

# ‘You Do You’ Feminism: Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Women’s Perspectives on the Dildo

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**Abstract** Historically, feminists have engaged in a contentious debate about the dildo. Some assert that it is an oppressive tool of the patriarchy whereas others proclaim that it is a practical means of expressing lesbian, bisexual, and queer women’s sexuality. To gain some perspective into the current status of this debate, seven non-heterosexual women were interviewed about their attitudes toward dildos. Interviews were examined using inductive thematic analysis, and viewed through the lens of social constructionism. Rather than taking sides in the dildo debates, participants embraced a *you do you* ideology (i.e., there is no “right” or “wrong” answer when it comes to choosing whether to use or not use dildos). Three themes clustered around this overarching ideology: dildos are optional (*à la carte dildo*), meanings of dildos are contextually and phenomenologically determined (*contextuality of the dildo*), and dildos have theoretical implications (*critically conscious queers*). Participants’ eschewal of the binarized debate about the dildo may be entwined with changing understandings of feminist, gender, and queer theory.

**Keywords** Lesbian/bisexual/queer women · Dildos · Social constructionism · Inductive thematic analysis · Feminism

## Introduction

Historically, some feminist scholars have critiqued heterosexuality on the grounds that it constitutes a systemic form of patriarchal oppression that serves to inhibit the liberation of women (Bunch 1975; Rich 1980; Wittig 1978). Recognizing men’s use

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of heterosexual norms and behaviours to control women, a radical lesbian feminist movement began, in which women would romantically and sexually partner with other women to escape the bonds of heterosexual oppression (Minge and Zimmerman 2009). This form of radical lesbian feminism was as entwined with politics as it was female desire; thus, debates erupted about how to be a "good lesbian"—particularly in terms of sexual practices.

The dildo, as it relates to penetration, pleasure, and patriarchy, has been the subject of much feminist debate (e.g., Fahs and Swank 2013; Loe 1998/1999). The primary focus of these debates hinged on whether the dildo was phallic and/or masculine in nature, and whether the act of sexual penetration was conflated with heterosexuality and patriarchal domination even during female masturbation or sex between women (Bolsø 2007; Minge and Zimmerman 2009). While these specific debates pertained to the dildo, they were in line with much larger arguments between schools of feminist thought such as the aforementioned radical lesbian feminism, as well as sex-positive feminism (Minge and Zimmerman 2009).

According to radical lesbian feminism, emotional and intellectual connections between women are held in higher regard than their sexual desire (Minge and Zimmerman 2009). As a phallic signifier, the dildo is viewed as redolent with patriarchal dominance (Minge and Zimmerman 2009). Tied into this anti-penetration ideology are assertions by some radical feminists that vaginal orgasms do not actually exist; the only "true" orgasms women can achieve are clitoral (Koedt 1970; Lieberman 2016). The belief that penetration, and therefore dildos, are non-feminist was sufficiently widespread that some feminist sex shops such as Eve's Garden (Lieberman 2016) and Toy Box (Loe 1998/1999) refused to sell dildos. The owner of the latter store (Janine Stone) was so vehemently opposed to "the phallus" that the decision to openly sell dildos only occurred after her business was sold (Loe 1998/1999).

While radical feminists conflate the dildo with masculine heterosexual patriarchy, pro-sex feminists see the dildo as a unique object—one that should not be dismissed as a substitute for a man's penis (Minge and Zimmerman 2009). They prioritize the "truths" of lesbian sexual desire over political tenets of what lesbian sex "should be," and accept the dildo as a part of lesbian sexual reality (Minge and Zimmerman 2009). Additionally, Reich (1999) maintained that the dildo takes power away from the penis by presenting an alternative option. She argued that the dildo is a tool of "genderfuck" because it challenges traditional assumptions of what constitutes the phallus: if the dildo can be a phallus, then the phallus *cannot* be reduced to an anatomical structure. Reich (1999) posits that vaginal penetration via the dildo does not impose heterosexuality or patriarchal ideals, but denies those ideals their purported supremacy.

It also has been suggested that the dildo is cyborgian in nature (i.e., post-human) and, consequently, should not be conflated with the penis or even with masculinity, but should be considered gender neutral because it assumes the position of a non-human object (Minge and Zimmerman 2009). From this perspective, a dildo does not turn a lesbian into a man; rather, she becomes something entirely different, occupying a space beyond the hegemonic binary understanding of gender (Minge and Zimmerman 2009).

Given these views, a critical question is: what are LBQ women's attitudes toward dildos? To the best of our knowledge, only six notable works have been published, which fall into three main categories: phenomenological accounts of women's relationships with the dildo in light of feminist debates about this object (Das 2014; Minge and Zimmerman 2009); interviews with feminist sex shop employees and analyses of customer correspondence (Lieberman 2016; Loe 1998/1999); and interviews with women exploring their opinions of, and experiences with, an array of sex toys including dildos (Bolsø 2007; Fahs and Swank 2013). Research illustrative of each of these categories will be briefly articulated.

Both Das (2014) and Minge and Zimmerman (2009) reviewed a variety of theoretical perspectives on the dildo, and then compared these perspectives to their personal experiences and understandings. Das (2014) investigated the dildo in accordance with three different aspects of herself: as a brown Indian woman, as a feminist, and as queer woman. While initially Das positioned the latter two aspects as being in opposition to each other (i.e., feminist anti-dildo and queer pro-dildo), she realized that the treatment of feminist theory and queer theory as monolithic and diametric was problematic, and concluded that the dildo was a complicated object with an array of meanings. Minge and Zimmerman (2009) discussed varying theoretical standpoints on sexual penetration and the dildo in conjunction with varying definitions of the word penetration alongside anecdotes of personal experiences of sexual assault, browsing sex shops, and dildo play. After analyzing arguments of the dildo as a patriarchal and oppressive object, a "truthful" part of lesbian sexuality, and a cyborgian, post-human object, the authors concluded that "the dildo holds as much agency as the person who engulfs it and the person who handles it allows" (Minge and Zimmerman 2009, p. 345).

Moving from the personal to the commercial, Loe (1998/1999) and Lieberman (2016) investigated the experiences of workers in a feminist sex shop entitled Toy Box, and customer correspondence with a mail-order feminist sex shop, Eve's Garden. Though it was not the central focus of either study, the dildo debates surfaced in both articles. Loe (1998/1999) outlined how dildos were kept in a cupboard in the back of Toy Box, and brought out only for female customers who specifically requested them. As noted above, the founder of the store, Janine Stone, rejected the dildo as patriarchal, saying she "wanted the phallus out of [her] shop entirely" (Loe 1998/1999, p. 114). Due to demand from lesbian customers, Stone was eventually convinced by coworkers to begin openly carrying dildos (Loe 1998/1999). This conflict within Toy Box mirrors the debate between radical feminist lesbians and pro-sex feminists. Lieberman (2016) includes a detailed analysis of correspondence between "Janet" (a customer) and staff at Eve's Garden. The dildo debates are clearly reflected in this correspondence, as "Janet" laments: "I feel a greater desire for penetration than anything else... But I refuse to let a male have the satisfaction of satisfying me. The politics of it just TEARS ME APART, enrages me, and I won't permit it for myself" (Lieberman 2016, p. 20). However, as Lieberman (2016) studied correspondence dated from 1970 to 1989 (i.e., Janet's letter was written in 1987), it is unclear whether the political "problem" of the dildo remains relevant in the bedrooms of LBQ women today.

Bolsø (2007) interviewed 20 women in Norway who have sex with women about their experiences with penetration. The two main themes expressed by 19 of 20 participants were: (1) using a dildo represented failure as a woman lover; and (2) using a dildo is a pragmatic solution if bisexual partners miss penetration via a penis. It is important to note that participants did not regard penetration as masculine *unless* a dildo was involved (i.e., penetration via fingers was not seen as masculine). The overall view of participants seemed to be that, although undesirable, the dildo may be necessary to provide some partners with sexual satisfaction (Bolsø 2007). A more recent interview-based study on women's subjective feelings about sex toys found that LBQ women primarily described sex toys in two ways: (1) as campy, fun, and subversive; or (2) as impersonal and artificial (Fahs and Swank 2013). Among those that embraced the former view, they described dildos as a fun side note in their sex lives; as "something different to do" (Fahs and Swank 2013, p. 677). Those endorsing the latter view reported that using sex toys during masturbation and partnered sex was less pleasurable physically and emotionally.

While these studies provide insight into current views of the dildo among LBQ women, gaps in understanding remain. To illustrate: the first two studies outlined above (i.e., Das 2014; Minge and Zimmerman 2009), rely on the direct dialogue of the authors and theorists, and thus may not apply to LBQ women less versed in theorizing pertaining to dildos. Loe (1998/1999) focused on interviewing the employees of Toy Box, a feminist sex shop, and their experiences working for the company as opposed to their experiences with sex toys themselves. Lieberman (2016) analyzed correspondence between customers and Eve's Garden, a mail-order feminist sex shop, from the years 1970–1989; only one such correspondence dealt with dildos as opposed to vibrators. Although she interviewed 20 women who have sex with women, in terms of dildos, Bolsø (2007) focused on a single participant who perceived them as subversive and fun. Finally, Fahs and Swank (2013) targeted women of all sexual orientations and sex toys of all types as opposed to LBQ women and dildos specifically.

## Purpose

To date, no published research captures the specifics and richness of LBQ women's attitudes toward dildos. Thus, myriad questions remain unexplored. For example: (1) what is the contemporary discourse surrounding the dildo among LBQ women?; and (2) are attitudes toward, and beliefs about, dildos contextually determined (i.e., do their physical properties [e.g., shape or colour] matter?) The purpose of this study was to examine these sorts of questions via a series of semi-structured interviews.

## Method

### Theoretical Model

This research was conducted using a social constructionist epistemology in which knowledge is understood as constructed by people in dialogue with their experiences and interpretations of objects, which are intrinsically linked to the overall cultural understandings of these objects (Crotty 1998). To use the helpful metaphor of the bricoleur (handyman), one can devise wonderful crafts, but one is still limited to those that can be built using the materials at hand, and all materials at hand come with predetermined notions of how they should be used. The importance of individual subject, worldly object, and social culture are all inseparable and important pieces in the creation of knowledge (Crotty 1998). As there are minimal empirical works regarding these research questions, this study was carried out using inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). As such, to ensure that the themes identified were as data-driven as possible, minimal examination of theorizing pertaining to dildos was performed prior to the interview and analysis processes.

### Participants

Seven<sup>1</sup> LBQ women living in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan<sup>2</sup> (age range 21–33 years) participated in this study. All interviewees fit the following criteria: (a) identified as lesbian, bisexual, queer, or otherwise non-heterosexual, (b) identified as a woman, (c) were over the age of 18, and (d) fluent in English. Most participants identified as bisexual ( $n = 4$ ) followed by lesbian ( $n = 2$ ) and queer ( $n = 1$ ). Six participants were white and 1 was Métis. Educational levels of participants included high school ( $n = 1$ ), Bachelor of Arts ( $n = 2$ ), bachelor's degree in progress ( $n = 2$ ), Master of Arts ( $n = 1$ ) and Master of Fine Arts ( $n = 2$ ).

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<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge that the number of participants we recruited for this study is small. However, Filiault, Drummond, and Smith (2008) note: “it is important to consider that qualitative research focuses on the depth of information provided by informants, rather than attaining a large sample size” (p. 328). Further, in relation to the lesbian, bisexual, and queer women in our research, a small  $N$  does not attenuate the “power of their experiences, and the value of their perspectives” (p. 329).

<sup>2</sup> Saskatchewan is a (primarily rural) prairie province, with an estimated population of 1,168,057 (Statistics Canada 2017). It should be noted that scant empirical attention has been directed at sexual minorities living in regions, such as Saskatchewan, that are far removed from the gay “meccas” of Vancouver, Montreal, and Toronto.

## Procedure

Participants were recruited from researchers'<sup>3</sup> social networks via referral to an online letter of recruitment on a public Facebook page ( $n = 4$ ) or through snow-ball sampling ( $n = 3$ ). Those interested in participating contacted the researcher via e-mail or Facebook message.

Interviews were conducted in a private lab room located in the researchers' institution ( $n = 6$ ), save for one that was completed via telephone due to the participant's geographic location. After giving their written consent, participants completed a brief, open-ended, 7-item demographics form to establish their pronouns and identity labels, chosen pseudonyms, and to allow for a better description of the sample. Participants then engaged in a one-on-one semi-structured interview (see "[Appendix](#)" section), which ran 20–40 min in length ( $M = 31$  min). Interviews were audio recorded electronically, uploaded onto a computer and transcribed verbatim by the first author. After transcription, audio files were deleted to ensure additional security.

Interview questions were designed to explore general attitudes toward the dildo (i.e., positive, negative, or neutral), whether dildos are viewed as gendered objects, and whether the use of dildos is conflated with heterosexuality. A smaller subset of the interview questions was dedicated to determining whether attitudes toward the dildo are "affected" by the specific properties of this object (e.g., colour, shape, and texture) and the ways in which it is used (e.g., placement near groin). The semi-structured interview allows for the researcher to ask about specific topics, gives participants freedom in their answers, and also allows the researcher the flexibility to probe for further clarification of topics brought up by participants (Braun and Clarke 2013).

## Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis was used to examine the data. This form of thematic analysis is primarily data-driven and has the potential to shape or even change the research question completely (Braun and Clarke 2006). There are five phases of inductive thematic analysis: (1) gaining familiarity with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, and (5) defining and naming themes (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The first author began by familiarizing themselves with the data through transcription and focused re-reading of interviews, before beginning to generate codes (i.e., Phase 1). A code refers to the simplest aspect of a piece of data that can be used to provide insight into a phenomenon (Braun and Clarke 2006). The first interview was

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<sup>3</sup> To situate ourselves in relation to this topic and the participants, the reader should be aware of the following points. The interviewer and first author of this paper is a genderqueer bisexual who is female in appearance, and has lived in Saskatchewan their entire life. The second author has lived in Saskatoon for approximately 7 years. She is cis-gendered, female in appearance, and has been a longstanding ally of LGBT communities. The final author is a gay, cisgendered man. He has conducted research on gay and lesbian persons since the late 1990s. Given the lived experiences of these authors, it is likely that a queer sensibility suffuses this research study.

coded in tandem with the co-authors in order to ensure codes accurately reflected the content of the interview, while the other 6 were coded independently (i.e., Phase 2). As this research is inductive, all codes generated came from descriptions of the data as opposed to attempting to relate the data to existing theories. After initial coding, codes were compared within and across interviews to begin searching for themes, after which they were organized into preliminary themes (i.e., Phase 3). These themes were reviewed with the other authors and refined into a thematic map (i.e., Phase 4). This thematic map then was used to comb over the entirety of the data set to ensure it offered an accurate representation of the findings (i.e., Step 5).

## Results

Three main themes were generated (*à la carte dildo*, *contextuality of the dildo*, and *critically conscious queers*), all of which are subsumed within the overarching ideology of *you do you*. Every participant exhibited the *you do you* ideology multiple times, and also expressed some aspects of each of the three main themes. These core findings as well as pertinent subthemes will be clarified and discussed.

### Overarching Ideology: *You Do You*

Regardless of sexual orientation or personal dildo preferences, each participant expressed the same ideological perspective regarding dildos: *you do you*. This perspective refers to the belief that, as the LBQ sexual experience is vast and heterogeneous, there is no “right” or “wrong” answer when it comes to choosing whether to use or not use dildos. “Some queer women use them and some don’t use them at all. It really seems to vary from couple to couple,” said Polly (28, bisexual), indicating that there is no concrete way in which LBQ women are expected to behave with respect to dildos. Further, Valerie (28, bisexual) explained, “[LBQ opinion on dildos] is a complicated thing. And I think people have individual relationships with that.” Both of these statements underscore the heterogeneity of LBQ sexual practice as well as recognition of that variability.

Due to this heterogeneity, some participants had difficulty answering questions about how LBQ women use dildos. For example, Rosie (27, queer/bisexual) said, “Everybody likes something different, so I don’t think I could say a specific answer for that.” Similar to Rosie’s hesitance to specify how dildos are used, other participants typically qualified their opinions with phrases such as: “I’m not sure where my opinions stand in the general context...” (Alice, 21, bisexual); “I probably represent one end of the spectrum...” (Valerie, 28, bisexual); or “This is *my* understanding...” (Polly, 28, bisexual). Even while joking or describing extreme circumstances, participants were reluctant to delegitimize anyone for their sexual preferences. For example, Liz (33, lesbian) teased about how veiny, “over-masculinized” dildos or 10-inch dildos were funny gag gifts, but quickly added, “If you like that and that’s your preference, then that’s great. Have a great time.”

Participants also frequently discussed perspectives outside of their own through use of a hypothetical person, and consistently presented these ideas as being just as valid as their own. For example, Polly (28, bisexual) said, "I think other feelings that other queer women may have towards dildos is because of their phallic shape. [They're] a replacement for a penis." This statement suggests that she has considered the opinions and beliefs of other queer women, and also feels them worthy of being expressed during the interview. Similarly, Rosie (27, queer/bisexual) recalled:

I think I definitely had conversations about dildos making sex between women less valid because there's something that represents or resembles a penis involved. I don't think that way but that is a way that it can be looked at.

This quotation also showcases an understanding of realities and opinions about the dildo that are external to hers, and a willingness to acknowledge them. Even participants who expressed very intense personal opinions about dildos did not believe their opinion was "correct" and recognized the legitimacy of those who disagreed with them. For example, Lan (22, lesbian), who was staunchly pro dildo, believed they ought to be sold in pharmacies and grocery stores, but also mentioned: "rejecting [dildos] is totally normal... if you're not comfortable using one then don't." This openness and acceptance of opposing but equally legitimate viewpoints regarding dildos is the core element of the *you do you* ideology. As is the nature of ideologies, *you do you* subsumes the other three primary themes: *à la carte dildo*, *contextuality of the dildo*, and *critically conscious queers*.

### **À la Carte Dildo: Take it or Leave it**

This theme is an extension of the 'you do you' ideology, and refers to the dildo as a useful but optional object. The key distinction here is that while *you do you* functions at a more abstract level, *à la carte dildo* is its practical expression. Three subthemes exist within the theme of *à la carte dildo*: *dildo use is a norm for LBQ women*, *dildos are unnecessary for LBQ women*, and *dildos are practical tools*.

#### *Dildo Use is a Norm for LBQ Women*

Dildo use as a perceived norm for LBQ women came up explicitly and enthusiastically. Lan (22, lesbian) says, "[using dildos is] a way o' life... It's how things are done if you're a lesbian." Likewise, Rosie (27, queer/bisexual) says, "I just assume all queer women have, like, a giant box of dildos." Pearl (21, bisexual) also noted: "I think it's like at this point in our culture [using dildos] is a pretty widely accepted practice for lesbian, gay, and queer women."

#### *Dildos are Unnecessary for LBQ Women*

All but one participant talked about how dildos were unnecessary for queer women, and specifically how the act of sex was not defined by the use of a dildo. Concerns were raised about people outside the LBQ community, and less commonly, LBQ



women, using penetration via dildo as the defining point at which sex was taking place. The supplementary rather than necessary nature of the dildo was concisely described by Pearl (21, bisexual): “the dildo is not when sex happens, it’s a part of the sex.”

Looking at the data, we find that the subthemes of *dildo use is a norm for LBQ women* and *dildos are unnecessary for LBQ women* are not at odds with one another, but are often expressed by the *same* people. In true à la carte fashion, dildos were described as “a sprig of mint” (Valerie, 28, bisexual) or “pepper on your lasagne” (Pearl, 21, bisexual). Like food, the use of dildos depends on individual tastes, and in keeping with the *you do you* ideology, these tastes were not subject to value judgments from the participants.

### *Dildos are Practical Tools*

The other key aspect of the *à la carte dildo* is that dildos are practical tools. Dildos were regarded as utilitarian and primarily rooted in delivering sexual pleasure. As with other tools, the dildo does what the body cannot, and participants reported that dildos could, for example, prevent “pruned” fingers, ease demands on wrists and arms, and assist in stretching the vagina.

While the potential functions of the dildo were discussed, it was similarly recognized that the dildo would not perform these functions successfully for everyone. Just as sexual utility and pleasure were reported as reasons to embrace the dildo so, too, a lack of sexual utility and pleasure were reported as reasons to reject the dildo. To illustrate: Valerie (28, bisexual) maintained: “Some people do not find pleasure in being inserted vaginally, and that’s okay.” Thus, the dildo is de-stigmatized from both sides: if it is normal, using it has no stigma; if it is unnecessary, rejecting it has no stigma. As there are multiple ways to use the dildo, there are multiple ways to view the dildo, which is explored in the next theme.

## **Contextuality of the Dildo**

This theme refers to participants’ descriptions of dildos being dependent on context. In keeping with the *you do you* ideology, dildos were described as having many different potential meanings that changed based on what they looked like, how they were used, who they were used by, and how they were perceived by the users. There was some dissent as to whether physical attributes contributed to different phenomenological experiences of dildos, or if those phenomenological experiences were projected onto dildos based on user ideologies. Three subthemes were identified: *appearance of the dildo matters*, *how the dildo is used matters*, and *the dildo both is and is not a phallus*.

### *Appearance of the Dildo Matters*

When discussing the physical properties of dildos, the defining characteristic for participants was whether or not a dildo resembled a penis. Dildos resembling

penises were more strongly associated with men and heterosexual sex—women who identified more strongly as lesbian avoided them because they did not like penises as a whole, while women who identified as bisexual or queer were more open to them because of their sexual attraction to penises. One participant described how she preferred dildos that resembled penises during sex with men and dildos that did not resemble penises during sex with women, because “[Sex with men and sex with women] are different experiences, and I want the things that we’re using for sex to, like, reflect that.” (Rosie, 27, queer/bisexual).

### *How the Dildo is Used Matters*

A divide between lesbian and bisexual/queer participants was not found when discussing the difference between holding a dildo in the hand or wearing a strap-on (i.e., dildo worn attached to the groin in a position akin to the human penis), even though participants did acknowledge that the use of a strap-on was more closely linked to heterosexual sex than the use of dildos held in the hand. This may indicate that a dildo resembling a penis is more tied to the idea of sex with men than the act of penetration itself, regardless of how it is performed.

The difference in description of the use of a strap-on versus a dildo held in the hand was primarily experiential. Participants reported strap-ons as being used for more intimate sex, not because of the similarity to heterosexual sex, but because of physical proximity. Lan (22, lesbian) expressed: “[Sex with a strap-on] is a lot more passionate because it’s a lot more personal. You can look at that person and you can feel them, you can move them and you can move yourself.” Dildos held in the hand were regarded as less intimate by most participants, although some reported that a dildo held in the hand was much more effective at providing the receiver pleasure. Dildos held in the hand were described by participant Rosie (27, queer/bisexual) as “training wheels” for having sex with women, requiring less practice to operate effectively than strap-ons, which require more experience to use successfully.

### *The Dildo is and is not a Phallus*

Moving from the physical to the theoretical, an interesting duality emerged: all participants described the dildo as being representative of men/penises/the phallus as well as being distinct from men/penises/the phallus. Some were keenly conscious of this duality: when asked if the dildo challenged gender norms, about half of participants said that the dildo reinforced and challenged gender norms simultaneously. The dildo was described as being able to “mirror” or “shadow” heteronormative sex, and in doing so, act as a phallus (reinforcing gender norms) or act as a tool of performing sexual penetration without a phallus (challenging gender norms). Some concerns were raised regarding outsiders’ perception of the dildo as a phallus. Pearl (21, bisexual), for instance, described a potential non-LBQ person as believing: “They’re lesbians, but they haven’t had sex without a dildo. They need a phallus in the relationship to have sex.” Alternatively, this same act of “mirroring/shadowing” could be viewed as subverting heteronormative sex and the phallus itself because, while there is a penetrating object present, it does not involve an actual man. As

Valerie (28, bisexual) said, “you are not having heteronormative sex, you’re almost impersonating heteronormative sex.” Or, as Pearl (21, bisexual) quipped, “Even if you wanna dick, you don’t need a man.”

Participants who did not explicitly acknowledge the dildo as simultaneously reinforcing and challenging gender norms switched between likening the dildo to men/penises/the phallus at certain points of their interview and insisting the dildo was a unique and separate object at other points of their interview. Rather than contradicting themselves—and in keeping with the *you do you* ideology—participants were conceptualizing the dildo as a complex and polysemic object, open to interpretation depending on the users. This dual conceptualization of dildos indicates a lot of theoretical consideration by participants, which is showcased prominently in the final theme of *critically conscious queers*.

### Critically Conscious Queers

Participants showed a high degree of critical consciousness, particularly pertaining to queer and feminist theories, when describing dildos. For example, they recognized: *dildos take power away from men and the patriarchy*; *the consciousness of transgender identities*; and *binary penetration discourse* within the framework of LBQ sexuality which, through analysis, became subthemes.

#### *Dildos Take Power Away From Men and the Patriarchy*

The dildo’s previously discussed ability to challenge gender norms through subversion of heteronormative sexual ideals can be extended to challenge other patriarchal institutions (i.e., the conflation of sexual penetration and male power over women). Some participants argued that because the dildo and the penis share so many attributes, the dildo takes power away from the penis. Alice (21, bisexual) says sexual power can be reclaimed from men “by taking control of the act of penetration, and bringing that into queer sexual relations kind of to usurp the position of, like, a perceived oppressor as the penetrator.” In other words, when a non-male is performing the act of penetration, it takes the power to penetrate away from men by presenting another penetrative option. Speaking on this subtheme, Valerie (28, bisexual) noted:

I think some men would feel obsolete. \*laughter\* Because I think some people place a lot of their identity in their dick.

While the dildo is equated with the penis and the act of penetration, it is not actually linked with men, but as a non-male solution to the desire for penetration. Akin to this idea, Polly (28, bisexual) said, “[The dildo] is a representation of being able to either pleasure yourself or pleasure somebody else without needing patriarchy to get their hands into things.” This quote, again, stresses how the dildo can empower LBQ women by giving them the ability to perform sexual acts traditionally thought to be exclusive to men.

*Consciousness of Transgender<sup>4</sup> Identities*

Removing assumptions of maleness from the act of sexual penetration is a step toward deconstructing binary ideas of gender and anatomy. Equating the dildo to the masculine made some participants uncomfortable—all but one participant explicitly discussed how conflation of dildos, phalluses, or penises with men was not representative of transgender individuals. Polly (28, bisexual) described the reasoning behind theoretical anti-dildo arguments as "... we're women, we don't have penises, that sort of, very cisgendered way of thinking," thus critically deconstructing the connection between penises and men.

Two participants discussed how dildos could be important during sex with transmen. Pearl (21, bisexual), briefly mentioned, "Were you in a relationship with a transman then it might be more about identity and like, how you prefer to engage in sex," but did not elaborate further. Rosie (27, queer/bisexual) reported from personal experience that sex with transmen and sex with women using dildos were distinctly different, with transmen "[using dildos] is not usually just a fun addition, it's a really important integral part for some people." Within this quote, we also see echoes of the contextuality of dildos, in which the dildo is described as fun in one scenario and carrying symbolic weight in another. Likewise, Rosie's use of "some people" harkens to the *you do you* ideology, as such careful articulation indicates that variability between individuals is to be expected.

*Binary Penetration Discourse*

Within the LBQ community, this term refers to discourse about binary sexual roles regarding which partner is more likely to wield or receive the dildo. The classic butch (masculine/wielding)/femme (feminine/receiving) lesbian couple was discussed, but also critiqued. For example, Rosie (27, queer/bisexual) said: "I don't think [the butch/femme binary] is real or true and it's definitely something that I'm pretty sure most people kind of get over." Discussion of top/bottom or dominant/submissive roles was more common than discussion of butch/femme roles, with participants referring to the top/dominant partner as the dildo wielder, and the bottom/submissive partner as the dildo receiver. While participants did not deny the existence of individuals who identified exclusively as tops/dominants or bottoms/submissives, they perceived their own sexual experiences as more fluid. Pearl (21, bisexual), for instance, troubled the top/bottom binary:

Obviously the top [wields the dildo]. Because in that scenario you're usually like, trying to emulate a heterosexual relationship with your gay relationship, which doesn't make any sense to me. But does to other people, I guess. I think that kinda comes from what we see in the media with like, gay male relation-

<sup>4</sup> No participants reported being transgender themselves (a question that was not asked). While all participants identified as women, only one explicitly reported being cisgender.

ships. Um, but how they're used... In my personal experience, it's a pretty mutual use because I don't really ascribe to the top and bottom thing as much.

This quote shows Pearl is making multiple critical considerations, including identification with a top/bottom role playing into heteronormative ideas; how media representations affect the LBQ community; the idea of gay male stereotypes being applied to other members of sexual/gender minority communities; and differentiating between her own reality and the reality of others. This last point exemplifies the *you do you* ideology: even though she does not identify as a top or a bottom, she recognizes that other people may, and that this identification is legitimate.

Fluidity and exchange of top and bottom roles were also discussed as being a way the dildo could be used to challenge gender norms. For example, Lan (22, lesbian) asserted:

Whoever is wielding [the dildo] kind of has the power to feel how they wanna feel... It definitely challenges norms just because both people are participating and both people are making it okay. It's not just one person's the man and one person's the woman in the relationship, both people can take both parts.

Lan's statement shows how the dildo can be used to challenge binary ideas. When the dildo represents dominance/masculinity as she described, and that dominance/masculinity can be handed off, it troubles the idea that dominant/submissive or masculine/feminine exist as categories of people. If these roles can be changed, then the labels themselves apply more to actions than individuals; they connote things that are *done* rather than things that *are*. The dildo can be used to "take on that masculine powerful energy," (Valerie, 28, bisexual) as long as one possesses it, traversing the space between these roles. These views of the dildo show a critical consciousness of body, gender, feminist, and queer theory from the participants.

## Discussion

Results of the current study indicate that the dildo is a complex and multifaceted object that can be viewed in many different ways. Crucially, the discourse surrounding the dildo acknowledges and accepts diverse opinions as legitimate. In comparison to the dildo debates described in the literature, in which radical feminists and pro-sex feminists adopted opposing sides (Das 2014; Fahs and Swank 2013; Minge and Zimmerman 2009), participants acknowledged pro- and anti-dildo opinions simultaneously without condemning either. It seems the debate itself has faded, subsumed by the overarching ideology of *you do you*.

On a practical level, the expression of *you do you* showed in participants' acknowledgement that the dildo would not be useful or provide pleasure to everyone, but could be an important multifunctional tool for others. Thus, no moral judgment was passed on the choice to use or not use dildos (*à la carte dildo*). This echoes previous literature that has described dildos as being primarily fun and pleasure-focused as opposed to a sexual necessity (Fahs and Swank 2013; Loe 1998/1999). The acknowledgement of sexual variability that comes with the *you do you* ideology

is also shown by participants' assertions that the meaning of the dildo is contextually and phenomenologically determined (*contextuality of dildos*). It follows that if the dildo exists in a multitude of ways, one cannot make blanket statements regarding how it should or should not be used. Theoretical implications of the dildo were not lost on the participants, who analyzed a variety of ways dildos could be used to trouble or support binaries within LBQ sexual relations, disrupt assumptions of what the male or female body is, and take the patriarchal power out of penetration (*critically conscious queers*).

As such, our first—as well as the primary element of our second research question—were answered in tandem: contemporary discourse surrounding the dildo frames it as a complex, polysemic object with meanings ascribed uniquely by its users based on individual experiences. Alice (21, bisexual) summarized:

I think [the dildo] can be used for very powerful things, but that's all at the hands of the people who are wielding it or receiving it, and within those relationships.

This quotation is almost identical to the statement, previously referenced in the introduction of this paper, "the dildo holds as much agency as the person who engulfs it and the person who handles it allows" (Minge and Zimmerman 2009, p. 345). Both statements suggest that the dildo itself is a vessel for the significance placed upon it by others.

The shift in dildo discourse, as it pertains to LBQ women, from an ideological debate to an individual choice may have something to do with the growing acknowledgement of the fluidity of gender and sexuality within feminist theory (Karaian and Mitchell 2010). For instance, while discussing second wave anti-dildo discourse, Liz (33, lesbian) recalled:

In past times being a bisexual woman wasn't even acceptable. Because if you were a bisexual woman you were just waiting for the right guy and sleeping with women while you were waiting.

The fact that most of the participants identified as bisexual may have affected how dildos were viewed, as bisexuality troubles the gay/straight binary. It is possible that inhabiting non-binary sexualities leads to less policing of sexual expression. For example, non-binary sexualities or "the borderlands" exhibit acceptance and celebration of non-binary sexual orientations and gender identities (Callis 2014). In discussing these sexual borderlands, Callis (2014) writes, "The majority of [people with non-binary sexualities] saw sexuality as something other than binary, and therefore did not read binary sexualities onto one another. [The] borderland was not so much performed as the sexual binary was ignored" (p. 75). Multiple scholars have deconstructed binary and biologically essentialist views of gender (Butler 1990; Hird 2000), which seems to be an increasingly prevalent notion in more recent iterations of feminist scholarship (Karaian and Mitchell 2010). As all but one participant was vocally conscious of how equating penises with men was problematic because of transgender identities, it is likely that they also are critical of anatomical assumptions of gender. It is possible that this lens of looking at gender and what constitutes

the male or female body may have led to a conscious separation of gender from genitalia, which in turn would make the dildo less relevant as a male signifier.

It can also be argued that the *you do you* ideology contains aspects of modern neoliberal attitudes, particularly the ideas of the supremacy of individual choice, agency, and personal freedoms (Grzanka et al. 2016). As an aspect of third wave feminism, neoliberalism has been critiqued as overly individualistic, taking power away from the movement as a whole (Karaian and Mitchell 2010). Keeping this interpretation in mind, it can be argued that *you do you* and the fading dildo debates are the result of contemporary LBQ women not having the same concerns with political unity as was evident among second wave feminists. *You do you* also places importance on sexual agency, emphasizing the ability to choose to use dildos to best meet one's needs. This perspective can also be viewed as an assertion that women *should* be in control of their sexuality, and that agency is not just an option but, rather, an expectation (Bay-Cheng 2015). This has been newly discussed as the "Agency Line"—yet another value standard used to judge women's sexual behaviour (Bay-Cheng 2015).

The description of the power dynamics between users of the dildo, the dildo being and not being a phallus, and the dildo taking power from men and the patriarchy harken to the idea of "genderfuck" (Reich 1999). Participants' discussion of the dildo being able to "usurp" the penis by presenting another method of penetration is nearly identical to the idea that the dildo can be a phallus, and that the dildo as phallus gives the power of penetration to women rather than imposing patriarchal power over them (Reich 1999). A key difference is that our participants did not romanticize or engage with the butch/femme pairing as a positive, campy performance of gender (Reich 1999) but, rather, rejected butch/femme identities as prescriptive of inaccurate sexual preferences (i.e., the assumption that butches penetrate and femmes are penetrated). Instead of butch/femme, top/bottom and dominant/submissive were the more commonly discussed and accepted penetrator/penetrated LBQ dyads, and even those were most often described as being versatile, with the "masculine, powerful energy" of the dildo being passed back and forth. In this way, it is an active give and take of penetrative power that challenges gender/heteronormative ideals for the participants, as opposed to a butch/femme couple usurping a heterosexual couple the same way the dildo is described as usurping a penis (Reich 1999).

The changing of roles such that both members of an LBQ dyad can act as the penetrator or the penetrated challenges binary sexual and gender norms akin to the descriptions of Hamming (2001). The dildo as a non-gendered, functional object that allows for sexual interactions that transcend the limitations of the body also alludes to the understanding of the dildo as cyborgian; that is, a technological attribute not of the body (and by extension gender) but beyond it (Hamming 2001). However, this cyborgian read on the dildo was meant to provide not another phallus or even phallic alternative, but a phallic erasure, in which "through the cyborgian coupling of sex toys and body parts, the phallus ceases to register as a relevant or intelligible sign" (Hamming 2001, p. 339). This view was not totally embraced by the participants, as evidenced by descriptions of the dildo as a phallic/masculine object. The theme entitled *contextuality of dildos* is showcased when comparing participant responses

to these theoretical models—neither is right nor wrong, and perhaps neither can be right nor wrong, as the dildo is not one or the other but both.

Moving to the more physically rooted research questions, participants indicated that both appearance and placement affected the meaning of the dildo, though appearance seemed to be more strongly linked to positive or negative attitudes than placement. Appearance mattered to most participants, and was divided into two main categories: resembling and not resembling the penis. For those who felt appearance mattered, dildos resembling penises were linked more closely to heterosexual sex. While wearing a strap-on was regarded as being more closely linked to heterosexual sex than using a dildo held in the hand, lesbian participants did not reject use of strap-ons, which is consistent with previous literature (Fahs and Swank 2013; Smith 2002). Instead, the focus was on how a strap-on could increase intimacy by allowing for greater physical proximity and keeping hands free to hold or caress one's partner.

Looking at our findings in relation to Fahs and Swank (2013) and Bolsø (2007), the other studies that qualitatively interviewed non-heterosexual women, we find similarities and differences. The theme of the dildo as "campy, fun and subversive" (Fahs and Swank 2013) was exhibited among our participants, who discussed how the dildo was a fun and optional tool as well as capable of subverting gender and sexuality norms. The other key theme reported by Fahs and Swank (2013) of the dildo being impersonal or artificial was almost completely irrelevant to our participants, coming up only once during the course of the interviews as a hypothetical opinion a person could use to reject the dildo. Themes of failure as a woman lover causing one's partner to desire a dildo or dildos being used to fulfill desire for penetration via the penis for bisexual women (Bolsø 2007) were not expressed by our participants. While bisexual participants did exhibit more openness toward dildos resembling penises, using dildos was not equated with a desire for heterosexual sex but a desire for penetration, which were treated as distinct. The theme of the dildo being fun, exciting, and pleasurable (Bolsø 2007) was expressed by the participants, as providing sexual pleasure was described as one of the primary functions of dildos, as well as a major reason to embrace their use.

Overall, the results show how the dildo is dualistic: it is at once a practical tool for sexual pleasure and a theoretical phallus that can aid in the dismantling of sexual and gender binaries. The dildo can be powerful, significant, and home to dense and interesting theory—and it can also be the source of a lot of fun.

## Limitations and Future Directions

Possible limitations of this research include age range, selection bias, and level of education. Participants were fairly young (age range 21–33), and it is possible polarized views of dildos would be more prominent in older LBQ women who lived through the second wave of feminism where the dildo debates originated. To temporarily borrow a term from the quantitative paradigm, "selection bias" (Collier and Mahoney 1996) also was an issue: We could only interview LBQ women who were comfortable talking about dildos for an extended period of time, which may



have led to a bias in favor of those who have a lot to say about dildos. Participants also had a high level of formal education: only one participant had not attended university, most had bachelor's degrees, and one participant had a degree in women's and gender studies. This level of education may have contributed to the critical consciousness exhibited by participants, who may be more educated in various feminist, queer, and trans ideologies and/or more inclined to apply a theoretical lens to the world around them than those who have not received as much formal education.

While all research inevitably has limitations, it also opens windows for expansion. An interesting potential avenue would be to examine the dildo from a trans perspective. While most participants acknowledged trans identity, they were rarely given much attention, as they were not the focal point of this research. In fact, some participants avoided them because the use of dildos with transmen was considered heterosexual sex, and thus not related to the subject at hand. (In these instances, the sexual encounters mentioned were between women and transmen, and therefore a man/woman heterosexual partnership.) Another interesting research offshoot is the use of dildos with cismen of any sexual orientation. The choice to use a dildo when a penis is available implies that they are distinct sexual experiences, and would offer another interesting angle to examine the dildo as a phallic or non-phallic object.

## Conclusion

Discourse surrounding the dildo appears to have evolved. Participants in the current study were highly conscious of individual variability regarding attitudes toward dildos, and did not make moral judgments about the choice to use or not use dildos in accordance with an overarching *you do you* ideology. Indeed, they stressed the importance of individual freedom vis-à-vis sexual expression. *You do you* feminism, then, acknowledges heterogeneous sexual practice as reality in the diverse world of LBQ women and expresses support for this diversity. Dildos were acknowledged as multifaceted objects experienced differently depending on appearance, method of use, and a person's feelings toward them. The dildo is not a constant or monolithic object, and thus it cannot be understood or governed within a single set of rules. Rather than attempting to regulate the dildo, participants believed people should be free to embrace or reject the dildo on an individual basis, or simply put, *you do you*.

### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors report no conflicts of interest.

**Human and Animals Rights** Further, all data were collected in accordance with ethical stipulations for research involving human participants, as detailed in the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS 2, 2014).

## Appendix

We are interested in LBQ women's perceptions of, and attitudes toward, the dildo. We will not directly ask any questions regarding your experience. This research is focused on attitudes and not behaviours, you are not required to mention any personal experiences you may have had with dildos. With this being said, you are more than welcome to bring in personal experience at any time, if you wish.

1. What are your general understandings of LBQ women and dildo use?
2. How would you describe the ways LBQ women use dildos?
3. What potential functions might the dildo serve for LBQ women?
4. Does using a dildo have benefits for LBQ women?
5. Does using a dildo have risks for LBQ women?
6. Does the dildo challenge norms based on gender (i.e., what it's like to be male/female)?
7. Does the dildo challenge norms based on sexuality (i.e., what it's like to be straight)?
8. Are there any reasons LBQ women would embrace using a dildo?

*Probes: Are there sexual reasons for LBQ to embrace using a dildo?*

*Are there political reasons for LBQ to embrace using a dildo?*

*Are there social reasons for LBQ to embrace using a dildo?*

9. Are there any reasons LBQ women would reject using a dildo?

*Probes: Are there sexual reasons for LBQ to reject using a dildo?*

*Are there political reasons for LBQ to reject using a dildo?*

*Are there social reasons for LBQ to reject using a dildo?*

10. Does the appearance of a dildo matter?

*Probes: Does the colour of a dildo matter?*

*Does the shape of a dildo matter?*

*Does the texture of a dildo matter?*

11. Does the placement of a dildo matter?

*Probes: What does it mean if a dildo is held in the hand?*

*What does it mean if a dildo is worn attached to the groin?*

*What does it mean if a dildo is worn strapped to the thigh?*

12. I think I've asked you everything I intended to, is there anything else you'd like to add, or any final thoughts?

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