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SEXTECH INDUSTRIES AND CULTURES: TOWARDS MEDIATED PLEASURES AND DATA JUSTICE

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Abstract

The industry of sextech is on the rise. *The Economist* suggested that the rapidly growing global market for sexual pleasure and wellbeing-focused technologies was projected to reach 40 billion US dollars in 2023 (Chankova, 2022). This market growth has coincided with a proliferation of industry conferences and hackathons worldwide, such as the Reimagine Sexuality conference; the Love and Sex with Robots conference; the Sx Tech EU conference; the online tech accelerator SexTech School; as well as sextech hackathons in New York, London, Singapore and Melbourne (Devlin, 2019).

While the term sextech has been applied to technologies as diverse as dating apps, menstrual trackers, personal lubricants, smart vibrators, and sex robots, it is often understood in terms of technologies that enhance, intensify, or improve sexuality and

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sexual experiences in an individualist manner. Our own understanding is less concerned with sexuality as a question of technological optimisation, and more invested in sextech as a range of technologies, not only for pleasure and health, but also for regulation, surveillance, and biopolitical management (in line with Ruberg, 2022).

Despite bold statements among sextech entrepreneurs about how their products will disrupt and revolutionise sex and pleasure (Barrica, 2019), as queer and feminist researchers we are interested in the intersection of technology, politics, and culture are examining the ways sextech products and marketing materials represent and engage with sexuality, gender, global markets, human rights, and data justice. This work builds on concerns raised by global public health and development practitioners and researchers, who argue that the "disruptive" ethos that underpins tech start-up culture is fundamentally incompatible with values such as sustainability and universal access to healthcare.

This panel explores the growth of the sextech industry and its relationships to surveillance capitalism, artificial intelligence, data governance, and politics of pleasure. Drawing from empirical data with sextech users, retailers, developers, and founders as well as collaborations between industry and academia, the papers explore how sextech industries outsource labour, upscale automation, and shape intimate connections through digital technologies. While we consider the interplay of sextech and public health policy and practice, we do not seek to quantify the prevalence of sextech use, or evaluate its therapeutic utility. Instead, we adopt a sociotechnical approach, reflecting on how cultural assumptions around gender, sexuality, health, and pleasure guide and inform sextech markets.

The panel is structured by moving from broad interrogations of the issues within the sextech industry to case studies of specific platforms, before finishing with a consideration of user experiences of queering sextech to explore some possible futures. Zahra Stardust investigates how a hubris of innovation can overshadow data extraction and wealth accumulation in the sextech industry, by canvassing how new sextech entrepreneurs understand their own responsibilities in governing sensitive, intimate user data. Emily van der Nagel examines the emergent sextech industry of automated chatbots to perform small talk, dirty talk, and outsource the work of building relationships with subscribers on OnlyFans. Kath Albury and Caitlin Learmonth explore equity and diversity issues raised by sextech's 'disruption' of public health services, contrasting the data-driven limitations of government-subsidised sexual health services with user experiences of a commercial sexually-transmitted infection (STI) testing platform. Finally, Jenny Sundén demonstrates how capitalism works to manufacture pleasures, using hetero, cisnormative, and couple-centred scripts embedded at the point of technology design, resulting in a disconnect between industry marketing of sextech products and their unpredictable, creative, and off-label uses by queer users.

In these case studies, focusing on industry practices allows us to see how sextech is marketed as simultaneously sexually empowering, a source of self-knowledge and a solution for social inequality and injustice (Greene, 2021). However, these narratives about sextech are often "contradictory, empirically unsubstantiated and gender oppressive" (Hendl & Jansky, 2022), and "create possibilities for unprecedented levels

of reproductive surveillance" (Mishra & Suresh, 2021), with major discrepancies between the language of the company and the experiences of the users.

Instead, we see precedents for the development of new sexual technologies in the work of disability activists who continue to pioneer future relationships between accessibility and technology (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022), critical race scholars who have explored how carceral technologies can be resisted and reworked for liberatory purposes (Benjamin, 2019), marginalised communities who have collaboratively produced design principles for more just futures (Costanza-Chock, 2020), and scholar-practitioners who have emphasised the political role of pleasure as part of social justice (brown, 2019).

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SEXTECH ENTREPRENEURS: GOVERNING INTIMATE DATA IN START-UP CULTURE

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Introduction

In the back cover blurb for her 2019 book *Sextech Revolution: The future of sexual wellness*, Andrea Barrica, founder of online adult sex education video-clip platform O.School, argues that "sexual wellness is the next blue ocean for tech entrepreneurs and investors alike" (Barrica, 2019). In an aspirational industry that attracts careerists from a variety of backgrounds, sextech entrepreneurs are immersed in a start-up culture that foregrounds business, marketing and branding. Across both sextech and femtech industries, data have been positioned as a tool for knowledge and user empowerment (Flore & Pienaar, 2020) and an opportunity for personalized and responsive health care (Hendl & Jansky, 2022).

However, the privacy and security vulnerabilities of smart sex toys have been the subject of recent media attention. Emerging research has identified multiple privacy and security vulnerabilities in sextech devices that potentially leave users open to stigma, blackmail, prosecution and remote sexual assault (Giusto & Pastorino, 2021; Wynn et al., 2017). Dating apps, menstrual trackers and sex toy companies have paid millions in compensation for non-consensually collecting or sharing intimate data.

As an industry, sextech itself is both unexceptional and unique. It is unexceptional in that it faces similar issues to other tech industries around accountability and surveillance capitalism. Sextech, however, is unique in the sense that it invites individuals to enter the industry through unconventional pathways. While it encourages people from minority populations to participate, the industry simultaneously positions data from those communities as an untapped mine for investment. Sexual stigma marks the industry, posing barriers to accessing finance, hosting, advertising and markets. However, stigma also forms part of sextech's appeal, forming a central part of the industry's narrative and acting as a platform for media, branding and recruitment.

There has been little research into how prospective sextech entrepreneurs conceptualise and approach intimate data governance. While industry-research sextech partnerships do exist, many of the current collaborations are focused upon collecting and analysing data for therapeutic or sexological insights rather than examining the complexities of data justice. In industry discussions, the topic tends to be presented in terms of the need to guard against data leaks, in order to protect the privacy, rights and security of individual data subjects. There has been less explicit discussion of more collective approaches to data justice or data sovereignty within sextech development and production.

Methods

To better understand the ways that "industry newcomers" currently approach industry data practices, we conducted a 3-hour virtual professional development and knowledge

exchange workshop with 15 people seeking to enter the sextech industry in August 2021. We sought to investigate if and how sexual technologies can be governed at scale in ways that prioritise public interest benefit and feminist data ethics. The discussion was divided into five key topic areas: current approaches to existing sextech on the market, ethical data governance frameworks, enablers and barriers to □ecentralize□g□ion, equitable distribution of benefits of sextech, and interface design.

The research was conducted in partnership with the Sextech School, an established private training academy for sextech start-ups and would-be professionals, situated between Australia and the United States and coordinated online, founded by industry *Future of Sex* podcaster and speaker, Bryony Cole. Sextech School enrols students from global locations including Australia, the United Kingdom, Europe, North America, Asia, and South America. Of those attending the 6-week online training course, the predominant demographic is women-identified people in the 30–40 age bracket. The curriculum includes four key modules: Industry Knowledge, Brand Building, Community Engagement, and Business Models.

Start-up journeys – from data subjects to data brokers

Among our participants, the predominant pathway to Sextech School involved a personal catalyst or experience that drew an individual to the field. Drawing from their adjacent business endeavours and preliminary sextech initiatives, participants unsurprisingly saw data as providing a valuable market insight. Data were seen as having potential use for multiple stakeholders, and many described a positive role for big data in improving products, user experiences, and well-being interventions. In transitioning from their position as data subjects to data brokers, some participants were confounded by the complex data protection legislation that applied to them. Despite this, they were □ecentral of the risks of collecting sensitive data. Speaking from their positions as tech users, participants were concerned with their rights to access and delete their own data, and there was general consensus that consent to data collection should be dynamic.

Our study suggests that there is an appetite and interest among upcoming sextech professionals for greater literacy, awareness, and skills in ethical data governance. We found that participants at the Sextech School drew from their experiences and frustrations as users (who expected their own data to be protected), reflected on their own sense of responsibility in handling sensitive data (aspiring to do it ethically), expressed desire for more information on data protection (how to comply with regulatory requirements), and sought improved accountability in industry standards and practices (looking for guidance on alternative approaches).

However, the workshop revealed disconnections between the collective possibilities offered by a data commons approach and the technosolutionist narratives of start-up cultures. Start-ups often position scale as their goal and automation as their method. This was consistent among the prospective sextech entrepreneurs we spoke to, who framed data accountability through a lens of individual rights, privacy, and consent. Accordingly, we found that because start-up cultures involve a boot-strap narrative and empire-building fantasy, they do not necessarily encourage founders to devolve their

own political power, redistribute their wealth, or prioritise collective ownership. As a result, when generated in a start-up model, sextech may be limited in its capacity to practice feminist data ethics.

Conclusions

If feminist data ethics is concerned with examining how data flows, "□ecentralize□g data power", and ensuring "control of the Internet architecture is wrested back from the privatized platforms" (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2022: 10), then individualist approaches that are solely concerned with consent, privacy, notice and transparency will not be sufficient towards this end. We conclude that there is a need for collaborations between industry, community and researchers to develop approaches to governance that □ecentrali, redistribute, and □ecentralize the data economy of sextech. Our research demonstrates that the existence of non-linear pathways to sextech and the liminal space that prospective sextech entrepreneurs occupy provides a ripe opportunity for re-thinking industry practice.

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AUTOMATING INTIMATE MESSAGING IN THE ADULT CONTENT CHATBOT INDUSTRY

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On content subscription platform OnlyFans, a promised pleasure is "authentic connections" (OnlyFans, 2024) between creators and fans. These connections, begun on mainstream social media, are often developed through direct messaging on OnlyFans as part of the subscription.

This paper considers the automating of intimate messaging on OnlyFans through artificial intelligence chatbots, a sextech service marketed in ways that shape the "authentic connections" made possible through the platform. It takes up the call for queer and feminist researchers to explore how sextech products and their marketing materials represent and engage with sexuality, gender, and data justice (Albury, Stardust, & Sundén 2023).

Direct messages on OnlyFans

OnlyFans, predominantly known for its adult content, has grown since 2016 to amass over a billion US dollars of revenue in 2023 from over 200 million users (Axios, 2023). It functions as a paid, adult layer over mainstream social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. There, content creators use strategies originated in influencer culture, including careful self-branding and performing authenticity (Bishop, 2023), to direct their audience to their OnlyFans page – all without violating the ban on adult content common to these platforms. This paper draws on a larger research project on OnlyFans that includes news, memes, blog posts, marketing material, a qualitative survey of 89 OnlyFans users, and interviews with 11 content creators and nine subscribers on the platform.

Content creators on OnlyFans must endeavour to keep their audience paying for their subscription, which is why a key aspect of the platform is interacting with individual subscribers through direct messaging. As one of my content creator interviewees put it: "People don't realise I'm in the inbox 18 hours a day. Building connections is how you get people to buy. It is so much work." (Participant 10, 36-45, cis female).

OnlyFans' potential to be quickly profitable for a popular user has sparked headlines like 'UFC star Paige VanZant reveals she made more money flaunting her body on OnlyFans in 24 HOURS than she did 'in her entire fighting career'' (Karruli, 2023) and 'Exactly how Lucy Banks made over $1million on OnlyFans' (Findlay, 2023). This kind of publicity, along with the knowledge that direct messaging is difficult to scale, has resulted in an industry of attendant services emerging to take advantage. This includes OnlyFans management agencies, chatter services (Hendy, 2023), and chatbots.

"Small Talk/Dirty Talk/Sell Content": OnlyFans chatbot Botly

Chatbots automate conversations between a computer program and a human, usually through text-based interactions. Their use within sextech has led to mixed experiences and attitudes. For example, in one study of a chatbot offering advice on sexually transmitted infections (Nadarzynski et al, 2021) chatbot users found its information about sexual health useful, convenient, and non-judgemental – but also that the chatbot lacked human empathy, and raised privacy concerns for the participants about with whom their health information would be shared.

This paper presents a case study of Botly, "the AI chatbot for OnlyFans" (Botly, 2024). Botly advertises "messages that sound like you" so content creators can "build relationships faster". I have conducted a feminist content analysis (Leavy, 2007) of marketing material of Botly to discover how ideas about gender are formed and represented. This included Botly's own promotional material – its website and Instagram

account – and industry reports about the service. The analysis allows me to argue that the OnlyFans service industry frames the platform as a heteronormative space that expects mostly women content creators to perform intimacy and care in messaging with their heterosexual male subscribers.

Botly offers three main modes of conversation, having identified patterns within OnlyFans direct messages: “Small Talk”, “Dirty Talk”, and “Sell Content”. Responding to a subscriber in one of the three modes is meant to ease awkwardness by matching the tone of the subscriber-initiated chat. Although the text addresses content creators as “you”, the testimonials on the website come from creators *and* agency owners, one of whom writes: “My team that’s been using the app loves it so far. They say it makes their job way easier”. This is despite OnlyFans’ terms of service forbidding the use of chatbots in direct messages, and OnlyFans CEO Keily Blair stating that “all accounts have to be tied back to a verified human creator, and that content needs to be identifiably that creator [...] We don’t allow AI chatbots. When we identify those, we take action” (Blair in Axios, 2023). Clearly, if the direct messages are so integral to the experience (and therefore profits) of OnlyFans, the risk of being penalised for outsourcing the work can be worth it.

But going against the terms of service isn’t the only violation. Use of chatbots in such an intimate setting is a kind of deception when a subscriber thinks they are chatting with the creator from the OnlyFans account – likely, one they already feel a connection with, based on their social media presence. Botly’s promotional material features an example set of exchanged messages designed to “show fans you care”. A Botly response to a subscriber messaging a content creator, “just hanging with my dog” reads, “Awww! :) how is Ted?” The implication is that the bot can recall and use personal details, like names of pets, in conversations as an expression of care – with no regard for the potential ethics of misleading subscribers. Instead of a chatbot helping to sort this kind of personal information, or find things to talk about that would interest both parties, or otherwise focus on increasing enjoyment of messaging, Botly markets the automation of a woman in a service role to a male client. In this way, the chatbot is providing a textual script that conforms to broader (hetero)sexual scripts, which are deeply gendered guidelines for sexual relations (Christensen 2021). The tone and content are derived from what Amy Shields Dobson (2015) describes as the “heterosexy” feminine form. While she is describing a visual culture when she identifies qualities of playfulness, up-for-it sexiness, and casual attitudes to commodification, these are all present textually in Botly’s sample messages and marketing material.

Conclusion

A central tenet within sextech scholarship is that focusing on pleasure helps us imagine better futures for technology (Albury, Stardust, & Sundén 2023). Based on my feminist content analysis of Botly’s marketing materials, the heteronormative scripts they follow cast OnlyFans as a place that limits, instead of expands, ideas around pleasure. This runs counter to the bold assertion of OnlyFans CEO Keily Blair, that OnlyFans’ goal is to “change the internet” (Blair in Axios, 2023). Blair’s way of changing the internet involves content creators more directly making money from their audience. A more imaginative

vision would involve building pleasure into OnlyFans experiences in all directions, expanding and queering the platform and therefore adult content culture.

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NAVIGATING *STIGMAHEALTH* – PUBLIC POLICY, SOCIAL CAPITAL AND DIGITAL SEXUAL HEALTH CULTURES

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Introduction

In Australia (as elsewhere) diagnoses of sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) are rising (King et al, 2023). However, face-to-face clinical testing services are culturally, financially and/or geographically inaccessible to many, and cannot meet existing demand. Consequently, Australian public health organisations are seeking to evaluate the quality of digital STI testing platforms, in order to develop policies and guidelines for a largely unregulated domain (Cardwell et al, 2023).

This paper combines approaches drawn from media and communications studies, platform studies, health sociology and sexual health research, to offer a transdisciplinary case-study of "digital sexual health". It explores the interplay of Australian sexual health testing policy guidelines – which restrict publicly-funded testing for individuals who are not deemed "high risk" – with the everyday digital and data intimacies (Burgess et al., 2022) of consensually non-monogamous adults who have multiple/concurrent sexual partners.

Drawing on user and founder accounts of the Australian sexual health platform S*TIgma Health*, we recommend that future evaluations of sexual health testing platforms should extend beyond consideration of platform adherence to formal health policy and guidelines (for example, Gibbs et al., 2017) or data-sharing practices (for example, Van Dijck & Poell, 2016). While these elements are essential for ensuring user privacy and quality care, they do not account for unequal distribution of social capital in sexual sub-cultures and communities. Nor do they consider the complex relationship between formal health data collection practices and everyday data cultures.

Methods

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted in two ongoing research projects investigating the relationship between digital technologies, data and everyday sexual health and wellbeing practices. The first explores the health-seeking experiences of Australian adults practicing consensual non-monogamy (n=17). While recruitment emphasised sexual practice over sexual identity, the majority of study participants identify as queer, bi+ or pansexual. The second investigates the ways that diverse Swedish and Australian LGBTQ+ sextech users aged 18+ (n=15), and sextech founders and retailers (n=10), experience and conceptualise sexual health and wellbeing.

Following preliminary abductive analyses (Tavoury & Timmermans, 2014), the authors undertook a limited walkthrough (Light et al., 2016) of the *STIgmaHealth* platform (without submitting health data or testing requests). Preliminary themes and speculative findings were sense-checked with Project Advisory Groups that include researchers, clinicians, and representatives from peer health advocacy groups and sexual health workforce training organisations.

STIgma though the lens of public health

STIgmaHealth is a private, fee-based mobile-friendly web platform that allows users to complete a brief sexual history and receive a referral to a pathology clinic for STI and HIV testing. Test results are returned via an app notification with a turnaround of 3-5 days. Users access telehealth consultations with a general practitioner, which can include digital prescriptions for STI treatment. A companion platform, *PrePHealth*, offers telehealth consultations and prescriptions for HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis medication. Both services adhere to current Australian health service provision guidelines (including guidelines for data privacy and security).

In a recent review, Cardwell and colleagues (2023) aim to assess the "quality, reliability and accessibility" of 17 Australian digital sexual health testing services (including *STIgma*) through a range of indicators, including platform alignment with existing Australian policies and guidelines for testing, and the Health on the Net Foundation's Code of Conduct (Boyer et al., 1998). Services were also assessed according to UK digital testing standards, which mandate telehealth consultations for users who are perceived to be especially marginalised to vulnerable (Cardwell et al., 2023). While digital services were evaluated with regard to "appropriate" offerings, appropriateness was determined primarily in relation to clinical guidelines, with the aim of service improvement. In contrast, our research focused on cultures of use.

Strategic navigation of health testing

Participant accounts of *STIgma* use demonstrated both fluency in the use of digital sexual technologies and platforms (ranging from hookup apps to health discussion forums), and high levels of health literacy – defined by Nutbeam (2000) as "the personal, cognitive and social skills which determine the ability of individuals to gain access to, understand, and use information to promote and maintain good health" (pg. x). While our study was small, the high levels of economic and social capital among our participants resonate with findings of a recent systematic review of digital sexual health testing interventions (Iyamu et al., 2023).

Our participant's accounts of using *STIgma* can be interpreted through the lens of "everyday data cultures" (Burgess et al., 2022). For instance, all participants seemed to be well aware that current public health policy guidelines limit the number of Medicare-billed STI tests available to those who are not "men who have sex with men" (MSM) or sex workers. However, they practiced workarounds to allow them to access testing on *STIgma*.

By identifying as sex workers on intake surveys, app-users who were neither MSM nor sex workers were able to test more frequently and/or comprehensively than guidelines allow. While some participants were employed in the health sector (and may have inside knowledge of health guidelines), others reported sharing cultural knowledge around testing on platforms that combine explicit profiles with discussion forums, such as *Fetlife* or *RedHotPie.*

As Robinson (2013) notes, "strategic" expression of sexual practice and identity is not uncommon in face-to-face health data collection. *STIgma* (and other testing apps) simplify "strategic identification" by providing digital menus that alleviate the need for detailed conversations with health providers.

For users, *STIgma* was preferred because digital test results could be easily copied and shared across group chats, as part of multi-partner sexual negotiations. This offered significant advantages in complex sexual networks, given that digital access to test results is not common in face-to-face Australian health services, and the majority of dating apps and platforms in Australia do not easily afford sharing of STI and HIV status (Author).

Conclusions

According to *STIgma*'s co-founder James Sneddon, assurances of anonymity and "discretion" are key features of platform advertising and marketing, alongside promises of accessibility. But "access" to commercial health platforms is dependent on both user knowledge and material resources. As Iyamu and colleagues (2023) observe, while digital testing services are sometimes promoted as an antidote to marginalisation and exclusion from face-to-face services, they are currently most used by those who have secure incomes, and multiple options for quality healthcare.

Some of our participants explicitly acknowledged high levels of both economic and social capital that enabled them to successfully navigate *STIgma* (and other digital services). However, they suggested that this was likely to benefit publicly-funded clinics, who could focus on offering testing services to people who could not afford to access commercial platforms.

Further, they valued the specific affordances of digital healthcare which facilitated the strategic deployment of intimate data practices. These included "gaming" intake data collection to access desired testing, and deliberately seeking test results in digital formats that could be easily shared in broader sexual networks.

Consequently, we conclude that the process of critically evaluating health platforms extends beyond an analysis of technical affordances and regulatory regimes. It also demands an attention to local health policies and industry-specific "quality indicators"; and contextual understanding of the diverse ways that sexual sub-cultures and communities engage with and understand "digital sexual health".

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AN ELECTRIC DOG COLLAR UNDER THE SKIRT: QUEER USES AND EXPERIENCES OF SEXTECH

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Pleasure is a question of sexual justice and sexual rights and as such critical for queer, trans and nonbinary people. This paper delineates a queer politics of pleasure by exploring LGBTQ+ people's uses and experiences of sextech by moving from normative regulations of sextech to counter-normative, or what Paul Preciado (2018) calls "countersexual" ways of interlinking sex and tech. Which bodies, identities, pleasures and practices do sextech assume and extend? And how can these assumptions be bent or played with in and through sextech use by LGBTQ+ people?

In-depth interviews and a Deleuzian perspective on pleasure and desire

From medical devices in disguise in the early 20th century (Lieberman 2016, 2017, Maines 1999), to liberating and playful political objects as part of the sexual revolution in the 1960s and 1970s (Comella, 2017), and to the present mainstreaming of sex toys as part of feminist and sex-positive sexual retailing (Attwood, 2005; Comella, 2017; Smith, 2007), pleasure is at the forefront of tech development. As a broad umbrella term for digital technologies designed to enable and encourage pleasure, sextech and sextech research encompasses, for example, sex robots and VR porn (Devlin, 2019; Evans, 2020; Kubes, 2019), sexual wellness apps for self-tracking (Gesselman et al., 2020; Lupton, 2015; Saunders, 2022) and smart sex toys (Flore & Pienaar, 2020; Author, 2020). While sextech has been given capacious definitions of what counts as sextech, it is often understood as technologies that enhance or improve sexual experiences and pleasure (such as when networked sex toys seek to measure, visualise, and "optimise" orgasms) in a linear fashion with limited space for curiosity, exploration, and desire which can be this elusive thing.

The paper builds on a collaborative research project with 38 in-depth interviews with LGBTQ+ sextech users and producers/retailers in Australia and Sweden. It mainly focuses on user perspectives on the sextech industry by emphasizing experiences of sex toys specifically. The group of participants currently represents a wide array of sexual and gender identities, from bisexual, queer and lesbian ciswomen, to trans, non-binary and gender fluid participants, and to gay cismen. Most of the participants are white (but with Indian, Aboriginal, Middle-Eastern/Asian, and Australian/Vietnamese participants in the Australian sample), their ages ranging from 18 to 70, but a clear majority is in their 30s and early 40s.

The discussion is framed through a Deleuzian critique of pleasure as a commodity in capitalist societies, and how entering into pleasurable, playful relations with sex toys entails a certain amount of giving in to their rhythms, logics, and ways of modeling both pleasure and sexual norms. Or, as Claire Colebrook (2006, 133) argues, capitalism does not repress or deny pleasure, but rather, we are "manufactured *to want*. My desire must be *for* this or that purchasable pleasure." In the discussion of normative

regulations of sextech with the help of countersexual forms of use, the argument also builds on how Elizabeth Grosz (1995, 180) proposes a Deleuzian reconfiguration of desire, not in terms of a (Freudian) lack to be filled, but as *production*: “As production, desire does not provide blueprints, models, ideals, or goals. Rather, it experiments, it makes: it is fundamentally aleatory, inventive.”

Countersexual uses and experiences of sextech

Normative marketing and design

The linear design of sex toys is in a sense paralleled by how bodies, genders and sexualities are assumed to “line up” according to a cis-heteronormative logic. While the field of sextech includes a variety of bodies, gender identities and sexual orientations, a majority of the sextech market focuses on products targeting women and female bodies on the one hand, and straight couples on the other (e.g., Faustino, 2018; Wilson-Barnao & Collie, 2018). This resonates in obvious ways with many of our interviewees who repeatedly pointed out the strikingly gendered marketing and design of sex toys, and how this in turn reinforces sexual norms and cisheterosexual relationships, which for some nonbinary participants gave rise to dysphoria.

Assuming and extending bodies and pleasures

Sextech design extend and assume some bodies, and not others. Are those straps holding the harness long enough to fit a fat body? Will the angle or positioning of bodies for this or that toy work for a body with chronic pain? Sextech also presupposes some pleasures and not others, as if toys are always used for receiving pleasure, and not providing it (in ways that can be equally pleasurable). Even toys marketed specifically to trans and nonbinary users may not recognize the pleasure involved in giving pleasure to others, “how it might feel to wear it or wield it,” as if extending the body in that way does not have its own pleasure possibilities. Within this shift, bodies are no longer confined to a narrow set of sexual or gender identities, to what bodies “are,” but rather imagined on the basis of what they are capable of, what bodies can do.

Creative, off-label uses of sextech

When it comes to more creative or off-label uses of sextech, those interviewees who also belong to kink communities were a particularly rich source. One queer woman in her 50s, who is also a BDSM practitioner, imagines using a vibrator which visualizes orgasm curves in practices of edging, knowing with a scientific precision of sorts where the breaking point is for “staying just under.” There are also stories of using appliances for sexual ends that are not designed for sex. A bisexual woman in her 40s wore a remote-control electric dog collar around her thigh with her dominant, male partner, stating how with every electric shock he gave her, she felt he was thinking of her. She just wishes the collar had further reach, was less clunky and easier to wear under a wide skirt on walks around town.

Variety and unpredictability

Counter to the linear design of orgasms in sextech, following a tech development assumption of the stronger and the faster the better, other uses and technologies are interesting, such as those that have space for desire in the sense of not knowing what one wants, finding out in the process, exploring, experimenting, and improvising. One interviewee programmed her own rather complex vibration patterns so that she would not know beforehand what would happen. Someone else enjoyed the musical randomness of jazz linked to their toy. They emphasise the importance of variety and unpredictability in sexy encounters with tech, as a way of making space for other pleasures and desires than those more predictably inscribed by design.

Conclusion

What queer users want from sextech is only partly what they find. In their ways of using, experiencing, and imagining sextech, they emphasise the importance of a focus on bodily capacities, not on what bodies are, but on what bodies can do, as well as on how it is not always possible to know what one wants beforehand. In the midst of sextech discourses emphasising optimisation and orgasmic results, there is thus a need for a discussion of more flexible and unexpected pleasures and forms of use. Such a discussion adds nuance to sextech discourses and makes space for more imaginative ways of sensing and making sense of tech.

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