

Sexual stereotypes influence behavior in adult bookstores, study

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Visits to adult bookstores elicit behavior that ranges from macho swagger to skulking insecurity in men and bold confidence to adolescent giggling in women, a new University of Florida study finds.

The dividing line appears to be whether men and women go to the stores alone or in a group, with gaggles of women often tittering like bashful teenagers and men with girlfriends resorting to macho bragging and gay-bashing homophobia, said Dana Berkowitz, a UF sociology graduate student whose research is published in the October issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*.

“In the highly sexualized space of the adult novelty store, people present themselves in ways that both sustain and challenge society’s notions of masculinity and femininity,” she said. “If people can understand these performances of gender aren’t natural and can lead to such problems as violence against women, it might trigger the consciousness to change behavior.”

Lone women can be very assertive claiming what they want, while many single men are reduced to cringing embarrassment about their desires, she said.

Little research exists on how people present themselves in adult bookstores, said Berkowitz, noting that most studies look at how images of sex influence behavior or how these shops are linked to prostitution, drugs and gambling. “These findings are important because they help us

look at what it is about groups of men that encourages physical and verbal violence against women and, in even worse forms, against gay men,” she said. “We see it in fraternities, we see it in sports and we see it in the military. On the other hand, what is it about some women that make them uncomfortable with their sexuality?”

Berkowitz did her research at a Florida store that specializes in pornographic videos, magazines and novelty items and is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. For six months, she frequented the shop two to three times a week for about an hour each time to observe.

She found two kinds of men who shopped alone: One group entered the store only to purchase or rent pornographic videos, while the other would discreetly browse through the entire store for a prolonged time before making a purchase — if they made one at all.

“Interestingly, of all the men I observed purchasing or renting videos, not a single one appeared to be uncomfortable or anxious in this setting,” she said. “It was like they were walking into a pharmacy, picking up their medication and walking out.”

Unlike the “video voyeurs,” the other group of solo men appeared timid and uncomfortable, darting their eyes, hunching their backs and muffling their speech, Berkowitz said. They found creative ways to manage the shame associated with being patrons of pornography, often by feigning interest in more socially accepted products, she said.

One balding man who appeared to be in his late 40s, for example, walked up to the counter one night and asked the clerk for a large box of condoms before proceeding to inquire about various sexual enhancement lotions, considered somewhat more shameful, she said.

Unlike these men, women who shopped alone were not shy, Berkowitz

said.

“There was one older woman with gray shoulder-length hair wearing Birkenstocks who felt so comfortable with her sexuality that she waltzed straight into the shop and announced in a voice loud enough for the whole store to hear that her vibrator had broken in use,” she said.

In groups, women displayed such stereotypical feminine practices as giggling and blushing, while some resorted to badmouthing and condemning other women, Berkowitz said. Women are not socially conditioned to flaunt their sexuality, and under the gaze of other females, many felt pressure to distance themselves from certain images and items, she said.

Men who shopped with women tried to reaffirm their heterosexuality, acting according to culturally imposed ideals of ultra-masculine or homophobic behavior, Berkowitz said. Some would loudly describe their sexual exploits with other women, while others criticized the all-male pornography section, saying gays should have their own establishment, she said.

“People may act differently when alone because these shops are somewhat anonymous settings and patrons may feel they don’t need to act in expected ways,” Berkowitz said.

John DeLamater, a University of Wisconsin sociology professor, said Berkowitz’s research “provides a good example of the value of careful observation. People behave differently when they patronize adult stores as part of a group, and their behavior reflects that context, focusing on sexual activity and sexual orientation.”

Source: University of Florida

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