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The V Formation: Feminine Care, Sex Toys Ride Wave of Female Power

Made by women for women, the latest crop of feminine care products moves beyond washes to lubricants, vibrators and rose water mists.

By [Allison Collins](#) and [Ellen Thomas](#) on July 17, 2018



As the veil lifts on the topic of feminine care, modernized vagina-centric products such as Queen V The Spritzer Rosewater Spray and vibrators from Smile Makers and Dame Products are growing in availability.
Joshua Scott/WWD

This summer, why not one-up your manicure with a vanicure?

Essentially a facial for the bikini line, the vanicure cleanses and exfoliates the hips, inner thighs, lower stomach, and yes, the vulva. After the cleansing, a mask is applied, followed by a strategic

application of highlighter and a thorough spritzing of rosewater mist. After launching at the DollFace salon in Copenhagen in 2017, the vanicure is being tested at the Lapis Spa at the Fontainebleau in Miami and in a slew of Steiner Leisure-operated cruise ships. Avonda Nelson Urben, the mind behind the vanicure and founder of The Perfect V product line, is planning to roll the concept out more broadly in the U.S. spa and salon channel in 2019, as either a stand-alone treatment or an add-on to waxing and other services.

“You feel so pampered when you get a facial, but when you get a wax you don’t feel so great,” said Nelson. “Women are a little hesitant at first [to get the vanicure], but once they do, they’re so happy. They say they’ve never felt anything like it, that it’s great to be comforted in an area that isn’t paid attention to.”

The vanicure is one example in the recent influx of modernized, vagina-centric products and offerings that are hitting shelves as part of a movement that links feminism with feminine care. This crop of washes, lubricants and vibrators are made by women for women. And in an era where women are speaking up about everything from sexual assault to periods, the voice of this product wave is a firm 180-degrees away from the hyper-masculine condom messaging or hush-hush tones of feminine care brands that have long dominated the market.

“You’re seeing more of women’s influence in these different industries,” said Cecilia Gates, founder and creative director of Gates Creative. “It’s encouraging conversations around things that have long been seen as taboo — things like periods and health and sex and your total wellness. That’s inspiring people to get into these categories and innovate and create because these types of things have been so focused and targeted toward the male. With women getting more into these industries and innovating, they’re speaking more to women.”

At five-year-old Deo Doc, which just hit the U.S. market with a launch on Violet Grey in July, female (and sister) founders Dr. Hedieh Asadi and Hasti Asadi weren’t happy with the experience or look of existing feminine care brands on the market. “Everything, we felt, had been stuck in the Eighties,” said Hasti. “We were more ashamed of using those products than actually wanting to show them on the bathroom shelf. We were hiding them as if it was a problem product.

“Today we have hundreds of different creams for our hands or our eyes or body, but the most delicate skin, intimate skin, only has like two brands,” she continued. “So, like, Beyoncé has to buy Vagisil because there’s nothing else on the market?”

The Swedish product line, housed in pastel, striped packages, includes Daily Intimate Wash, Intimate Deospray, Intimate Deowipes, Pre-Shave Oil, Shaving Foam, After Shave Balm and Intimate Calming Oil priced from \$15 to \$25. Fragrances for the product line were sourced from Givaudan.

The Asadi sisters are flying to Violet Grey soon to train the staff, they said. “We’re going to have a vagina pop quiz,” Hasti said. “Just to start talking. They’re actually going to focus on vaginal health so I think it’s a good start.”

Deo Doc isn't Violet Grey's first move into vaginal territory — the [beauty](#) retailer also sells the Elvie Kegel Exercise Tracker, \$199.

“We see ourselves being in [beauty](#),” said Hedieh. “In Scandinavia, the woman who is interested in taking care of herself with makeup — she likes our products....It's like pampering your vagina, that's the feeling we want to give her.”

“We want to make intimate skin care a luxury. We want to give our customers the association that taking care of their intimate parts is nothing shameful,” Hasti added.

That sentiment captures a theme in the broader feminine-care market.

“If you'd asked me to talk about my vagina a year ago I would have turned bright red,” said Lauren Steinberg, the founder of Queen V and daughter of a gynecologist. She started her range, which rolled out into 4,100 Walmart doors in April, as well as beauty retailers Riley Rose and Ricky's, less than a year ago. The line takes a three-step approach to the vagina — maintain, heal and enjoy, Steinberg said.

Queen V's line includes The Spritzer, an \$8 rosewater spray for the vagina; Swipe Right Wipes, \$7; P.S. I Lube You, a \$9 lubricant; UTMI, \$20, meant to help with urinary tract infections. The line is housed in bright packaging meant to stand out on the shelves. Queen V's line is also ingredient conscious, Steinberg said, something the brand talks about in its content with videos that show people reading Queen V's ingredient list versus that of competing brands.

Ingredients are an important part of the new wave of products, according to Gates. Transparent ingredient lists are now a standard entry point, she noted. “It's what's expected,” she said.

Love Wellness founder Lo Bosworth started her feminine health care company — the product assortment includes supplements and probiotics targeted at women, along with intimate cleansers and wipes — because she didn't like the design or ingredient lists on traditional drugstore brands. “The experience as a woman in the drugstore looking at Monistat and Summer's Eve was demoralizing and uncomfortable — everything from just the names of these brands to the products that are full of chemicals,” said Bosworth.

For Kush Queen, a CBD-oriented product line focused mostly on skin-care products, the brand's Ignite CBD Lube, \$49.99, was launched because founder Olivia Alexander felt existing products didn't appeal to her. With Ignite, Alexander aimed for an ingredient-conscious product that contained CBD and was made specifically with women in mind.

The brand also makes a THC lubricant, not available broadly in the U.S., that Alexander says can increase blood flow to the areas it touches. “That's a whole different area people don't want to talk about,” she noted.

“There is a huge note of feminism through our brand,” Alexander said, noting that the company's lube has even gone out in Amber Rose's Slut Box. “People have just been making products to sell to women, they haven't been looking at them saying, ‘why are we using this, is

this good for our bodies, how could this affect future generations?” she said. Kush Queen’s lubricants are paraben and petrochemical free and latex-compatible.

At Lola, one of the original direct-to-consumer, ingredient-focused tampon brands, sex products were a natural fit. The brand launched Ultra Thin Lubricated Condoms, \$10; Personal Lubricant, \$13, and Cleansing Wipes, \$10, in May.

“Sex is a category that came to mind shortly after launching the brand, but has been brought to our attention time and time again by our customers who want to know what’s in a condom, what’s in lube, and what other products [she] should be using,” said cofounder Alex Friedman. “Really, what we’re trying to do is drive conversation around ingredients.”

With a new mural and installation in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Lola is also driving the conversation more broadly about sex. The brand’s ‘Let’s Talk About It’ campaign kicked off in July, and includes a national hotline (1-622-hey-Lola) that women can call to hear audio content around sex topics women want to talk about, as well as ask questions and leave comments.

Lola’s campaign follows similarly splashy initiatives from brands like Thinx, which makes period underwear, and body care brand Billie, which recently launched a marketing campaign that shows women shaving actual body hair instead of running razors over already-shaved legs.

In addition to thrusting obvious yet mostly undiscussed facts of life (periods and body hair, among them) in front of consumers, with sex products, modern brands are taking a more gender-neutral approach to marketing, Gates noted. “That whole pink-it-and-shrink-it formula — that just doesn’t work anymore,” she said. Now products are “targeted towards an end use or your needs — how it’s going to make your life easier,” she said.

They’re also being targeted to a new generation — Millennials — who are much more willing to talk about sex.

“In the 25 years I’ve been practicing, it’s been a real slow crawl to women empowering themselves sexually and in the last five years I’ve seen a huge swing of the pendulum,” said Dr. Sherry Ross, an ob-gyn to celebrities such as Reese Witherspoon, Yolanda Hadid and Brooke Shields, and author of “She-ology,” a book on women’s health.

“I see a lot more openness with their bodies and vaginas — there’s a lot more conversation around the vagina and the clitoris, women now want to have an equal partnership in bed,” Ross said. “They don’t want to have to fake an orgasm.”

At Free People, head of beauty Jessica Richards is also targeting a Millennial shopper. She started the retailer’s “self-love” category with the Goop-popularized yoni eggs, and was surprised when they quickly became top-selling items. Now the sexual wellness mix includes crystal dildos, natural lubricant and condoms, organic tampons and a product called “sex tea.”

Richards has found that the category’s sales have far exceeded the retailer’s expectations, and she’s working on growing it with an eye on innocuous products, like Smile Makers’ sleek pastel

vibrators. “I’m targeting 26- and 27-year-old girls,” she said. “It doesn’t have to be offensive and pornographic; it can be cheeky and fun.”

From a business perspective, Richards is not surprised that the vagina category has taken off. “There are creams for your elbow now — products for the vagina aren’t too far off,” she said.

Revolve’s sexual wellness business is also taking off — so much so that beauty buyer Kandice Hansen is set to attend her first adult toy trade show this summer.

Hansen sees products such as the Elvie trainer — a kegel exercise device — as an extension of the retailer’s wellness category, which launched at the end of 2017. Revolve also carries products from The Perfect V, and Maude vibrators, organic lubricant and natural condoms.

“Doing this as a fashion and lifestyle retailer, it’s offering our girl a familiar and safe place to explore a category,” said Hansen. “There’s the discretion of having your vibrator come in your Revolve box with a dress and a pair of shoes.”

The vibrator market has evolved into the modern era, branching away from strictly phallic options and into things centered around women’s pleasure.

Disenchanted with dildos that “all looked like penises” and spooked by a faulty bullet vibrator that began smoking while in use, Alexandra Fine and her co-founder Janet Lieberman started their own sex toy business, Dame Products.

Dame’s two vibrators — the Fin and the Eva II, which sell for \$75 and \$135, respectively — have a sleek design and are meant for clitoral stimulation, which Fine saw was missing from the existing sex toy market.

Dame is sold on its web site, on Amazon, in sex toy shops and on the web sites of Urban Outfitters, Free People and Revolve. When Fin launched on Revolve in April, it became the number-one beauty sku overnight.

“Our whole purpose is to create well-designed, well-engineered tools for sex that feel like any other product in your wellness routine,” said Fine. “Masturbation is so much about relaxation — it decreases stress, it helps you fall asleep. It’s like wearing makeup — it can make you feel better and more happy in your body.”

“It’s become more of a normal part of conversation,” Gates said about sex and affiliated products. “As more and more people start talking about it and these bigger retailers start selling it, it gets out of the shadows and becomes an everyday occurrence. Everyone has a period, everyone has sex, it makes sense that we start talking about these things.”

It also makes sense that women are the ones designing more and more of the products now, she noted. “If you have a vagina and a vulva, you can understand how these products work better,” Gates said. “More people are going to start innovating in these areas because they’ve been untouched.”