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SELF-TRACKING 'FEMTECH': COMMODIFYING & DISCIPLINING THE FERTILE FEMALE BODY

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This paper engages with feminist political economists to explore questions of affective labour in self-tracking technologies designed for the female body ('femtech'). Self-tracking femtech is largely characterised by smartphone applications (apps) and smart devices that track user data relating to menstruation, fertility periods, sexual activity, ovulation, hormones, and health and wellbeing. This data can be collected through self-reporting or through automated transmission from sensory devices attached to the body. By reflecting on my own experiences with these technologies in the tradition of feminist autobiographical writing, this paper argues that users of self-tracking femtech perform the labour of reproducing our bodies and our affective relations in ways that are amenable to both capitalist and patriarchal structures of power.

The everyday activities of social media users - liking, sharing - can be understood as freely given, uncompensated labour that produce value for commercial media platforms (Terranova, 2000). Kylie Jarrett's (2016) pivotal work points to parallels between this model of labour and the unpaid labour of the housewife. Jarrett (2016) outlines how the work of the domestic labourer produces value for capitalism in dual ways: the labour of (re)producing a healthy body that then enters the workforce and generates profit, and the labour of forming and disciplining subjects and social relations amenable to capitalism. In this paper, I firstly argue that the productive role of self-tracking femtech must be contextualised within broader shifts of affective, reproductive labour. I subsequently argue that self-tracking femtech is a new category of digital labour focused on management and reproduction of the normative fertile, hormonal, and sexual female body within the post-Fordist context. Furthermore, social networking sites have been explored for disciplining subjectivities in linguistic and symbolic ways. I highlight the ways that digital technologies like self-trackers discipline subjects via the realm of affect and material, embodied experiences.

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Nancy Fraser (2016) persuasively argues that we are living through a crisis in care and social reproduction that reflects the socio-economic contradictions of post-Fordism. The Fordist mode of production utilised public health services and mass media to communicate appropriate norms that could then be enforced by a class of unpaid women. As social services were diminished and women entered waged work, social norms continued to unevenly push the burden of caregiving onto mothers (Fraser, 2016). The contemporary displacement of these socio-economic conditions necessitates the outsourcing of their responsibilities. Self-tracking can therefore be understood as a reconfigured manifestation of labour that reproduces and does the caring work for the labouring body and performs the labour of subject formation (McEwen, 2016). I argue that the proliferation of self-tracking technologies specifically focused on fertility, menstruation, and sexual reproduction demonstrate not only the ongoing and unequal outsourcing of reproductive labour to unpaid women, but that these technologies also re-stabilise gender hierarchies in the post-housewife “crisis” of care and reproduction.

When I log a bout of acne or weight gain, I immediately receive instructions on how to “fix my symptoms” from the app MyFLO. The app instructs me to do specific exercises, to eat vegetables, to change my sleeping schedule, and even to engage in sexual intercourse as “stress relief.” The intimate and affective experiences of users are shaped and modulated by self-trackers to (re)produce and discipline the fertile and sexual female body to be *both* a productive labouring body and heterosexually attractive feminine subjectivity. Rachel Sanders (2016) analyses digital self-tracking devices as “technologies of gender” that ascribe individual self-discipline and self-improvement to the individual. Technologies of gender construct the healthy female body as a project that must be constantly managed, regulated, and surveilled (Sanders, 2016). Self-tracking femtech presents novel body projects concerned with disciplining the hormonal, sexual, and fertile female body according to normative configurations of embodied heterosexual femininity. These apps displace the medical professional and subject the female body to ever more fine-grained, laborious, customised, and internalised forms of measurement, management, and control. My embodied experiences are quantified, judged, and shaped by the “expert knowledge” of the app’s algorithm. The bar for reaching optimal “health” is placed increasingly and unattainably high, as my body is the project that I must constantly work on and improve. Crucially, these body projects are further intertwined with the labour of producing data for digital media industries that generates profit in the advertising marketplace.

Several of the apps I came across had an option to share my biometric dataset with a partner. MyFLO has a unique Sync My Partner feature that sends regular emails that “let your partner know how to best support you.” The apps purport to bypass my own narrative accounts and tap directly into my body, calling upon me and my partner to act upon its algorithmic knowledge. The various interventions into my body and my intimate

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experiences reveals the ways that power manifests within self-tracking femtech in affective, experiential ways. Self-tracking femtech create an affective space that intertwines intimate experiences, social relationships, and identity formation with the commercial logics of consumption and production. To understand how gender hierarchies are formed in this affective context, I turn to Preciado's (2014) critical history of the Playboy Mansion. The Playboy Mansion was a biopolitical space which intertwined market processes and media technologies with the lived experiences of the residents (Preciado, 2014). In the shift away from the Fordist roles of the housewife and the breadwinner, women experienced sexual liberation via the contraceptive pill and sex became increasingly disassociated from reproduction and strict morality (Preciado, 2014). The Playboy Mansion, then, recalibrated appropriate gender roles and became a "laboratory" for the production of new forms of hegemonic masculinity (Preciado, 2014, p. 10). Unshackled from the world of domesticity, men were the voyeurs and Playboys who chased, watched, and managed the sexually ready and available women.

Femtech constructs and intertwines medical devices, economic exchange, expertise knowledge, bodies, affective experiences, social relations, and labour. Self-tracking femtech responsabilises me to meticulously ensure that my fertile body is under control and attractive in order to maximise both my sexual availability and my labour power. The app MyFLO encourages my partner to distract me with a "*passionate kiss in the kitchen*" if I seem disinterested in sex at any given moment. The overt reference to my place in "the kitchen" cannot go unnoticed here. Fraser (2016) notes that the crisis of social reproduction emerges in the contradictory imperative for women to dually fulfill the role of the waged worker *and* continue the uneven labour of caregiving and domesticity. Through self-tracking femtech I commodify and reproduce my paradoxically thin, emotionally balanced, hormonally managed, sexy and sexually available, caring, docile and domestic self for both the machine gaze and the male gaze

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