drawing. Juxtaposed with the image of a naked woman lying in bed, the meaning is clear. Vibrator ads could not show the young woman masturbating or seducing a man, but they could imply both.¹²⁶

Unlike in the household vibrator ads, in which women are shown in traditionally domestic roles, the medical vibrator ads featured the Modern Girl "self-possessed" and focused on improving the look of her own body.¹²⁷ The vibrator was a part of the beauty culture that was arising in the 1910s and 1920s, as it had become socially acceptable for women to enhance their beauty through commercial products like makeup, products that had previously been the province only of prostitutes.¹²⁸ Like other commercial products of the beauty culture, vibrators were marketed as devices that could transform

122. Better Health Vibrator Co. ad, *The Independent*, March 23, 1914, 426.

123. The data come from ads running from 1900 to 1930 in *CDT*, *NYT*, and *LAT* that contained illustrations of people (62 out of 521 ads total).

124. Weinbaum, et al., *The Modern Girl*, 35.

125. *Ibid.*

126. White Cross Vibrator ad, *Health*, December 31, 1908, 258.

127. Weinbaum, et al., *The Modern Girl*, 36.

128. Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 4.

and sexualize women's bodies, making them more appealing to men. In fact, vibrator companies touted their devices as superior to cosmetics and other commercial beauty products. "Every woman can have a faultless complexion and youthful, finely proportioned figure," said a 1908 Arnold Vibrator ad, which advocated using vibrators to "develop the bust," among other body parts. "There is no further need of powder, paint, pads, or other deceptions."¹²⁹

Another Arnold ad from a 1909 edition of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* suggested that a respectable woman could use vibrators to increase the size of her breasts because "to be beautiful and symmetrically molded ... is the reasonable and attainable ambition of every woman." This ad featured a drawing of a busty woman in a low-cut dress next to the headline, "Is Your Body Poorly Developed?" The copy makes no overt claims that vibrators will increase breast size, but it implies the vibrator will do so by making the claim that the vibrator would develop "your body as beautifully as nature intended."¹³⁰ Sometimes companies went further and suggested using vibrators to massage breasts.

Many of these ads argued that vibrators were a way to shape the body more efficiently than exercise. For example, a Hamilton Beach ad said, "The society woman has not always time for gymnasium work. ... 'Try New-Life' is the only thing that will take the place of hours of physical exercise ... rounding out the thin places and removing as by magic the superlative tissue of the stout." One of the places that needed the most "rounding out" was the breasts, the ad claimed. "For the bust, which should be full and rounded and vigorous looking, but is inclined to be lank and flabby, nothing equals 'Try New-Life,' which is really massage applied by the latest scientific principles."¹³¹ Similarly, Lindstrom Smith marketed its Red Cross Vibrators as devices that could give women "a perfect figure," which they wrote, "was the crowning glory of woman's beauty." What did they mean by a perfect figure? One key component was "a permanent, perfect bust."¹³²

Advertisers were not always so overt in their claims of vibrators enhancing women's sexual charms, though, probably because the sexualization of women through consumer products remained somewhat controversial. As Kathy Peiss argues, in the early twentieth

129. Arnold Vibrator Ad, *The New York Times*, June 2, 1908, 5.

130. Arnold Vibrator Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 28, 1909, B9. This woman showed up in many of the Arnold company's advertisements. See *CDT*, 9 May 1909, 7.

131. Hamilton Beach Ad, May 4, 1913, *Salt Lake City Tribune*, 5. This is one of many, many similar ads. Another *Chicago Tribune* Arnold ad instructed women to massage their busts with the vibrator (May 16, 1909). Seven *Los Angeles Times* ads and 3 *New York Times* vibrator ads from 1900 to 1930 featured similar bust-development claims, as did ads in *Health* magazine; see Monarch ad, *Health*, December 31, 1908, 50.

132. Red Cross Vibrator Ad, *Health*, December 1907.

century the use of beauty products like makeup was “no longer the mark of the prostitute,” yet “too much makeup still implied female coarseness, promiscuity, and low social standing.”¹³³

Vibrator companies dealt with this dilemma by frequently pairing sexualized images with desexualized text, a way of communicating sexuality visually. For example, in a 1908 ad, the highly sexual image of a partially exposed, supine woman lying under a bedsheet was accompanied by medical claims; its most suggestive language stated that “It strengthens your nerves and thrills your whole body” (Fig. 2).¹³⁴ When the language was more sexually suggestive, however, the images were less so. For example, a White Cross ad simply featuring a pretty young woman coyly smiling while vibrating her face had more suggestive language. “*All the keen relish, the pleasures of youth, fairly throb within you,*” said the ad, next to “Every organ is put in *perfect working order*” (emphasis in original).¹³⁵ The sexual innuendo helped convey potential sexual uses of the device, while also being not so overt as to attract Comstock. For men, even more explicitly sexual information was available. One example is found in White Cross’s *Health and Beauty* pamphlet, a pamphlet that it promoted in its ads.¹³⁶ White Cross quoted advice from Dr. Arnold Snow on how to use its phallic attachments:

Sexual neurasthenia, impotence, and prostatitis may also be treated by vibration either alone or in connection with electricity. For the treatment of which employ the rectal vibratode for five minutes or so, using the minimum stroke and a fairly rapid speed, taking care that the treatment be not too prolonged.¹³⁷

Another technique advertisers used to sexualize the vibrator while avoiding censorship was to eroticize chaste diseases by advocating sexual treatments for all manner of common ailments. This strategy allowed them to convey more erotic details while still maintaining the façade that a vibrator was a legitimate medical device. Necessity caused this flourishing of multiple, and sometimes bizarre, sexual discourses in their advertising. Asthma, backache, baldness, fatigue, indigestion, and obesity were all transformed from ordinary diseases into sexual problems to communicate the vibrator’s sexual uses to potential customers. Draconian anti-obscenity laws motivated early twentieth-century vibrator companies to imbue nonsexual diseases with sexual power.

133. Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 152.

134. White Cross Vibrator Ad, *Health*, December 31, 1908.

135. White Cross Vibrator Ad, *Health*, September 1912, 210. Italics in original.

136. Lindstrom Smith Company, *Health and Beauty* (Chicago: Lindstrom Smith, 1911). Health Fraud-AMA Box 243, File: Lindstrom Smith.

137. *Health & Beauty*, 8. January 12, 1911, Health Fraud-AMA, Box 243, File Lindstrom Smith.

A 1912 Hamilton Beach ad illustrates how companies deployed this strategy visually. In addition to its image of a sexy woman curing her indigestion (Fig. 5), the ad also featured a drawing of another young woman in lingerie cinched at her tiny waist. She is grasping a vibrator in one hand, while holding its plug with the other, tracing a phallic shape with cord and device. Pressing the vibrator up to her throat, she tilts her head and gives a sideways glance to the reader, daring him or her to experience this exquisite pleasure, as the text underneath her read “Healing a Sore Throat.” Thus a nonsexual disease was sexualized through imagery.¹³⁸ Another Hamilton Beach ad, this one from 1914, featured the headline, “Rheumatism: the Most Painful of Diseases, Yields to ‘Try New Life.’” But the images featured two young women who clearly are not suffering from arthritis, and only one older woman. The young women are highly sexualized, one with her legs spread and the other in a low-cut dress.¹³⁹

This language was never fully erotic, not just because of anti-obscenity laws. As Foucault noted about the Victorian era, even as sexual discourses permeated culture, “there was an expurgation ... of the authorized vocabulary” of sex.¹⁴⁰ This expurgation of direct language helps explain why euphemisms abounded in vibrator ads, with appeals to health and beauty displacing claims of sexual pleasure.

Marketers also attempted to convey the sexual uses of vibrators in the brochures and books that the newspaper ads implored customers to send for. These books almost always featured illustrations and discussions of penis-shaped insertable attachments. Rectal and vaginal attachments were produced for nearly all of the turn-of-the-century vibrators, in both physician and consumer models.¹⁴¹ One of the most popular physician vibrator models, the Shelton, had a carrying case designed to fit its multiple phallic attachments (see close-up of Shelton phallic attachment, Fig. 3).

Vibrator companies sometimes illustrated their phallic attachments in newspaper and magazine ads, but they only described their use

138. Hamilton Beach’s New Life Vibrator Ad, November 26, 1912, *The Des Moines News*.

139. Hamilton Beach New Life Vibrator Ad; May 4, 1913, *Salt Lake Tribune*, 3.

140. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 17.

141. Many of the companies that offered free or cheap booklets via mail order include the following: Arnold Vibrator Co. featured a *Health and Beauty* book; see ad in *Chicago Daily Tribune* May 9, 1909, 7. Hamilton Beach offered a book for the New-Life Vibrator called *Health and How to Get It*; see *The Evening Standard* (Ogden, Utah), August 24, 1913, 16. White Cross Produced a *Health and Beauty* book, featured in many ads. See December 31, 1908 ad, “Vibration Routs Disease,” in *Health*, 258. Better Health Vibrator offered a free booklet. See *The Independent*, March 23, 1914, 426. Eureka Vibrator offered a free “Health and Beauty” booklet, too. See *Health* magazine, April 1909, 200. This fact undermines Maines’ central argument that vibrators achieved social camouflage because they weren’t penetrative.



Figure 3 Attachment from Shelton Vibrator Outfit No. 7 ca. 1906-1917; Manufactured in Chicago, IL. Courtesy of Science Museum, London, England. A659643.

in books. The Lindstrom Smith company, makers of the White Cross vibrator, frequently showed a phallic attachment in its *Popular Mechanics* ads (Fig. 4), which also ran in *The Chicago Tribune*. Both a rectal dilator attachment (left middle) and a soft rubber vaginal applicator (upper right) are shown. Lindstrom Smith ran ads with a phallic attachment in more than a third of the issues of *Popular Mechanics* from 1909 to 1916. Phallic attachments often stood out in the ads because they were usually larger than the other pictured attachments. The rectal and vaginal attachments were visible but not acknowledged in the text.¹⁴² Lindstrom Smith's catalog also included an image of the White Cross girl using a bust-enhancing cup with a suggestive look

142. White Cross Electric Vibrator ad, *Popular Mechanics*, December 1913, Advertising Section, 171. Ads featuring images of the phallic attachments showed up 38 times in *Popular Mechanics* from 1909 to 1916. Feb–May and July 1909; March–April and Nov–De 1910; Jan–April and Oct–Dec 1911; March 1912; Jan–Feb, April–June, and Oct–Dec 1913; Jan–April, Sept, Oct 1914; Jan–May, Sept, Oct, Dec 1915; Jan, March, and April 1916; March, April, Sep–Dec 1917. *The Chicago Tribune Ads* were run four times from 1911 to 1916. Hamilton Beach, “New Life Catalog,” circa 1915, 15; Hamilton Beach Price List, 1926, 3.



The great White Cross Electric Vibrator and its attachments.

Figure 4 Lindstrom Smith Co., White Cross Vibrator Advertisement. Source: *Popular Mechanics*, Advertising Section Jan. 1914, 125.

on her face and her left hand situated near her crotch. The pamphlet tempered its overt sexualization by arguing that the vibrator could enhance a woman's traditional gender roles. Using a "a Good Vibrator ... during the winter" allowed a "farmer's wife" and her daughter to "recuperate on her looks, coming out in the spring like the flowers do, fresh, sweet

INDIGESTION, HEADACHE,
ANY PAIN YIELD TO
Rheumatism
Gout,

**"Try-New-Life" Offices
Open Day and Evening**

For the convenience of those who cannot come down town to the city, the offices of the Hamilton-Beach Sales Company at 228 W. 4th St. in the Des Moines City Building, will be kept open until 9 o'clock every evening. You cannot get away from either, no long as there is a tremendous demand for this thing in the trading and you will be made welcome and shown what "Try-New-Life" can do for you. Phone Walnut 305.







Figure 5 Advertisement for Hamilton Beach's New Life Vibrator. Source: 26 November 1912, *The Des Moines News*.

and pretty, and ready and willing for another year's work for home, husband and children."¹⁴³

Even though Lindstrom Smith offered many sexual attachments for its vibrators, they usually did not come standard with the device. This was another way of concealing the sexual uses of vibrators.¹⁴⁴ By requiring consumers to send away for bust-enhancing cups, as well as rectal and vaginal attachments, companies were able to keep alive the myth that the vibrator was not primarily a sexual device, while making a lot of money in the process, as these were the most expensive attachments offered. Vibrator companies assumed that consumers would pay premiums for sexual attachments. For example, in 1916 Lindstrom Smith charged around 40 cents for its nonsexual attachments, yet the rectal attachment was \$1.25, the bust attachment \$1.50, and the vaginal attachment \$2.¹⁴⁵

Hamilton Beach also discussed penis-shaped attachments in its 300-page book for its New Life Vibrator, *Health and How to Get It*. For women, the hysteria chapter gave less detailed, but clearly sexual instructions: "Hysteria is related most intimately and peculiarly with the sexual organs of women. ... Naturally, then, the cure of hysteria presupposed the cure of whatever has caused it."¹⁴⁶ However, after being so forthright, Hamilton Beach backed off and suggested sufferers treat the spine, then move onto the "paralyzed and contorted muscles," reminding women that "the disease is sure to manifest itself in some part of the body more decidedly than elsewhere—treat the nerves and muscles of this part."¹⁴⁷

This two-step marketing process, ads followed by booklets, reflected the dual-use nature of the vibrator. This process allowed companies to have it both ways: they were able to portray vibrators as primarily nonsexual devices in their ads, while portraying vibrators as sexual devices in their booklets.

Vibrators and Sexual Pleasure

Although the sexual nature of the vibrator was rarely explicitly discussed, an occasional reference does show that its sexual use was hardly a secret. Physicians and moralists were worried about the

143. Lindstrom Smith, *Health and Beauty*, 80.

144. Recent studies have shown that women commonly insert vibrators into their vaginas. See Herbenick, et al., "Women's Vibrator Use." Of women surveyed, 73.4% had inserted vibrators in their vaginas for masturbation (Herbenick, 3311).

145. *Health and Beauty*, 60. See also, Illinois Electric Company, *Westinghouse Agent-Jobber Catalog*, No. 58, 492 in NMAH-Trade Literature Collection.

146. Bryson, *Health and How to Get it*, 209.

147. Bryson, *Health*, 204.

vibrator's ability to simulate masturbation, especially in men. A 1912 men's sexual advice book, *Himself: Talks With Men Concerning Himself*, warned of the dangers of vibrators: "Various electric vibrators have been abused by the unscrupulous ... to give men vibratory massage of the generative organs. ... The effect of this treatment is to give a sensation similar to that of masturbation."¹⁴⁸

Similarly, in 1906, a physician writing in a medical journal said that he encouraged his male patients to use vibrators to treat prostaticorrhea, "an excessive discharge of the liquor prostatica" resulting from sexual abstinence, especially in young men, because vibrators "promise better results than the form of masturbation known as 'stripping.'"¹⁴⁹ Another doctor noted "the not inconsiderable risk of starting masturbation" when using vibrators to treat enuresis, or involuntary urination.¹⁵⁰

And in 1938, another doctor, Edwin Hirsch, described his concerns about women using vibrators in his sex advice book, *The Power to Love*. "Vaginal-uterine masturbation is a practice supposedly confined to the women of Oriental countries, but, as I shall soon show, it is indulged in by women of the Occident as well." Western women also masturbate, except they use different tools, he said. "The substitute method used in this country, though it is employed under the guise of medical treatment, is the use of the vaginal vibrator or high-frequency electrode." Both of these devices came with similar attachments, which looked like "erect phalluses." Hirsch explicitly described the vibrator's camouflage as a medical device. "Ostensibly, the treatment is for erosion of the cervix, cervicitis, encervicitis, and what not, but the hidden purpose in innumerable cases is for the masturbatory action and the resulting voluptuous sensations."¹⁵¹ Hirsch's description of vibrator use shows that the vibrator's medical camouflage continued in spite of the fact that at least a few medical professionals understood its sexual use.

Conclusion

Because the vibrator was a dual-use device, both sexual and non-sexual, it was amorphous enough to allow companies to classify it with electrotherapeutic and small appliance technologies. This strategy permitted vibrator companies to plaster newspapers and

148. Lowry and Lambert, *Himself*, 67-68.

149. Williams, "Prostate Gland," 246-248.

150. Wachenheim, "Enuresis," 280.

151. Hirsch, *Power to Love*, 140.

magazines with large-format ads in an era when masturbation devices and ads for them were illegal. Vibrator and electric companies capitalized on shifting male gender norms and liberalizing female gender roles to position vibrators as devices that would aid the man who was insecure about his masculinity or the new woman who was becoming more sexually liberated.

Ironically, because vibrators were rarely sold openly as sexual devices in the first three decades of the 1900s, they did not spark as much public outrage as they have in the twenty-first century. Despite the apparent openness of twenty-first-century society to vibrators, in some ways they are more controversial today than they were in the early twentieth century. For example, in 2010, MTV refused to air an ad for the Trojan Vibrating Triphoria commercial unless the word “vibrator” was removed.¹⁵² Because sexualized vibrators spark controversy, vibrators continue to be sold in ways similar to those in which they were marketed in the early twentieth century: as health aids and back massagers. This strategy allows vibrator companies to distribute their products in family-friendly locations, like the shopping-mall chain Brookstone, without incident.¹⁵³ Conservative pundits lament the sexualization of the American media in the twenty-first century, but when it comes to sex toy advertisements, it seems we’re still Victorian.¹⁵⁴

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152. Newman, “Trojan Makes Concessions,” *New York Times*, Sept. 27, 2010.

153. Laura, “In the Drugstore Aisle.” For Hitachi, see <http://www.walmart.com/ip/Hitachi-HV250R-Magic-Wand-Massager/10910404>. For Lelo vibrators sold at Brookstone see the category “Lelo Personal Massagers” on Brookstone.com, http://www.brookstone.com/lelo-personal-massagers?catId=L3_LeloPersonal|L2_PersonalMassage|L1_Message&bkiid=redirect_lelo&requestid=223745.

154. See especially Herbenick and Reece, et al., “Women’s Vibrator Use in Sexual Partnerships.”

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