FROM THE BOARDROOM TO THE BEDROOM: SEXUAL ECOLOGIES IN THE
ALGORITHMIC AGE

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ABSTRACT

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This project examined traditional gendered discourses surrounding the ends and means of

sexuality, the emerging role of digital sexual technologies in purported sexual empowerment,

and the socio-material aspects which revolve around these technologies, sexual medias, and

sexual discourses. Combining critical feminist insights with media ecology, this project explored

happenings within the sociosexually violent pre- and present-COVID-19 United States ecology,

documenting novel and rigorous contributions in our increasingly algorithmic world. This study

of the U.S. context critiques foundational constructs created by Enlightenment decisionmakers

who rationalized colonial rhetorics and logics built into each preceding iteration of capitalisms

from industrialism into neoliberalism since national origin. As such, it extends critiques of

mechanistic models of the human body and sexual communications and situates them within the

vastly uncriminalized sexual violences, as well as insufficient sexual education standards.

Theoretically, I argue that a mechanization of humans has occurred, been pushed to its extreme,

and is flipping into a humanization of objects. To demonstrate this, I critical feminist rhetorically

analyzed 75 biomimetic sextech advertisements from the brand Lora DiCarlo, contextualizing

them in salient discourses within 428 present-COVID-19 TikTok videos, investigating: "What

rhetorical themes occur within advertisements for biomimetic sexual technologies marketed to

vulva-havers in the late-stage present-COVID-19 neoliberal U.S. landscape?" "How have

biomimetic sexual technologies marketed to vulva-havers effected how their sexual experiences

are created and maintained in the sociosexual U.S. landscape?" and "How are biomimetic

sextech changing vulva-havers sexual sense-making, experiences, and relations within the

sexually violent late-stage capitalist present-COVID-19 U.S. landscape?" Using a feminist eye, this brings to media ecology a contextualization of biomimetic sextech devices marketed to vulva-havers, situating their socio-political and cultural nuances in conversation with otherwise taken for granted biological components of cisnormative and heteronormative life, among other relevant characteristics. Ergo, this project debuts a brand new liberatory embodied research paradigm.

To all the humans who continue to be deemed less than who they have been and truly are.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, the human body has often been viewed through the dominant technologies of the age. For instance, Descartes talked about the body as a machine (1596-1650), Spinoza described the body as a system of pulleys and gears (1632-1677), and Fritz Kahn talked about the body as an industrial machine (1888-1968) (Borck, 2007). As a result, these metaphors informed our ideas of sex and sexualities in the digital age. Likewise, new digital environments have altered ways in which sexual identities and bodies emerge and are maintained.

Although sexual technologies change, the question concerning technology's role in sexuality has yet to be substantially addressed in communication and media scholarship. Arguably, advancements in sexually mediated aids, like sex devices, and now sexbots have and continue to monumentally shift our socio-sexual identities and relationships for better or worse (Comella, 2017; Lieberman, 2017) especially in our present-COVID-19 world. The consequences become more salient when considered against the normalized American taboo on sexuality in consumer culture, since the advertising industry has long capitalized on sex (Boddewyn, 1991).

In contemporary times, certain discourses complicate this further such as the absence of federally funded Comprehensive Sex Education (Griggs, 2017; SEICUS, 2014), normalized sexual shame (Clark, 2017), and sexually violent medias (Dastagir, 2018). What makes these matters more complicated beyond the lack of institutional financial support for sufficient sex education, is that consumer capitalism problematically frames sexual identity through a lens of economics.

In this dissertation project, I elucidate some ways consumer capitalism goes about problematically framing sexual identity through a lens of economics, by fleshing out the cold

profit-driven sociosexual body politic via the following two-part argument. Firstly (or, on one greedy hand), the advertising industry capitalizes on sex and sexuality by taking advantage of the historical devaluation of female pleasure (Irigaray, 1991) (otherwise referred to as the "orgasm gap") (Mintz, 2017), which eventually led to the invention of basic novelty sex toys (Bell, 2018) (created and sold by cismen to ciswomen, usually phallic shaped). During the cutting-edge International Clitoris Summit, held virtually on Saturday, May 22nd, 2021 from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. PST, Mintz gave the opening remarks, explaining relationally that the orgasm gap is largest during cisheternormative hook-up sex, decreases slightly with friends with benefits of these relations, and is closest, but does not ever close, in cis-heterosexual partnerships.

At the end of her talk, Mintz made a call to action for everyone to stop equating the word "sex" with "intercourse" as well as the word "vagina" with "vulva", for the purposes of explicitly countering the erasure of female pleasure and the anatomical correctness of female genitalia, centering around the clitoris. Culturally, both of these linguistic statements are paramount to make because for centuries, this orgasm gap has been undiscussed, disregarded, or devalued through heavily scripted socially and representationally attributed myths that the female orgasm is difficult to achieve. Making matters more complicated, over the course of the last decade, popular feminist entrepreneurs have co-opted sextech for vulva-havers blossoming from preexisting highly profitable neoliberal "lady boss" rhetoric (Cauterucci, 2018). This trend infested leading enterprise, culminating in biomimetic sex devices. These biomimetic devices are designed and allegedly made to mimic the feeling of human touch and/or technique and have been marketed as being founded by a "female" (Republic.co, n.d., para. 2) created with a self-proclaimed, "mission…to create a sexually equitable world where all genders and sexualities are met with innovative and thoughtful tools to serve on their path to pleasure" (LoraDiCarlo.com,

n.d., para. 1) to "promote female and LBGTQ+ sexual empowerment" (LoraDiCarlo, 2019, para. 7).

Secondly, I overview how the advertising industry has capitalized on sexual identity; preying upon the naturalized emotionally stunting, vapidness, and toxicity many men are socialized into performing - inside and outside the bedroom (Simmons, 2017). Tangentially, this phenomena interplays with the factors of the first premise, as well as fuels a market for men being good consumers of humanoid intelligent AI sex robots (RobotCompanion.ai, 2020). And, to stir this sexy pot further, anticipatory controversies in popular culture, academic, and feminist circles alike have emerged, debating whether sexual products are morally acceptable for people like registered sex offenders, sociopaths, serial killers, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW)/red-pillars, necrophiliacs, and pedophiliacs (Ghosh, 2020; Kubes, 2019). Adding insult to these uncertain societal injuries, numerous reports have documented the unlikelihood of these marketed and future promised humanoid intelligent AI sex robots ever assuming the positions that futurists and marketers alike have been promising these men. Said otherwise, as the market currently stands, sex robots are still much more doll-like than they are like humanoid companions that these brands suggest (Kleeman, 2017; Morgan, 2019).

Therefore, the second main aim of this dissertation is to address current challenges and contemporary concerns around our usage of these sexual technologies. This includes, but is not limited to, an examination of traditional gendered discourses surrounding the ends and means of sexuality, the emerging role of digital sexual technologies in purported sexual empowerment, and the socio-material aspects which revolve around these technologies, sexual medias, and sexual discourses. An understanding of the relationship between sextech and identities requires an exploration of the broader cultural discourses that foster fear of sexual judgement, humanness,

and vulnerability avoidance. I tie this into Field's (1995) phenomenon skin hunger, or touch hunger, which occurred alongside the normalization of human isolation.

As media historian and Professor John Durham Peters (1999) poignantly states, "There is nothing so electric and unmanageable as touch...[so] to think of the longing for presence of other people as a kind of metaphysical mistake is nuts" (p. 270). Herein, I assert that this rejection of longing may be connected to a reported increase in isolation and normalization of sex technologies as extensions of sexuality, years before COVID emerged on the American sociosexual landscape; inspiring the CDC to suggest masked and kinky sexual experiences (Parker-Pope, 2020). As stated, newer product's claim to fame is the biomimetic replication of human touch. Thusly, in our present-COVID-19 world (circa 2021-22), I aim to explore certain effects of sexual extensions that are being marketed to vulva-havers as biomimetic sexual devices, scientifically designed to mimic (and, arguably, eclipse) human-human sexual contact, that are now taking the place and, allegedly, filling a gap of sociosexual socialization (Nichols, 2019; Smothers, 2020).

These events should be understood as existing within a media landscape of socio-cultural precedents, like the increasingly resonant diegesis of future forward techno-dystopias within shows like "Black Mirror" and "Love, Death & Robots", as well as movies like "Idiocracy", "Her", and "Ex Machina". Based on ample research in this area, I hypothesize that in this violent sociosexual American landscape, perspectives on sex education are as diverse as the sexual technologies that have infiltrated our lives (Curtis, 2004; Davis, Blank, Lin, & Bonillas, 1996; Rosenberger, Schick, Herbenick, Novak, & Reece, 2011; Queen & Comella, 2008). For reference, in 2009 one team of researchers found that in North America 53% of women owned sex toys (Herbenick, Reece, Sanders, Dodge, Ghassemi, & Fortenberry, 2009), and so did 45%

of men (Reece, Herbenick, Sanders, Dodge, Ghassemi, & Fortenberry, 2009). In fact, Susan Colvin, Co-founder of the Adult Novelty Manufacturers Expo, estimated the industry at $15 billion with projections to pass $50 billion by 2020 (Burns, 2016). And that was well before the COVID pandemic occurred, where reportedly sextech sales have exploded (Lee, 2020; Drolet, 2020; Smothers, 2020), and show no signs of slowing down, despite prevailing present-COVID-19 American unemployment (Kochhar & Bennett, 2021; Tappe, 2020).

Equally neglected in this ecological discussion are questions concerning the ways in which the material and constitutive characteristics of technology, via shifts in our media environments, have impacted where and what young adults learn about sexuality. When I say "ecology", I mean it in the broad media ecological understanding, which one of the late founders of the field, Christine L. Nystrom (1973), defined as, "the study of complex communication systems as environments" (para. 9). For example, from an ecological understanding, the dearth of a formal sexual education system is being filled by unlikely web sources, like Pornhub, which now include a sex education section alongside their content (Pornhub, 2020). Without a more comprehensive analysis, we are left to wonder whether these alternative/unofficial sources of sexual education sufficiently facilitate healthy sexual lives and relationships. Thus, my primary goal in this dissertation project would be to begin understanding the relationship between the constitutive aspects of sexual communication, sexual technologies, and the modern sites of inept formal sex education that they mutually arise through and help maintain.

In one perspective, sextech, and their advancements, have affected society in a similar way that the pill altered the larger dynamic of human experience because females/women were able to then get jobs for the first time and prioritize their own careers and sexual desires (outside of an ever-looming possibility of pregnancy) (Peterson, 2010). The evolution of sex toys into

devices has virtually (pun intended) taken quintessential White Anglo-Saxon Protestant and Baptist abstinence-only, often pro-life, and dogmatic, arguments that sex should only occur between married people, for reproduction, and thrown them out the window (Ingersoll, 2019). This reveals the fact most sexual acts do not exist for purposes of reproduction[1], but pleasure.

A struggled shift in this reproduction-centric perspective of sexuality is evidenced within our present-COVID-19 world by scientific advancements coming increasingly close to enabling females (if they desire and can afford to) to asexually reproduce using their bone marrow (Teare, 2019). Concomitantly, and arguably as a form of class warfare backlash, conservative think tank informed policymakers perpetually threaten female reproductive rights (Najmabadi, 2021), and are persistently attempting to criminalize unavoidable miscarriages (Robert, 2021). And, lastly, in recent years, an entire Childfree by Choice lifestyle has arisen (Blackstone, 2019).

Theoretically, technological changes offer opportunities for a complete absence of cismen from the picture of sexuality because sextech is a way feminine agents' can seize their own means of sexuality. Also, these biomimetics have set the stage for a much more expansive presentation for non-binary and/or trans people to be sexed and sexual in never-before-seen ways. In fact, there's a whole market for transmen and packers; allowing them to combat body dysmorphia in a more cost-effective way than bottom surgery (TransGuySupply.com, 2018).

Additionally, the emergence of clitorally-centered biomimetic sex toys has shifted sexual discourses and norms by decentralizing the penis during sex (Lora DiCarlo, 2019). This practical yet commodified rearticulation of what sex is may further expand potentialities of erotic expressions beyond heteronormativity; opening spaces for vulva-havers to experience more

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[1] Aside from the roughly 1 in 8 couples (or nearly 7 million Americans) dealing with infertility, according to The National Infertility Association (2022).

fulfilling sex lives. On the other, use of biomimetics may short-circuit user's needs to learn about their own preferences, as well as those of their partners, through negation of human touch in a way never seen before. Said otherwise, we don't yet know if there are costs to sexually extending human touch by using technologies to attain efficient pleasure and orgasm.

Thus, in light of the recently reported "sexocalypse" (Holohan, 2019; Julian, 2018), this project contributes to explorations of taken-for-granted engendered ways in which sexually mediated separations of body from body -- much like the distance brought about through the implementation of writing and mediated environments -- may complicate the already multi-factor maladapted socio-sexual environment, long-steeped in a devaluation of female pleasure.

Key Research Questions

My research questions for this dissertation project are oriented around the potentialities and implications of technological mediation within late-stage capitalist present-COVID-19 sociosexual American landscape. My concerns are critically epistemic, sensoric, and relational; media ecologically and communicatively informed by the natures and profit-driven purposes of neoliberal advertisements in our algorithmically driven human environments. Specifically, I am inspired by critical feminists who unpack the epistemic ways in which we come to know what we know, like Patricia Hill Collin's (2000) *matrix of domination*, Evelyn B. Higginbotham's (1994) *respectability politics*, the late bell hooks's (2014) work on imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchal dehumanization Othering of Black feminine folks, Simone de Beauvoir's (1949, 1997) *The Second Sex* and her term *bad faith*, Marilyn Frye's (1983) lesbian feminism and bird cage metaphor, Linda Alcoff's (1991) critiques of universality, Sandra Harding's (1995) standpoint theory, and others.

Also, techno-feminists like Donna Haraway's (1987, 1988, 2010) concepts of the cyborg and the God Trick, Sherry Turkle's (1986, 1990, 2017) works on universalized masculine coding culture, critiques of Objectivity, and digital loneliness, danah boyd's (n.d., 2010, 2015) work on sexism of technologies and participatory cultures, Lisa Nakamura's (2008) takes on digitalized race, Safiya Umoja Noble's (2018) findings about oppressive algorithms, Ruha Benjamin's (2019) work on technologically inequitable and racialized coding practices and programs, Roopika Risam's (2019) critiques of credentialism and human subjectivity, Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein's (2020) *Data Feminism*, Legacy Russell's (2020) *Glitch Feminism*, and more.

My media ecological inspirations have mainly derived from Marshall McLuhan's (1951, 1969, 1997) concepts regarding breakdown as breakthrough, laws of media, and art as counter-environments, Neil Postman's (1971, 1986, 2011) works on critical pedagogy, infotainment, and technopoly, Christine L. Nystrom's (1973, 2021) post-mortem published works documenting the field of media ecology in its infancy and within her own dissertation project, Sarah Sharma's (2011, 2019, 2020, 2022) work on time, feminists as broken machines, and viewing systems of power as machines, John Dowd's (2016) landmark suggestion to pursue a critical media ecology further, and Andrey Miroshnichenko's (2014) work on humans *as* media, among others.

Communication wise, my research interests began reading sociologists like George Herbert Mead's (1934) Hegelian dialectics and philosophies of symbolic interactionism, Erving Goffman's (1959, 1979) presentation of self and advertisements, rhetoricians, like Kenneth Burke's (1969a, 1969b) works on identification, and Mary Daly's (1994, 2015, 2016) radical feminist means of language reclamation and wordplay. Additionally, I am inspired by critical mass communication scholars who employ political economic analysis, like Herman and

Chomsky's (1988) media works on *Manufacturing Consent* my master's mentor Lee Artz (2015) work on neoliberal transnational and global media monopolies. Lastly, post-phenomenology and techno-scientists, like Don Ihde's (1990) *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* about an inability to return to "natural" living (a fantasy) prior to the introduction of human extensions, and critical cultural critics of capitalist bureaucratic logics like Max Weber's (1968) rationality, George Ritzer's (1993) term, that extended Weber's work, *McDonaldization*, as well as social change theorists like Bowers, Ochs, Jensen, and Schulz's (2009) agitation and control.

Thus far, after consulting a variety of interdisciplinary works, it seems information has not solved problems within these environments. So, instead I explored these concerns by asking the following: "What rhetorical themes occur within advertisements for biomimetic sexual technologies marketed to vulva-havers in the late-stage present-COVID-19 neoliberal U.S. landscape?" "How have biomimetic sexual technologies marketed to vulva-havers effected how their sexual experiences are created and maintained in the sociosexual U.S. landscape?" and "How are biomimetic sextech changing vulva-havers sexual sense-making, experiences, and relations within the sexually violent late-stage capitalist present-COVID-19 U.S. landscape?"

Methodology

Throughout this dissertation, my orientation is, in true media ecological fashion, not one after an assertion of definite answers, but, instead, one of offering my own documentation of happenings, to inspire further questioning. At best, these investigations allow for a more expansive revelation of the sexually violent American ecology, and our sociosexual landscape writ large. Withal, as a holistically minded feminist media ecologist, I would commit a disservice if I planned to document the design of sex devices for vulva-havers, without situating these artifacts within a historicity of the White heteronormative violences of the American landscape.

Therefore, using a feminist eye, I bring to media ecology a contextualization of biomimetic sextech devices marketed to vulva-havers, situating their socio-political and cultural nuances in conversation with otherwise taken for granted biological components of cisnormative and heteronormative life, among other relevant characteristics. I approach this project with the perspective that, academia knowledge and credentials aside, I know that the patriarchy, sexual violence, and an orgasm gap exist because I have lived them and heard many more marginalized people report these realities. Ergo, I envision tactics of dissent, like this project taking the form of feminist histography, solidifying a critical feminist media ecological framework by providing an edge to media ecological tenants, like breakdown as breakthrough.

Said otherwise, in writing this project I am tangibly putting McLuhan's (1969) famous theory of arguing the functionality in learning how any medium truly works, by deconstructing it, unpacking it, or "breaking" (p. 12) it (an eerily feminist reminiscent form of praxis), into conversation with technocritical scholars like Sharma, Ruha Benjamin, and Lisa Nakamura. Whether motivated by rage, or some other just means, the people must begin changing these oppressively designed systems. We must acknowledge our circumstances, in all their challenges and opportunities, to collectively redefine legitimacy and values, prioritizing people over profit.

Theoretical Framework

The knowledge I've gathered regarding the historical emergence of feminist scholarship in fields like rhetoric, and the neoliberal discourses of sex industries, have helped inform and shape my understanding of my potential trajectories of how a critical feminist rhetorical, gendered, and media ecological approach to analyzing sextech advertisements might be oriented and enacted, culminating in a solid theoretical framework which grounds this project.

Critical Rhetoric

Specifically, readings which serve examples to form the rhetorical theorizing I orchestrate throughout this project are Sloop's (2009), Marchessault (2005), and Worthington (2015). For example, in Sloop's (2009) piece "People Shopping", he chose to analyze the text parameter of General Motor's Saturn advertisements. In doing so, he probed a relationship between rhetoric and materiality to demonstrate how the company's PR and retail customer service constructed the company's image as being synonymous with an American identity.

In media ecological fashion, his efforts explored this commodified phenomenon by first consulting literature on blurred meanings between bodies and technology. It makes sense that Sloop's work would blur the lines between rhetoric and media ecology considering he has taught a course called "CMAP 8004: Media Ecology" since Spring 2018 at Vanderbilt University. According to Vanderbilt University's (2017) website, Sloop's course description is, as follows:

> Designed to study how media of all sorts have come to define the spaces of human life, action, experience and what we may call "our world." Focus on the impact of media technologies on built environments such as urban centers, academic learning spaces, museum and gallery settings, hospitals, transitory spaces (airports, malls, train stations), and domestic interiors. Additional attention to how different technologies and media are used to alter the shape of our natural surroundings, be it to address issues of climate change or remake specific landscapes in form of aesthetic projects (para. 1).

What particularly interests me about the piece was how Sloop focused on how the body, and its prosthetics, are shaped by institutional rules and regulations; materially and semiotically altering cultural mediations. His larger argument articulated how, through Saturn's commodification of discourse, they profited two-fold. Firstly, through the contemporarily

resonant metaphors of commodification and, secondly, via the persistent rhetoric and logics of U.S. citizenship. Both aspects are crucial for contextualizing biomimetic sextech adverts.

For Sloop, the company's decision to brand identify with U.S. values created a situation in which viewers learned to equate deregulation with their own consumer desire to reach fulfillment as human beings. Having said that, despite prevailing capitalist instability and resulting inequities, by centering products instead of people, Saturn advertisements depicted citizen agency as capably enacted through purchasing instead of intimacy (Sloop, 2009). Chapter five similarly demonstrates how this financial theme of intimacy still prevails today. One feminist scholar who critically analyzes adverts, Janine Marchessault (2005), said it best:

> It is women's experiences that have disappeared in what McLuhan identifies as a drive to push the boundaries of physical experience beyond the body. Women's bodies are the primary and original commodity. In post-war America, these bodies are advertised through 'glamour cake' postures and highly charged displays of affect and melodrama. Through rhetorical ploy, 'moving emotion and merchandise', subjectivities are invited to obey the law of numbers figured not by the folk but rather in the laboratory, the studio and advertising agency (p. 57).

Another relevant, and more recent scholar, Worthington (2015) chose to analyze Huffington Post forum comments in response to backlash to a Belvedere vodka advertisement that "was widely interpreted to support rape culture by joking about sexualized violence against women" (p. 12). In doing so, she identified four major recurring themes, emerging from a range of topics, "(1) speculations on advertising strategy; (2) contested perceptions of sexual assault; (3) links between gender politics and party politics; and (4) media literacy lessons" (p. 12). Their findings suggested that this left-leaning participatory space hosts a questionably effective

environment for critics of mediated misogyny to disclose authoritative credentials and speak truth regarding patriarchal ideologies, ushering in feminist progress (Worthington, 2015). Worthington's work relates to this project because it illustrates the increasingly complex and unilateral digital landscapes that now for the first time in history exist in our algorithmic world.

Critical Feminist Rhetoric

Additionally, and for the purposes of more equitably exploring and problematizing rhetoric of capitalistic commodification, I draw from race, ability, and gendered commodity critical scholars. For instance, one early popular and liberal feminist fallacy, expressed both explicitly and implicitly, is that "changes in media messages and structures would contribute to the empowerment of women in the wider society" (Ferguson, 1990, p. 1). However, on the contrary, Ferguson found that as more women entered the labor force, weaponized rhetorics and imagery of female autonomy, competence, confidence, and achievement were being sold as an assumed correlate of empowerment, despite the pervading systemic lack of feminine power and control (Ferguson, 1990). This is crucial to note, as not to perpetuate a loss of scope.

Other researchers, along their own unique avenues of literature, also found that all that glitters isn't gold. For instance, according to Goldman, Heath, and Smith (1991), there was a shift where, instead of fighting feminist discourses, neoliberally trained and oriented advertisers strategically co-opted them. Specifically, they noted that advertisers filtered feminist values through logics of commodified relational narratives, which then result in profitably internalized ideological contradictions. For decades, the researchers argue that this potent milking of envy and desire has led to fetishized pop feminism, or an aestheticized version of the male gaze, which addresses, reduces, and asymmetrically positions female spectators as symbolic material,

depoliticizing feminist morals for profit (Goldman, Heath, & Smith, 1991). Therefore, the trajectory of neoliberal co-opting must be factored into analysis.

Despite this conflicting market-oriented history, Goldman, Heath, and Smith concluded that "setting up the female body as the locus of pleasure and desire may, in fact, fetishize women's parts as objects of desire, but it also creates the possibility of revaluing women's bodily pleasure, legitimating it in its own terms" (Goldman, Heath & Smith, 1991, p. 18). Which is to say, although feminist scholars must remain cognizant of these forces, struggle is ongoing.

Notably, the late bell hooks (who purposefully does not capitalize her pen name, so that people focus on her ideas rather than her name), is a Black feminist who traced out the socio-historical foundation and reproduction of Black women's bodies being used and seen as objects for those in power in the Western world. She argued that an analysis of the social understanding of Black women's bodies that does not explicitly consider the historical domination and construction of Black women's oversexualized bodies by White society has been insufficient. Due in part to these impartial considerations', hooks argued that Black women have had to contend with oversexualized and abject projections of the Black female body and the resulting expectations about their sexuality. Just as Whiteness subjugates Blackness in American society, conventions of White bodies as human have reduced Black bodies to, at worst, deviant racist naked bodies for violent exploitation, and, at best, compartmentalized objects for mere White spectacle (hooks, 2014).

As hooks explained, symbolically, financially, and physically, this Othering of Black peoples' bodies interplayed with the prevalent human-animal dichotomy in the Western world and was thus intimately interwoven with the perverse sexual dehumanization of Black people, utilizing a rhetorical analogy of Black people to animals. Where Black women's sexuality was

eroticized around their butts, Black men were stigmatized as being feral rapists. In contemporary society these stereotypes represent a lose-lose battle for Black people, which has been commodified by neoliberal capitalism and implicated as something they should be proud to endorse and perform as inconsequential. She asserted that Black women have been expected to replicate this oversexualization, humiliation, and abuse depicted in historically White-owned media. Concurrently, on the binary-gendered flip side, Black men then too have been expected to perpetuate dominance and violence against each other, alongside an imposition of Black women's submission to Black men and White people (hooks, 2014).

In contemporary media, these race and racisms have been tailored into neoliberal form. According to Robinson and Rich (2017) most mainstream media that showcases Black women and women of color, stereotypes like the "White man's whore," are, "introduced, rehashed, and recycled…several times, not to engage this topic authentically but rather to bolster viewership and construct a preferred [read: White, patriarchal] reading about US racial relations" (13). They note that women of color delivering colorblind narratives is profitable (Robinson & Rich, 2017).

Lastly, Jermyn (2016) has argued it is imperative that feminist media critics address the implications of the dynamic neglect, disenfranchisement, and invisibility and/or aestheticized marketplace co-opting of trendy older women in critiques of the neoliberal, postfeminist climate, suspending consumers into a coercive cycle of what Gill called a "makeover" culture (p. 573). In subtle and overt ways, marketized rhetorics of commodified self-care are omnipresent.

Critical Media Ecology

Considering the emerging nature of critical media ecology since 2016, although the following scholars may not explicitly refer to themselves as "critical media ecologists", I argue they all fit the bill. For instance, on a technological and reproductive note, Jana Sawicki (2017)

in her article "Disciplining Mothers: Feminism and the New Reproductive Technologies" introduced some ways discourses of biopower and pervasive social control have inclined ciswomen's bodies to be represented and seen as machines. She described biopower as policies, interventions, and processes which transform the mindset of human bodies themselves; regulating humanity within the capitalistic narrative that bodies can and should be seen as functioning equivocal to machines, and, in this case, to churn out machine-like reproduction. As media ecologist Valerie V. Peterson has pointed out in her respective work on the environmental effects of the birth control pill, Sawicki argues those who disagree have historically met these reproductive technologies with resistance and struggle (Sawicki, 2017).

Furthering her argument, Sawicki mentioned that Foucauldian feminists distinguish their unique line of thinking through lodging critiques of new reproductive technologies, which they claim have historically equated "female" people with a reproductively capable womb alone, in effort to normalize control over ciswomen's bodies. They detail that not only have practices involving these technologies negated ciswomen's subjective experiences, but also end up desensitizing patients to the idea concepts of "natural" childbirth are obsolete (Sawicki, 2017).

Another example of arguable critical media ecology which challenged normative relations of power is one critical intersectional work by Fletcher and Primack (2017). Specifically, in critical and ecological fashions their piece combines lenses from disability rhetoric, crip theory, and eco-ability, illuminating a new rhetorical perspective on identity construction for persons with disabilities. These rhetors found that, "narratives incorporating characters with disabilities could be significant for generating new cultural myths outside the influence of able-normativity, ones that embrace the differences of all beings and respect conditions of disability as an inevitable part of existence" (Fletcher & Primack, 2017, p. 12).

Therefore, I argue their piece is of media ecological importance in that it provides an example of how I utilize neurodivergence to ground my own argument that users are, in fact, mediums.

For Sale: Neoliberal Feminist Empowerment

An additional theoretical influence on this project are popular press and culture discussions of neoliberal commodification, written by laypeople and public intellectuals. For example, Sarah Banet-Weiser considered how popular feminism sells "empowerment" alongside popular misogyny under late-stage neoliberal capitalism. According to Banet-Weiser, the commodification of feminism is a double-edged sword, simultaneously popularizing (removing the teeth from) and narrowing feminist discourse, and therefore failing to expose systematic, structural sexism across all industries and society (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

A year later, Lisa A. Daily (2019) in her piece "'We bleed for female empowerment': mediated ethics, commodity feminism, and the contradictions of feminist politics" extended this argument by examining, "the intersecting manifestations of female empowerment, commodity activism, and ethical capitalism with case studies" (p. 140) of two different brands of period panties. In doing so, she argued that these rhetorics of empowerment, "not only reinforce logics of neo-colonial capitalism, but also mask[s] disciplinary regimes for individual feminine subjects (p. 140). Recently, Windels, Champlin, and Makady (2021) also published about *femvertising*, or a generation of persistent advertising campaigns that are building youth discourses on a basis of post-feminist claims. These conflicting findings contextualize my analysis of biomimetic adverts.

Sex Industry Discourses

In any case, all of the above archetypes, or at least the resulting traces and human implications of them both, do appear saliently throughout my findings regarding biomimetic

sextech advertisements, as well as in the surrounding histography conducted within this dissertation, combining a critical feminist rhetorical and gender and media ecological approach. Following the aforementioned pieces as rough templates, I supplement their theoretical approaches with extensive consultations of popular and academic literatures I have compiled over the course of the last two years. These axillary and tangential materials have informed me and more readily enabled me to comprehensively discuss integral discourses vulva-havers are regularly immersed in, both personally and publicly. Thusly, I argue they reveal a landscape of sociohistorical, political, and sexual inequity in linguistically and systemically naturalized ways.

Contextually, for instance, I incorporate literature regarding the immense profit the porn industry generated by and for male industry moguls and politicians alike. Additionally, I discuss the consequences of the graphic remediation and public imaginary of sexualized violence performed against female bodies. Along those same lines, I wouldn't be doing due diligence if I didn't discuss the complex, controversial, and dynamically commodified landscape of mainstream porn, as depicted within the film *The Price of Pleasure: Pornography, Sexuality & Relationships*, which documented the superimposed a juxtaposition of soft porn images with a compilation of overtly fetishized female torture (Picker & Sun, 2008).

Furthermore, my knowledge of feminist rhetorical theory on sex industry discourses paired with insights from Eastman's film Sex Robots and Us helps overview some commonly discussed appeals and concerns regarding the selling and buying of sexbots. His verdict in the first half of the film was that: although these bots are more kinetically and communicatively sophisticated, realistically they still exist and are sold in a stage of AI infancy. Theoretically and materially, inherent biases were discussed in the film; considering femme bots are largely

designed by and for cismen. Ergo, there may be unanticipated repercussions on our overall sociosexual relations, sexual expression, and the collective consciousness (Eastman, 2018).

Gender and Media Ecological Framework

Additionally, within this dissertation project, I build upon my tentative feminist and media ecological survey as a demonstrative means of describing and analyzing some theoretical developments and fundamental assumptions that underlie feminist and computer mediated, digital, or online communication studies (or, in other words, gender and media ecological studies). In the most generalizable terms, when it comes to feminist thought, the three broad categories which have predominated feminist literature and the temporal progressions of the movement are: 1) radical feminism, 2) liberal/reformist feminism, and 3) difference feminism. Within these three groups, there are vast sociohistorical variations of sub-beliefs and values.

If I had to choose some foundational feminist scholars who have influenced what has since become my own intersecting culmination of Black, Marxist-, eco-conscious vegan-oriented, Indigenous, techno-feminist and womanist frame of mind, it would be the following figures: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Arlie Hochschild, Mary Daly, Simone de Beauvoir, Marilyn Frye, Linda Alcoff, Sandra Harding, Dale Spender, Sarah Banet-Weiser, Alice Walker, Evelyn B. Higginbotham, Claudia Jones, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Susan Griffin, Carol J. Adams, Soraya Chemaly, and Rachel Flowers. To synthesize and apply their insights to the field of media ecology, I have organized choice terms and concepts from each figure into the following categories constructing six gender and media ecological tenants: a) identification, naming, and language play as reclamation, b) feminist epistemologies, c) institutional barriers, d) womanist/Black feminist thought, e) ecofeminism, and f) rage as empowerment.

Ultimately, my argument is that the pre- McLuhan era first wave feminist scholars listed here were the first media ecologists. And it is my presumption that although each of these figures utilized terms foreign to communication and media studies, that they all spoke the naturalized idea of language as an agentic medium. In other words, a method of purposefully highlighting first-wave feminists is built upon the idea of communication that Lisa Cuklanz (2016) explained; that "feminist theories in communication have examined dimensions of gender and power in rhetorical and mediated texts, focusing on both the expression of dominant ideologies and various opportunities and limitations in the include of feminist ideas in those texts" (p. 11). Hence, in doing so, I reclaim these feminists, and many more, as ignored media ecologists.

More specifically related to the field of media ecology, due to an otherwise prevailing feminist-theory-ignoring White, Christian, cismaleness of the field, Sharma (2019) recently argued for "Many McLuhan's or None at All", frankly stating that:

> …the scholarly celebration of the man who predicted the internet has systematically and perpetually ignored an entire body of feminist technology studies and critical race and media studies—largely a whole body of work one might call the cultural approach to technology (See, also, Slack & Wise, 2005) (para. 5).

In this regard, Spender's work, alongside the above scholars and what we know of the "mothers of communication", can help more comprehensively detail out a means of composing a feminist histography; unveiling the perpetuation of canon, of which this project aims to do.

Methods

The methods employ throughout this project are critical feminist rhetorical criticism, critical discourse analysis, and a combination of feminist and media ecological histographies.

Critical Feminist Rhetoric

Generally, traditional patriarchal modern rhetoric reconciled the limitations of neo-Aristotelian methods and the colorblind faux pas still known to occur. Said more explicitly, this type of rhetorical criticism is used as a method of textual analysis that acknowledges there is no absolute Truth when there is a human being involved. Because everyone has their own biases, even if two rhetors use the same method, they may or may not come to similar interpretations.

According to Sonja Foss, there are four basic components to rhetorical criticism: the rhetor, the audience, the situation, and the message (Foss, 2009). For the purposes of contribution to the field, an essay of rhetorical criticism should do either one of two things: 1) provide new concepts and/or identify relationships among pre-existing concepts, or 2) concepts within a piece should be components, elements, or variables that a theory is about (Foss, 2009).

And, as far as a method is concerned, Foss says rhetorical criticism involves four steps: 1) selecting an artifact, 2) analyzing the artifact, 3) formulating a research question, and 4) writing the essay (Foss, 2009). Said in more scientific terms, the artifact is the data for the study, that should include the kind of information being focused on in the units of analysis of the method, such as: strategies, types of evidence, values, word choice, metaphors, etc. And research questions should entail what you want to learn about rhetoric by studying an artifact.

Just within my lifetime alone (1990 onward), many inspiring works of feminist rhetorical scholarship have been written expanding upon these basic tenets. The critics who have, did so to illuminate issues related to women's agency, voice, standpoints, and socioeconomic and cultural power. Making matters more complicated, due to the sociohistorical and systematic enslavement and selling of Black people by Whites, there are still undealt with overt and implicit racisms pervading in conditions of modern life, which bleed into sociosexual relations.

In recent years, this rhetorical analysis has taken new aim. For example, according to Rhodes (2018) "notions of potentiality, of futurity, of critical imagination must be part of a vision of feminist rhetorics" because it this form of positioned, "critical imagination [that] might lead us to more than [commodity feminist-fetishized] resignification" (p. 102). If this sounds familiar to our previous discussions on neoliberal popular feminism, it should, because it is.

These trail-blazing feminist scholars have begun using rhetorical criticism to explore intersections between media representations and the effects of ongoing technological and reproductive innovations within the biomedical sphere. For example, while taking into consideration intersections of varied temporalities, Kroløkke (2018) analyzed two documentaries by employing the feminist cultural analytic tool of cultural imaginaries. They unpacked ways each one uniquely extends cryobiological developments of "frosties": cells and seeds. Their focus was on the procedural aspects of how each frostie is extracted, collected, and frozen; highlighting different cultural imaginaries and trajectories, which frame the future-oriented freezing of cells and seeds as genetically, culturally, and economically heroic acts.

Drawing from works on politics of low temperatures, Kroløkke (2018) discussed the ways in which freezing complicates time; revealing the plasticity of living matter, and the somatic, institutional, normative, and affective temporalities which complicate their intersections. Building on Freeman's work regarding chrononormativity, they disentangled how, in a late-stage and global capitalist system within an increasingly warming planet, freezing buys time. Kroløkke explored how a feminist cryopolitical framework can be useful in assessing sociotechnical imaginaries (Kroløkke, 2018). By connecting and rhetorically analyzing what may otherwise remain be distinct literatures of media, the environment, and advancing biomedical realities and potentialities, Kroløkke's piece illuminated nuances regarding modern pregnancy.

A second more recent feminist rhetorical critic studied the intersections of technologies, health, and medicine taking a different route: digital social media platforms. Within her piece, Lori Beth De Hertogh (2018) overviewed new feminist digital research methodological orientations. More specifically, that is, by taking insights from rhetorical, technological, and ethical online research frameworks. She explained how these methods of understanding, decorum, practice, ethically guide researchers, paying special attention to the vulnerabilities inherent in the collection of information within online communities. Respectively, De Hertogh (2018) found that rhetoricians of health and medicine are best situated to embrace embodied and interdisciplinary advantage of ways in which technologies reveal messy power imbalances.

Distinctively, De Hertogh discussed the opportunities and challenges of enacting an ethic of care in digital spaces, making example of their own reflexive processes, while studying doubly marginalized vulnerable populations in one Birth Without Fear (BWF) online natural childbirth community. She asserted how crucial it is to speak with subjects, and publish this research transparently, consistently, and intentionally within open access journals. De Hertogh reminded readers that situational circumstances of Web 3.0 are ubiquitous, and thus, need to be continuously revised (De Hertogh, 2018). Significantly, her work used rhetorical criticism as a means of orchestrating an ethics of care to the benefit of especially marginalized populations.

Another critical feminist rhetorician that highlighted different ways in which an ethics of care can be implemented towards marginalized folks was Celeste M. Condit (2004) who explained how the "laypeople are genetic essentialist model" has constrained academic findings. To remedy this problem, Condit (2019) offered the "laypeople are strategic essentialist model"; arguing that laypeople strategically deploy complex and context-dependent goals. Condit attributed the failure of the previous model to academic's inability to recognize laypeople's

attitudes, incorrect theoretical understandings, and lack of reflexivity. In response to these judgmental academic blind spots, they recommend an adoption of multiplicity.

Condit unpacked the nature of language and how, at times, people produce statements that sound deterministic, unqualified, hyperbolic, and absolutist because context-specific psychological essentialism is linguistically functional. Despite the surface-level appearance of laypeople's beliefs, they reminded that factors like priming, sensemaking, and lifestyle can complicate the purposeful, strategic, and situational decisions in articulating certain beliefs. Therefore, Condit argued for more development of complicated approaches, which account for human complexity (Condit, 2019). Considering the elitist history of academia, Condit's use of rhetorical criticism here strives to ensure that rhetoricians do their due diligence to the public.

Critical Discourse Analysis

When considering Celeste M. Condit's (2004) piece *The Meaning and Effects of Discourse about Genetics: Methodological Variations in Studies of Discourse and Social Change* from a different angle, she employed a critical method, blending feminist rhetorical criticism and critical discourse analysis, geared towards women's autonomy and agency. By integrating findings from various methods, Condit sought a clearer picture of genetic discourse. According to Condit, academic sources have linked biological heredity to biased racist and sexist assumptions (biological essentialism). Therefore, she argued no single method can answer all questions about social change processes in discourse, and accurate prediction of meanings and/or impact of on-going discourse has proven to be challenging for rhetoricians. To offer a solution, Condit suggested a multi-methodological approach, and the implementation of multiple tools, which would then incorporate novel considerations from multiple angles (Condit, 2004).

According to Condit's findings, textual critiques have highlighted discriminatory actions and attitudes, while also potentially falling into potentially problematic deterministic mindsets. Secondly, she noted that results from audience studies have indicated a broader range of potential meanings and interpretations for media content. Thirdly, Condit argued persuasion studies illuminated limitations of both critical and audience studies by revealing expectations and interpretative frames used by audiences. Lastly, she observed that institutional methods could trace the trajectory, positionality, and time shifts of varied discourse (Condit, 2004). Condit's article demonstrated how feminist rhetorical criticism serves as a useful method for the field to remain reflexive in their own scholarship; and remaining geared toward just ends.

For instance, more recently, Tebogo Mogashoa (2014) explored how critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a useful approach for "revealing the textual techniques by which texts attempt to position, locate, define, and in some instances, enable and regulate readers and addressees" (Mogashoa, 2014, p. 108). Methodically, they explained that CDA is "primarily positioned in the environment of language and its successes can be measured with a measuring rod of the study of languages" (Mogashoa, 2014, p. 112). In this way, CDA as a method is the exploration and procedural analysis of how language is used, representing a "speakers' beliefs, positions and ideas in terms of spoken texts like conversations…[which]…can assist in interpreting issues, conditions and events in which…[speakers]…find themselves" (Mogashoa, 2014, p. 112).

Their framing of CDA has also since inspired Black feminist poetic inquiry, that combined critical discourse analysis with historically situated poetic inquiry (Ohito & Nyachae, 2019), enriching the field. Additionally, Melissa Stone exercised the possibilities of an embodied feminist rhetorical object; answering Jack's call to consider the implications and empowered potentials of feminist subjects (Davis, 2007) via femme wearable technologies (Stone, 2019). In

other words, the potential to combine differing but related feminist methods is nearly endless. These multi-model methods reinvigorated me to conduct similar processes within this project.

Feminist Histography

As stated, the construction of this entire project in itself is an intentional method of recovery work, and thus, histography. I am among good company enacting this form of praxis. After consulting literature, the methodical usefulness for feminist scholars in combining critical rhetoric, discourse analysis, histography becomes even clearer. For example, Condit (2019) ended up eventually building upon their blended critical analysis work, to generate the "laypeople are genetic essentialist model" (p. S27) had constrained academic findings. To remedy this, in a newer piece, they offered the "laypeople are strategic essentialist model" (p. S27); arguing that laypeople strategically deploy complex and context-dependent goals. Condit (2019) attributed the failure of the previous model to academic's inability to recognize laypeople's attitudes, theoretical understandings, and a lack of reflexivity. In response to these academic blind spots, they recommended an adoption of multiplicity (Condit, 2019).

For instance, methodically, Condit unpacked the nature of language and how, at times, people produce statements that sound deterministic, unqualified, hyperbolic, and absolutist because context-specific psychological essentialism is linguistically functional. Despite surface-level appearance of laypeople's beliefs, they reminded that factors like priming, sensemaking, and lifestyle can complicate the purposeful, strategic, and situational decisions in articulating certain beliefs. Therefore, Condit (2019) called for development of nuanced approaches, accounting for human complexity. And due to the elitist history of academia, Condit's use of blended criticisms here strives to ensure that rhetoricians embody their reflexive due diligence. In part, this insight emboldened me to approach this project with a wider range of sources.

Another pair of feminist rhetoricians who explored unorthodox or otherwise alternative means of knowledge making as a means of challenging the Old Boy's Club of institutional memories were Enoch and Jack (2011). These two scholars empowered their students to exercise their critical eyes using reclamatory rhetoric and pedagogy via new feminist histography to trouble the taken for granted perceptions of our world. More specifically, their course projects centered around community involvement, consciousness raising, and local interventions which challenged historical perceptions and allowed for a refocusing of attention. Consultation and creation of feminist physical and digital archives were interwoven into each course to challenge imperialist nostalgia, sites of memory, and co-constitution of public intellect (Enoch & Jack, 2011). I admire the way these scholars utilize these means for just ends.

With that said, Enoch and Jack's work perfectly exemplified unique benefits of critical feminist rhetorical criticism and discourses of larger society. And, considering media ecologists also often use the method of histography as well, using their method act as a compatible bridge between feminist application and media ecological practices, accomplishing that goal. Overall, feminist rhetorical, critical discourse, and histographic scholars have faced challenges and have only just begun exercising and expanding the immense potentialities that utilizing rhetorical criticism as a method enables. My feminist media ecology adds to this new wave of literature.

Overview of This Study Into Sociosexual and Technological U.S. Relations

This project is comprised of five chapters beyond this primary one. Chapter two begins with a brief historical background of foundational logics of United States colonialism, which had since been developed upon into contemporary late-stage neoliberal consumer capitalism. The manuscript highlights certain key media ecological and feminist concepts and sets the rhetorical stage by a) defining what I mean when I say there has been a mechanization of humans, and b)

contextualizing how I argue these phenomena have manifested in the sociosexually violent U.S. relations. The following third chapter then expands upon contextual landscapes. Specifically, focusing on funding constraints, which have conditioned sexual education in the United States. Additionally, I explain some relevant human-human intimacy and sexualities studies literature.

Next, chapter four moves from human-human interpersonal intimacy towards discussions of both pre- and present-COVID-19 sexual technology usage, and some observed ideologies and rhetorics used to sell them. This segment ends with a brief overview of literature on controversial and increasingly pervasive data mining and algorithmic processes, as well as the present-COVID-19 era of TikTok research. As such, the fifth chapter showcases the analysis of my primary data of 75 Lora DiCarlo sextech email advertising/marketing rhetorics, contextualizing them in secondary data of 428 present-COVID-19 TikTok videos with sociosexual and relational themes.

After first describing each, I proceed with a rigorous discussion of rhetorical themes and trends which emerged. To conclude, chapter six discusses analytical observations from my critical media ecological framework unpacking and revealing what I describe as a McLuhan reversal from the mechanization of humans into an em-bot-ied humanization of objects. The manuscript ends with a recap of my findings, contributions, and directions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO. BACKGROUND

To comprehensively understand philosophical underpinnings of the United States context, we must first trace out the background story of capitalism. As discussed in chapter one, I approach this with a media ecological sense that when any one "medium" (i.e. the English phonetic language, or a system of power, like institutions) is introduced into any one society, it influences the entire ecology and/or environment in question. The goal of this critical media ecological approach to epistemic sense-making is to reveal otherwise taken for granted biases built in as features of said system. The purpose of this approach is to enliven erasure.

Informed and structurally based upon colonialism, over the course of a few centuries, capitalism, and its benefactors' pursued development of the planet through means of industrialization and globalization, which bore increasingly more mechanized practices. To illuminate how it went about orchestrating this grand development plan, throughout this chapter I now very briefly discuss logics of colonialism, industrialization, globalization, Keynesianism, and most recently, neoliberalism. As readers will notice, each preceding ideological platform builds upon the previous ones, becoming the dehumanizing and demoralizing logics and practices of late-stage present-COVID-19 U.S. neoliberal capitalism.

Rhetorics of Colonialism

There are countless compounding racist, Eurocentric, and sexist discriminatory ideologies which socio-historically founded and fostered the colonial-minded power structures. These logics set the stage for events that continue to unfold today. This notorious narrative frame has lingered around Indigenous folks (much like the plagues unleashed upon them), romanticizing them as martyrs to Eurocentric forces of racism and greed. Speaking of greed, during the onset of U.S. capitalism neoliberal individualism and materialism branded in full

force as a marker of Eurocentric social progress. As a result, White institutional figures reinforced an Indigenous naturalistic approach to life as "the Other" to their Eurocentric values.

What ensued next were two types of racist tropes: the "violent heathen" and the "Nobel savage" (Barton & Somerville, 2012). As with most Othering, the "violent savagery" stereotype set the stage for a dichotomy. This binary, reproduced by Western societies like the United States, focused on the alleged aggressive and primitive lifestyles of Indigenous peoples to pedestal Eurocentric civilization. To do so, audiovisual U.S. media landscapes idolized the "heroic" and "Great" U.S. cowboy - pitted against the "blood-thirsty Indian." The racist "noble savage" representations, on the other hand, perpetrated a different decretory angle.

These stereotypically racist rhetorics associate Indigenous folks with a pre-industrial era, framing them as being less civilized and inferior in comparison to Eurocentric modernity (Barton & Somerville, 2012). And these colonial themes remain today. The dehumanization of Indigenous peoples, and a sociopathic rationalization of subtlety and overtly enacted violences. These rhetorics communicatively absolved colonizers of culpability through a blame shift; allowing a displacement of responsibility onto faceless or abstract concepts like modernity and "progress" (Lake, 1991). As time progressed, these logics morphed into industrialized rhetorics.

Rhetorics of Industrialization

While industrialized capitalism was just beginning, Max Weber chronicled rhetorics of *rationality*, concurrent with socio-structural demands to boost efficiency (Weber, 1968). His work itemized how highly organized and hierarchical *bureaucracy* was the means to command this type of structure. Decisionmakers smoothly rationalized this new top-to-bottom way of thinking and being. However, to function, this shift required an orientation, replacing "efficiency over values, calculation over emotion, and instrumental reason over sympathy" (Bowen, 2021d,

p. 13). Incrementally, these replacements became pervasive, and Weber explicitized two naturalized phenomena: 1) a philosophical shift for human action in all spheres from emotion, sympathy, and other human centered values to profit-centered efficiency no matter the price, and 2) loss of former values in a way that fragmented all other cultural values, which pushed rationality to an extreme, and turning irrational via an absence of humanness (Bowen, 2021d).

Intentions aside, the issue with this taken for granted irrational philosophical orientation is it standardized a devaluation of human life, socializing people into accepting increasingly mechanical ways of thinking and acting in all spheres. These rhetorics and practices solidified a normality of superiorizing symbolic, quantifiable, and theoretical abstractions over holistically embodied feelings of truly unquantifiable and ineffably complex experiences of human beings (Weber 1968). Therefore, the industrialized capitalist orientation of rationalized bureaucracy inherently conflicts with human-centered values and personal freedoms. And, furthermore, if Weber is correct, these losses slowly dehumanized and depersonalized citizens (Weber, 1968). In the early 90s, Ritzer extended Weber's theories, by coining *McDonaldization* (Ritzer, 1993).

For Ritzer, this term *McDonaldization* expands Weber's irrationality into hyper-irrationality, which he asserted drives social institutions, "including education, health care, religion, the family, sports, the media, politics, and even sex" (Bowen, 2021d, p. 14). Most notably to this project, Ritzer argued that through incremental changes, which occurred over decades, this shift rampantly degraded relationships, priming individuals into a gradual and efficient isolation. More tragically, in the short-term these changes appeared harmless because they were taken for granted and normalized bureaucratic shifts. But when panning out to observe them long-term they shown to be destructive and inhumane (Ritzer, 1993). Krasnow (2012) of Adbusters.org expounded on this dehumanizing way of orienting, thinking, and being by stating:

We are all inculcated into the culture of individualism—by our families, who tell us we

are special; by the vision of the U.S. Dream; by schools, who demand that we specify

fields; by advertising which compels us to carve out who we are by consuming certain

commodities; by capitalism which teaches us that to succeed is to win in a competition of

yourself against all others; and by the ever-growing new age and pop psychology oeuvre

which tells us to create our own realities. (p. 1)

Transnational capitalists seeking out a cheaper labor force welcomed these shifts, which

launched an era of globalization (Parpart, Connelly, & Barriteau, 2000). Globalization was

founded upon development rhetorics of Western colonialism, and a White supremacist

entitlement to enforce Eurocentric languages, definitions, and practices of innovation,

transforming savages into citizens. Speaking of problematic normalized rhetorics of colonial

progress, many media ecologists, like Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, and Leonard Shlain, have

disrespectfully spoken of shifts from "tribal" societies into ones embodying language-using

White supremacist approved Western civil servants (McLuhan, 1997; Ong, 2013; Shlain, 1999).

As hegemonic as the rhetorics of preceding colonialism and capitalisms that these White

men were steeped in during their lifetimes was, it remained a single choice among many others

available. For example, ecofeminists like Susan Griffin (2015) addressed prolonged interlocking

traumas of sexual violence, ecological exploitations, and warfare committed under the guise of

U.S. democracy, while celebrating resilience of women and nature. And Carol J. Adams (2010,

2015) has argued that transnational and global industries are ideologically grounded in both a

human-animal dichotomy, as well as a Western-orientation of entitlement to exploit resources.

Most recently, in her work Rachel Flowers (2015) argued that there has been, and

continues to be, a settler misrecognition of solidarity expected from Indigenous women by

colonial figures. In other words, she asserts that there is validity in Indigenous women's rage, as a means of resistance, against settler colonialism. Moreover, she discussed the transformative potentialities and tenuous, but valid, boundaries of indigenous solidarity and refusal to forgive. For Flowers, this balance between self-affirmation and gender resentment, complicates and situates righteous Indigenous rage. She contends that the presence of resentment is a revelatory reminder of ongoing harm and Indigenous people's desire for freedom due to the continuous land dispossession, violence, and domination ever-present in the lives of Indigenous peoples, especially those of Indigenous women and children (Flowers, 2015). This is a perspective that any academic field must remember, especially if it parrots colonial rhetoric.

Outside of his famous phrase "the medium is the message," Marshall McLuhan is most often known for his conceptualization of technologies as "extensions" of our various human senses (McLuhan, 1969). He, and other media ecologists, argued that these innovations are a double-edged sword, offering us both services and disservices. For instance, in response to the accelerated pace and intensities of any one invention, he asserted that our central nervous systems are unable to handle the stressors, and therefore have no choice but to numb, or auto-amputate, themselves. Explicitly, McLuhan (1997) stated, "Any invention or technology is an extension or self-amputation of our physical bodies, and such extension also demands new ratios or new equilibriums among the other organs and extensions of the body" (p. 45).

Additionally, some modern-day media ecologists, like Sarah Sharma, Rianka Singh, Carolin Aronis, Jaqueline McLeod Rogers, Julia Hildebrand and Lance Strate (following in footsteps and schools of thought generated by media ecologists Christine L. Nystrom and Neil Postman), have argued that visually dominated mediums short-circuit our ability to think clearly and in depth, due to constant streams of distractions that interfere with any kind of rational

response to the world, and demonstrating how, "image-based media transformed our politics, and in almost universally unproductive ways" (para. 38).

Perhaps lesser known, beyond media ecological, technological, and semantic circles, have been McLuhan's laws of media, otherwise referred to as the tetrad. McLuhan's tetrad (envisioned as a Mobius strip) is a pedagogical, analytical, and practical tool comprised of four questions, which can be used to probe into any type of technology, from the simplest to the most complex innovations: What does the artifact enhance? What does the artifact obsolesce (eliminates)? What does the artifact retrieve (return us to something) that had been obsolesced earlier? And lastly, what does the artifact reverse or flip into (its opposite) when pushed to extreme? (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988; McLuhan, Powers, Bruce, 1989). This tetrad of McLuhan's undergirds my main argument throughout this project, that -- for centuries -- there's been a mechanization of humans, now flipping and reversing into a humanization of objects.

For McLuhan (1997) one of the first mechanisms which set this process into motion is the clock. For example, he stated, "the mechanical clock, in short, helps to create the image of a numerically quantified and mechanically powered universe" (p. 146) continuing on in the text to later state that, "by the nineteenth century it had provided a technology of cohesion that was inseparable from industry and transport, enabling an entire metropolis to act almost as an automation" (p. 149). Canonical intercultural studies theorist Edward Hall (1976) also spoke to U.S. time this way through his discussions around his term *monochronic* time (p. 17). He explained his concept undergirds various U.S. normalities of sociosexual relations when he said:

> In constant, within the Western world, man finds little in life that is exempt from the iron hand of M-time. In fact, his social and business life, even his sex life, are apt to be completely time-dominated. Time is so thoroughly woven into the fabric of existence that

we are hardly aware of the degree to which it determines and coordinates everything we
do, including the molding of relations with others in many subtle ways (p. 18).

And, for the record, Hall's usage of the word "man" or "he" as universal terms to describe a human being is not lost on me, or a lot of other women scholars (Martyna, 1980; Miller & Swift, 1981; Vetterling-Braggin, 1981). According to the Online Etymology Dictionary (2021), the etymology of the word "man" in Old English referred to a "human being, person (male or female); brave man, hero," (para. 1) in a broad human sense, a product of the time. It was not specified until late Old English (c. 1000) to distinguish an "adult male…human" (para. 3). And yet, the 10th century was thousands of years before Hall or McLuhan used the word this way. Men canonized in academic fields are often forgiven for being "of their time" (Bowen, 2021a). However, as we proceed into gendered discussions of contemporary neoliberal discourses, keep in mind the social norm that less than half the population were considered full subjects.

Contemporary Neoliberal Discourses and Concepts

Since the onset of neoliberalism in the 1970s and 80s, a massive political-economic shift has occurred, expanding transnational and global investment, production, and distribution. Alongside these market adjustments, rapid technological advancements were made, that either expedited and/or made previous generations of transportation and communicative norms obsolete. As stated in the previous section, market-oriented transnational and increasingly globalized capitalists who were interested in securing cheap labor welcomed these multilevel changes (Parpart, Connelly, & Barriteau, 2000). In relation to this project, it is crucial to be transparent about the aforementioned hegemonic rhetorics of colonialism, industrialism, and globalization that were laid as the foundation of U.S. context because they have since been utilized by advertising agencies, acting as the profitable driving forces of all traditional medias.

Traditional Advertising

According to Alex Kuskis's McLuhan Galaxy blog, in his heyday, Marshall McLuhan was the prophet the "Mad Men" had been waiting for (Kuskis, 2012). This was allegedly because, McLuhan envisioned a profitable future before his time, regarding what was to come about communication problems of interest to the marketing specialist (Varey, 2013). Although, plenty of futurist (Giannina Censi, Wanda Wulz, and Bice Lazzari) (Gatti & Resch, 2018; Hawlin, 2018), second futurist (Bendetta Cappa Marinetti) (Hawlin, 2018; Larkin, 2013), and mid-century modernist (Edith Head, Elaine Lustig Cohen, Yayoi Kusama, Sister Corita Kent, Mary Blair, Ruth Asawa etc.) feminine contemporaries had too (Fowler, 2020). And a host of femme futurists continue to build upon their work (Amy Webb, Cindy Frewen, Amy Zalman, Madeline Ashby, Erica Orange, Shara Evans, Nancy Giordano, among dozens of others) (Morgan, 2020).

With the emergence of Web 2.0 ("Web as Platform" 1999 – 2004), a centralized mobile and cloud computing, came an influx of surveilled and advertising exploitative social networks (O'Reilly, 2021; Silver, 2020). In the late 2000s, advertising scholars reported the field as being in its infancy, as far as developing its own original work. For example, in 2008 Pasadeos, Phelps, and Edison published a study entitled "Searching for Our 'Own Theory' in Advertising: An Update of Research Networks" in which they reported findings of a comparative analysis they completed, comparing literature from the early 2000s to some of the field's earlier research.

 As such, their study was an attempt to determine whether (or not) their "immature" field had moved from "borrowed" theory into work of its "own." Their investigation highlighted that most advertising theories had originated in other fields, like psychology, cross-cultural studies, or sociology, and that it still lacked in developing its own unique theories (Pasadeos, Phelps, &

Edison, 2008). However, shortly thereafter, due to emergence of more advanced technological advancements involving the Internet, specifically Web 2.0, and the increasing sophistication of centralized data networks, the field appears to have experienced an unprecedented period of change (Patti, Hartley, Dessel, & Baack, 2015).

For example, as Rentner and Lengel (2011) explained:

The implementation of social marketing campaigns generally follows the format of typical marketing or PR plans: understanding the problem through research, identifying target audiences, and developing goals and objectives. Target, or segmenting the audience, is key to developing effective messages (p. 138).

As such, Joel J. Davis stated in *Advertising Theory: Research and Practice* (2012) that, "today's advertisers can take advantage of a broad range of traditional and new media options: television, radio, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, paid research, mobile, and video game placement, to name just a few" (p. 2). And take advantage these advertisers certainly did.

Through the orchestration of means such as these, advertisers have striven to understand these new more technologically immersed consumers lifestyles, attitudes, and behavior changes; garnering, "their willingness to provide their personal information in exchange for exposure to more relevant advertising" (Davis, 2012, p. 4). Considering the ramifications of these fast-paced changes, one media ecological researcher discussed how geographical spaces and distances are no longer considered barriers, due to the "massification, socialization and democratization of technological devices," which have now been able to extend advertising into previously unimaginable spaces: penetrating homes and converting them into receivers of public information in highly pervasive new ways (Paredes, 2017, p. 175).

In 2006, two years after Facebook was launched, Habermas commented this about the modern public sphere:

> With regard to the colonization of the public sphere by market imperatives, what I have in mind here is [that]…[u]nder the pressure of shareholders who thirst for higher revenues, it is the intrusion of the functional imperatives of the market economy into the 'internal logic' of the production and presentation of messages that leads to the covert displacement of the one category of communication by another: issues of political discourse become assimilated into and absorbed by the modes and contents of entertainment. Besides personalization, the dramatization of events, the simplification of complex matters, and the vivid polarization of conflicts promote civic privatism and a mood of antipolitics (p. 422).

And just as Habermas alluded to, advertisers and advertising researchers seem to have taken to a belief that humans can be reduced to simply our data (Maurer, 2015). These data trends are then used to effect product and advertising success, and advertisers use platforms for advertising to capitalize on all of the above (Davis, 2012). In recent years, due to developments and emergences of whistle-blower data scandals like Cambridge Analytica (Meredith, 2018) and the Facebook papers (The New York Times, 2021), the issue of social media companies knowingly swaying voters, and negatively impacting teen girls for profit, must be explored.

With that in mind, for me, the problem of advertisements is not the fact that they exist in themselves, but the orientation for which they exist. Meaning, the fact advertisements are a vehicle of late-stage present-COVID-19 neoliberal capitalism, premeditatively targeting, reducing, and dehumanizing people for profit (Jhally, 2000; Jhally, 2010; Marchessault, 2005; McLuhan, 2000; Tomaselli & Shepperson, 2010; Sloop, 2009; Simmons, 2017; Varghese &

Kumar, 2020). Sut Jhally (2000) put it plainly, "…twentieth century advertising is the most powerful and sustained system of propaganda in human history, and its cumulative cultural effects, unless quickly checked, will be responsible for destroying the world as we know it" (p. 27).

Overall, I am intrigued by the dissonance of internal and external gratification that has run amuck in the U.S. Namely, the fact that advertisement progression within our late-stage neoliberal capitalist landscape depends upon an allegiance to the idea that our happiness is, and should be, derived from external forms of gratification. McLuhan (1997) spoke to this in his book *Understanding Media: the extensions of man* when he asserted the advertising industry is, "a crude attempt to extend the principles of automation to every aspect of society" (p. 227).

Perhaps if U.S. culture was not rooted in a philosophy of prioritized profit over people, the advertisements distributed could not appeal to citizens learned sense of our own deficiencies and incapacities, in order to sell us products, services, or experiences that quell an achingly hollow modern sense of self. In other words, healthy, internally gratified people, who sit outside of consumer margins, don't good consumers make. Or as Postman (2000) cleverly phrased it, "The cure for such a stupid philosophy is conservatism…a conservative recognizes the difference between rape and seduction. The rapist cares nothing for his victim" (p. 49).

I join scholars such as Kilbourne, Marchessault, Varghese, and Kumar who find that the phenomenal success of advertising, in itself, is truly fascinating. Advertising is an incredible field, where Amazon, Google, and Facebook make up 50% of the total U.S. $225 billion revenue (Ali, 2021). And based on findings from within my previous section, the field has since found novel ways to do that. However, this could be seen as problematic, for a number of reasons.

Throughout the course of this project I document the extension and reversal of McLuhan's noted remark (1997) in which he referred to humans as the "sex organs of the machine world" (p. 46). In the following large section, I will now discuss how over the course of the last century a societal transformation has occurred, described as the feminization of labor.

Feminization of Labor

The topic of feminized labor has been approached from many different angles. Primarily, my entrance into this topic has been sociological. Specifically, being introduced to concepts like emotional labor, glass ceiling, and glass elevator. For those who are unaware, emotional labor was coined by U.S. professor emerita of sociology Arlie Hochschild (Hochschild, 1983). What Hochschild did, in the creation of her term, is further turn traditional patriarchal concepts of labor on their head. In hindsight, this is a form of critical media ecology.

Additionally, the U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) defined the term glass ceiling as, "levels of artificial barriers to the advancement of minorities and women in the private sector that contradict this nation's ethic of individual worth and accountability – the belief that education, training, and dedication, and hard work will lead to a better life" (p. 7). And lastly, the glass elevator described the inverse of the previous term, a conceptualization of differences in promotion, and other forms of upward advancement, between binary concepts of feminine and masculine peoples (Williams, 1992). These three terms are crucial to understanding a more comprehensive sociohistorical context of the feminization of labor in more specific disciplines and industries throughout this country.

Non-Men Founders in the Field of Communication

As stated, this project contributes to literatures of critical feminist rhetoric and media ecology, combining them for the purposes of better gleaning an understanding of different ways

of seeing and describing the contemporary sociosexual U.S. landscape. I argue that there is much to learn about the processes and discourses surrounding biomimetic sextech when considered ecologically. As a mean of tangibly counterbalancing the otherwise White patriarchal canon of media ecology, I now overview the otherwise erased founding mothers of communication research (Rowland & Simonson, 2013) and Christine Nystrom's media ecology.

According to Rowland and Simonson (2013), little do many scholars know, during the infancy of fields of communication and media studies in the 1930s through the 1950s, alongside the highly documented "founding fathers", there were an equally remarkable group of "founding mothers." Or, at least, an assemblage of undervalued, yet integral, feminine and/or non-men laborers: The Associate Director: Herta Herzog, The Data Analyzer: Hazel Gaudet, The Interview Trainer: Thelma Ehrlich Anderson, and The Secretary: Rose K. Goldsen (Rowland & Simonson, 2013). My usage of "non-men" and "feminine folks" is purposeful because it is more inclusive of cis- or trans- non-binary, gender fluid, two spirit, and other often erased folks with vulvas that this project would also apply to, but at the time would have been erased by a binary.

To explain, in the early 1900s, a feminization of labor occurred allowing more women to enter the U.S. work force. Despite this, institutional barriers generally kept them from obtaining the same positions as men. Therefore, the "founding mothers'" stories of resilience and accomplishments, although grand, were largely undocumented. That was until Rowland and Simonson utilized the theoretical frame of assemblage theory to "illuminate a forgotten episode in the gendered history of our field" (Rowland & Simonson, 2013, p. 5) via composites. As a result of these researcher's feminist political intervention and historically retrieved assemblages of the "founding mothers'" legacies, we now know and can articulate the women who have been excluded from parts of the agentic work force that articulate what is history.

In the field of media ecology, a similar phenomenon occurred regarding the work of one Christine L. Nystrom. Media ecologist Christine L. Nystrom (1973) in her dissertation *Toward a Science of Media Ecology* explained media ecology as, "the study of complex human communication systems as environments," whose basic subject matter involves, "the transactions between individual[s] and realit[ies]...seek[ing] to identify the role[s] played in those transactions by the media...and technologies – through which they are conducted" (Nystrom, 1973, p. 1). I made a point to cite her older work because Nystrom coined the term "media ecology," and yet has largely been unpublished and uncited in comparison to White cishet male scholars. That was, until the first post-humous volume of her work was published February 2021 (Nystrom, 2021). As shown, Nystrom's definition is overtly relational, and thus applicable to my dissertation project on sextech. A revisitation of her work offers unique theoretical potentials for fostering modes of thinking, capable of elucidating socially mediated trends as they become environmental.

The combination of these otherwise disparate avenues of literature, such as the uncredited and erased life works of aggregate feminine figures in the field of communication like Herzog, Gaudet, Anderson, Goldsen, alongside the thus far overshadowed media ecological perspective of Christine L. Nystrom, is enactment of feminist praxis enriching the field of media ecology's thus far troublingly White male enlightenment past. As a means of theoretical growth, we can revisit and supplement choice works by phrase-famous "the medium is the message" media ecologist, Marshall McLuhan, and begin to make-sense of sexual technologies pros, as well as the potential cons of systemic auto-amputation. Additionally, by enriching traditional texts with critical intersectional feminist and techno-feminist insights, we can critique any potential short

circuiting of the need to learn about one's own anatomy, preferences, and/or partners that negates human touch in fundamentally new ways.

Said otherwise, much like canonical erasure flattened history, during the physical use of these advanced sexual technologies in taken for granted ways, human touch is being replaced and extended, for the purpose of a more "efficient" ability to experience pleasure and orgasm. And my questions are: at what cost? And more suitably questioned today, for whose profit?

Datafication Practices

For instance, as Genevieve Bell (2015) pointed out in *The Secret Life of Big Data*, beyond prevailing surveillance and privacy concerns, "macho talk about how big, fast and multitasking data can be…[are] ideas…as old as still dominant forms of Euro-American masculinity" (p. 11). To be fair, I do empathize with the perspective that our data could, in some sense, be considered representative of our lifestyles. However, on the other hand, I also firmly believe we are never truly "just" our data. And I'm not the only one. For example, as Melissa Gregg (2015) reminded in her chapter of *Data, Now Bigger and Better*, "data's power lies in the assumptions that it is synonymous with fact" (p. 55). And her point was, of course, multifold.

Firstly, she made a point to explain that there are distinct boundaries that determine where "data" begins and ends, which are decided by human actors (whether directly, or indirectly by some type of human designed software). Therefore, in data sets, certain elements are privileged, while others are considered irrelevant. Thusly, data collection is an exceptionally nuanced practice, in which trained human actors make decisions, that are subject to their own preconceived notions and implicit biases (Gregg, 2015). As such, Neuman, Guggenheim, Mo Jang, and Bae (2014) noted that, "big data methodologies do not represent a panacea or a

substitute for carefully designed surveys, experiments, and content analysis," but instead, complement researchers' understandings of ever-changing digital algorithmic spaces (p. 18).

Even more recently, advertisers and advertising researchers seem to have taken to a belief that humans can be reduced to our data (Maurer, 2015). These data trends are then used to affect product and advertising success, and advertisers use platforms for advertising to capitalize on all of the above (Davis, 2012). Marketably, what the countless erasure of women founders within the field of communication who completed integral processes, like producing research, inventing practices, and networking, (as discussed in-depth in the section on Non-Men Founders in the Field of Communication) demonstrates is a system that perpetually dehumanized and devalued, especially Black and Brown, feminine laborers, systematically.

Historically, if what scholars like Goffman (1979), Kilbourne (see Jhally, 2000), Postman (2000), Marchessault (2015), McLuhan (1951, 1997, 2000), Varghese & Kumar (2020), and Windels, Champlin, and Makady (2021) have respectively said about advertisements (or post-feminist "femvertising") holds weight, that the themes present in advertising both perform and remediate cultural trends, then the political and human implications of the commodification of these sophisticated sexual technologies within the violent American ecology are vast. My intentions are to combine critical feminist insights with media ecological ones, to explore and document happenings within some current sociosexually violent United States ecologies, in the hopes that these novel and rigorous ecological contributions could one day serve useful in of our increasingly algorithmic world. I joined scholars like Ruha Benjamin (2019b) who wrote *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, and carried the torch of scholars like Nakamura (2008) and Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) to illuminate ugly protrusions of technological racialization and racisms, by moving scholarly focus from visual racisms into textual codings.

Specifically, Benjamin did this by contextualizing how the cultural significance of Whiteness is implicit in Western naming practices to demonstrate what she called *the New Jim Code* or, "the employment of new technologies that reflect and reproduce existing inequities but that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era" (Benjamin, 2019b, p. 5). By drawing purposeful parallels between sociohistorical racial coding and codes programmed into technologies, Benjamin elucidated how both types of codes are reflective, predictive, and dictate racially biased norms (Benjamin, 2019b). In a similar recovery fashion, this project draws from U.S. rhetorics, linking them to advertising practices and sociosexual discourses. I also did this reminiscent of how Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) did in her work *Algorithms of Oppression,* in which she meticulously gathered evidences of algorithmic racisms and sexisms within the Google search engine (the Big Tech corporation that also censored and then fired Timnit Gebru for undertaking related critical work on entrenched AI inequalities [Perrigo, 2022]). In similar fashion, herein I documented digital and algorithmic happenings in the late-stage present-COVID-19 neoliberal capitalist U.S. context.

Thus, I see this project contributing to current media ecological literature in the following ways. First and most broadly, by appropriating theories and insights from media ecology, philosophy, psychology, feminism, and sexuality studies I focus on the systemic impacts of sociosexual medias. One way I go about doing this is by building upon Director of the McLuhan Centre for Culture and Technology, Sarah Sharma's (2019) argument that:

> Exit is an exercise of patriarchal power, a privilege that occurs at the expense of cultivating and sustaining conditions of collective autonomy. It stands in direct contradistinction to care. Care is an opposing political force to exit. Care is that which

responds to the uncompromisingly tethered nature of human dependency and the contingency of life, the mutual precariousness of the human condition. Women's exit is hardly even on the table, given that women have historically been unable to choose when to leave or enter inequitable power relations, let alone enter and exit in a carefree manner (para. 5).

Furthermore, by following her combined approach of feminist and media ecological sense-making, I further amplify Sharma's (2020) observations that power has machinelike characteristics and that, "time allows for an empathetic understanding of social difference because everyone knows that time is finite…," (Sharma, 2011, p. 444); continuing on in the same piece to remind us that, "experiences of time are tied to inequitable horizons of political possibility" (p. 444). In this way, I extend critiques of overly linear, and I argue, mechanistic models of sexual communication, situating them within the sexual violent U.S. landscape, and the associatively insufficient sexual educational network, which only complicate these increasingly complex sexual technologies further. Theoretically, this grounds my argument that a mechanization or objectification of humans has occurred, resulting in what was described within the Kickstarter campaign inspiring this project (the LoveSync) as sexual "syncing issues."

Mechanization of Humans

In hindsight, one of the concepts which inspired this idea that we have lived through a mechanization of humans came from learning about Steve Lerner's (2012) term *sacrifice zones*, coined in his work *Sacrifice Zones: The Front Lines of Toxic Chemical Exposure in the United States*. The term is exemplary in that it demonstrates a mechanization of humans from an ecological view, being that it explains a phenomenon of low-income minority communities forced to live next to heavily contaminated industrial sites, accepted as social expendabilities.

The text itself also acts as a local archival piece, collecting resident's stories who, in a traditional academic setting, would not be considered legitimate and/or credible sources of information. Furthermore, these compounding stigmas and dehumanizations that keep profitable tragedies like this from being known by layman peoples are the same ones that uphold academic elitism.

Academic or not, human thought does not occur in a vacuum. Therefore, intentionality aside, institutions run the risk of perpetuating exclusionary practices in a taken-for-granted bureaucratically rational fashion. Moreover, this foundation only becomes further complicated when considered within the context that increasing platformatization has led to the normalized implementation of algorithms responsible for both simple and complex social tasks traditionally handled in public arenas, such as the increasing technological implementation or Googlization, of legal decisions, healthcare, and education (Sharon, 2018; Van Dijck, Poell, Waal, 2018).

The initial inspiration for this project was an advertisement for a product on the Kickstarter website called The Love Sync. For those who are not familiar, the LoveSync is a simple device comprised of two buttons, a presumed cisheternormative monogamous couple would each place on their bedside tables. Practically, when one partner is interested in having sex, they press the button on their bedside. If the other hits their own button, the buttons light up and rotate. Therefore, the problems the LoveSync device reportedly solves are the forms of human anxiety, miscommunication, and discomfort that arise when negotiating sexual syncing issues. This led me to ask, "Where did the idea humans have sexual syncing issues come from?"

Ideological and Material Foundations of Sexual "Syncing Issues"

Philosophically, if Drew Leder's (1990) work *The Absent Body* holds weight, as the use of advanced sextech as aids, or "companions," becoming ever-more ubiquitous and integrated, they increasingly recede from focal awareness as they make room for modes and experiences

that they introduce into society (i.e., becoming environmental). In this regard, the aspects of media ecology I build upon are observed reversals, extensions, breaks, and autoamputations.

Dirty Humanness. For those unfamiliar, his work, among other topics, discussed how modernity normalized an enforcement of clean surfaces and dirty insides. In other words, what I suggest is a prime example of the ongoing stigma of humanness. Additionally, I would say this observation is a perfect way to extend and nuance the idea of the current sociosexually violent U.S. landscape. In other words, on the surface of contemporary society, whether that it in traditional media depictions or our own everyday grooming practices, people internalized this aim of inhuman hygiene: a valorized, sanitized, and, thus, dehumanized form of humanness.

Even still, the creation of that unsustainable boundary of bodily upkeep, there can never be a complete erasure of the messy and dirty laundry of being a human. Again, this is not a value judgement so much as an observation that people spend, quite literally, their entire lives trying to escape it, developing meticulous routines to keep up the clean show. However, the dirty always remains somewhere. And this is where these concepts intersect and relate to this project on biomimetic sexual technologies and their rhetoric specifically.

My argument is that, on one hand, like physically relegated "red-light districts" that exist in most towns or cities worldwide, this "dirtiness" in a plethora of forms is subjugated to dark corners of the Internet in the form of porn, hidden sexual habits, fetishes, and other autonomous ways of living that are not overtly sexual, but harness a connection to power dynamics and associated sexual energies reveal to us a valuable piece of this story. However, on the other, and as Audre Lorde (1978) detailed in her work "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power":

In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various

sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change.

For women [sic], this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of

power and information within our lives (p. 1).

Said directly, by bastardizing feminine sexuality as taboo we have since lost raw humanness.

This relates to Leder's text because he explained that when one experiences a heart

attack, the pain often radiates down their left arm because that is where it was once located.

What I am suggesting is that societal manifestations also travel and burst into numerous forms.

And often in ways what would be dominantly classified as bizarre ways of coping with these

hegemonic constraints. All things come to the surface eventually, and we all die multiple times

throughout our lives. Thus, we phase through stages of cleanliness and dirtiness— ad infinitum.

Fear of Judgement. In traditional medias, surface presentation of cleanliness is priority.

Characters are cast to play pretend on screens, so that we can fully enjoy the tabooness of the

dirty. It is a societal relishment. Although not everyone has been or is allowed to enjoy these

indulgences evenly. Some people, like with hygiene, will spend their entire lives repressing

sexual urges in efforts to appear pure. They want to suppress all senses of what they have been

taught are impurities of their soul and body. This is an ideology supported by a mind/body

Cartesian split in which the mind, was labeled as the organ of rational thought, demanding a call

for the separation of sexualities from our lives, so that we can be productive and clean.

In this way, the only form of productivity that has been or is semi allowed in the rational

mind is the process of reproduction (Freud, 1905/1971). And as discussed, even that has been

meticulously compartmentalized in reproductive technologies galore. Thus, those processes are

experienced differently depending on one's embodied social location in relation to a doctor.

One cost of these norms is a resulting and indivisible fear of judgement for not

conforming to these cleanliness habits (brown, 2019; Carter, 2007; Jensen, 2010; Mintz, 2017;

Orenstein, 2016; Taylor, 2018). Inside and outside the doctor's office, bodily indulgences have been sociohistorically divided along a binary gendered line. A potential danger of this surveillance is recent abuses that have come to light, like the more than 500 feminine folks who were sexually abused by Lawrence G. Nassar, a form national gymnastics team physician (Macur, 2021). His violences exemplify dangers of the hegemonic U.S. rhetorical trend of a default to White cishet patriarchal doctors as agents for patients, documented by feminist rhetorical scholar, Katie L. Gibson, in her revisitation of the legislation of Roe v Wade.

To expand upon the eye-opening rhetorical findings of her study, Gibson (2008) argued that, contrary to popular second-wave feminist accolade, Roe v Wade did not cast patients as agents of their own bodily autonomy. She did so by detailing out the U.S. legislative context and two strategic forms of rhetoric Justice Blackman used to advocate for the approval of Roe v Wade, arguing that the legislation, actually, rhetorically undermined pregnant folk's voice. The first rhetorical strategy she highlighted of Blackman's was "doctor knows best"; arguing that it built upon an apotheosis of medicine that centers physician's expertise over patient autonomy.

Secondly, Gibson detailed Blackman's rhetoric of medical advances; appealing to patient safety (Gibson, 2008). Through her analysis of Justice Blackman's rhetorical persuasive tactics, Gibson (2008) demonstrated how in the case of Roe v Wade cismale physicians were cast as the primary authority in abortion decision-making processes, not pregnant patients. She explained this was further exemplified by Blackman's concluding thoughts not even mentioning patient's rights to reproductive choice. Gibson argued the casting of pregnant person-as-patient-as-womb reveals a U.S. worldview, negating them as independent thinkers and agents. She concluded by calling for further feminist attention to Supreme Court rulings (Gibson, 2008).

Systematic legitimization of rhetorics like these associatively set precedence for societal rules that cismen and masculine folks are allowed to be dirtier than feminine folks. To be an authoritative agent is to be human, to be messy is to be human, and the authority to determine who is allowed to be messy, and thus, human (instead of a clean object) is power. It fits the modernity created primordial model of the gender binary, as part of the masculine aesthetic to be big strong, hairy, and messy. Not only making the messes, but not learning to cleaning them. Whether inside or outside, dirtiness and/or messiness is not their problem to solve or clean.

In fact, cismen are expected and praised for embodying messiness this way. This public cleanliness double standard bleeds across physical expectations into the emotional, verbal, and sexual social spheres. Emotional intelligence is a form of messiness men are absolved from taking part in themselves. Realistically, at birth we all have capacities for both feminine and masculine expressions. And yet, young men and women in cis- and heteronormative societies have been socialized into a bastardization of embodied and narrow definitions of feminine emotional expression in favor of the solely alleged masculine logical variety. As a result, everyone, but especially masculine people, becomes inclined toward vulnerability avoidances.

On the other hand, ciswomen are socialized to be yin to their yang, namely: small weak, hairless, and clean. Again, this can't be historically divorced from the socialization to be clean inside and out, and the gendered norms of responsibility for cleaning the messes of all others. Societally, this has consequences, bleeding into all aspects of feminine experience, normalizing harmfully limiting and subordinating the emotional, verbal, and sexual spheres of the feminine.

Sexual Shame. The consequences become more interesting behind a veil of secrecy and pretend where no one apparently has sex ever according to the professional world (Lorde, 1978). For example, Kastrenakes (2019) explained, "A CES Innovation Award was initially presented

to Lora DiCarlo for its Osé Robotic Massager ahead of the conference in January, honoring the device in the show's robotics and drones category. But the show's operator later revoked the award, saying that sex tech was not allowed. Lora DiCarlo's ability to even exhibit at the show was revoked as well" (para. 2). In other words, societal and organizational sexual shame was still so stringent and normal that the sex toy was banned from even exhibiting at first, let alone winning (Hitti, 2019).

The more we rationalize the separation of body from body through text and mediated environments, the mediations have multiplied for us to adapt to our own inability to touch. We can feel soothed and sedated in isolation, but at what cost? What have we lost? One notable cost of the interlocking and compounding norms is described by Field (1995) as *touch hunger* (p. 1) and even "touch deprivation" (p. 69), as a result of normalized taboo and stigma of touch.

Cultural Discourses Surrounding Desire for Sex Devices

My original motivation for writing this project was inspired by how Sharma, Nystrom, and McLuhan's works could be theoretically and practically related to sexual technologies and in relation to the most micro, individual, level. Specifically, my concerns were around how the commodification of the most basic forms of sex toys which have now developed into the more complex sextech devices existing today, have caused a shift in some of the most intimate processes experientially accessible during human existence. To reiterate, when I say this, I am not presuming intent, but instead interested in documenting the impact of these technological interventions on millennials and Generation Z folks, which by proxy of these sales and dissemination are tangibly separating human bodies, arguably ushering in social relations in which biological human-human touch may one day be seen as obsolete. And so, in knowing that

depending on what any one person desires to get out of their own uniquely felt and understood

processes of sexuality, now more than ever, we must document these happenings.

Our human experiences, from sex to live music, are centered around realness. So much so

that, in all our faulty human glory, our alleged greatest thinkers, designers, and technologists

now believe we can and should attempt to replicate us. Alas, imperfections and all, we cannot.

Nevertheless, for hundreds of years at this point, creators of robots, and now new-fangled

sexbots alike, seem to be instilled with a deep sense of womb envy, theoretically akin to Freud's

(1905) many misguided and biologically essentialist claims to internalized cisfemale penis envy.

Understanding how this has become engendered in society becomes more complicated

when we considered the White, thin, hyper-individualized, and youth obsessed commercial

culture that the United States is founded upon (Cottom, 2019; Ehrenreich, 2018; Ellul, 1964).

Like anything else, this cannot be understood in a vacuum. As discussed at the beginning of this

chapter, the sociohistorical trajectory of colonialism into today's U.S. context of neoliberalism.

Therefore, national ideographs of freedom, meritocracy, and time being money influence all

aspects of our lives, inclining us to view the world in such a way that orients individual focus. In

other words, if one believes in trickle-down economics and that the "American Dream" are

attainable, their actions will proceed from that ideological orientation for better or worse.

The Internet Age. As discussed, media ecologists like Nystrom, McLuhan, and Sharma

are notorious for tracing out technological extensions of human abilities and capacities

(McLuhan 1997; Nystrom 1973; Sharma, 2017, 2019). Numerous scholars have taken ideas

further, into considerations of the emancipatory potential in the current social relations of

sociopolitical identity construction and empowerment (Castells, 2002; Havers, 2003; Turkle &

Papert, 1990). For example, feminist internet pioneer researcher danah boyd's work has centered

around social medias, digital participatory cultures, examinations of the intersections between technologies, sexist biases built into them, and most recently, their increasing datafication (boyd, n.d.). And on a related note, Manuel Castells extended McLuhan's idea that the Internet is an extension of our nervous system, capable of transforming key aspects of our individual social lives, public knowledge-building, and larger power relations (Castells, 2002).

However, as techno-feminists and media ecologists like Sherry Turkle have also demonstrated, not all building is created equal and/or is favorable for all. Over the course of her lifetime, Turkle's work has covered an array of topics, beginning from her critiques of the universalized masculine coding of hacking culture. In this research, she found links between masculine abstraction and objectivity which have suppressed epistemologically pluralism, and reinforced traditionally gendered perspectives and habits of programmer's, which disinclined women from pursuing and/or continuing training (Turkle & Papert, 1990). In Turkle's (2017) more recent work, like the book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other* she explores concerns over a loss of humanity due to decreased face-to-face contact. She made bold claims within that particular work about futurists dream and promises to create sociable robot companions. Alongside this she ruminated on the likelihood that modern humans might very well prefer simulation of humanness to reality (Turkle, 2017).

With the emergence of the Internet, no pun intended, came cybersex and other forms of novel Internet sociosexual relations, simultaneously expanding reach globally. For instance, according to Smith (2011), "while there is no universally accepted definition, an Internet affair frequently involves intimate chat sessions and sexually stimulating conversation or cybersex, which may include filming mutual masturbation with a Web camera" (para. 4). In hindsight, emergences such as this led bold enough scholars to question prevailing literature on relational

maintenance which presumed geographically close relationships as the valid norm. With this came assumptions that said relations were, "driven by notions of social exchange" (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004, p. 28) where distanced loved ones were physically absent, but psychologically present (Boss, 1999). As a result, long-distance relationships depicted in this scholarship were generally framed as suffering from proximal-based barrier deprivation (Attridge, 1994).

However, not everyone agreed. Namely, two studies produced by Marston and colleagues (1987;1998) provided contrast to this dominant read; examining the representational and/or ecological validity of subjective meaning, as not to marginalize or disqualify outlier experiences. One study by Arditti and Kauffman (2004) took these findings further, examining how a social constructionist framework can emphasize individual interpretative realities of, "relational maintenance, commitment, and subjective meanings around relationship strengths and difficulties" (p. 47). In doing so, these works provided rare insights and evidence of alternative meaning systems regarding bondedness, interdependence, and commitment. The scholars also suggested some ways in which ambiguity tolerance may interplay with an individual's sense of interdependence and motivation within their relationships (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004). In the following chapter on sex education, sexuality, and intimacy literature, I dig much deeper into long distance sociosexual relations scholarship.

For now, keep in mind that for better and worse, during the last few decades, the introduction of the Internet has also transformed our entire planet. From every microcosm of societies to larger organizations, our social relations have been irreparably altered, by the increasing ubiquity, efficiency, and pervasiveness of these technological extensions. These new limbs have led to both privacy concerns, as well as catalyzing modes of communication, resulting in progress. However, what media ecologists are quick to remind us of is that

technologies, when introduced into societies, create environments, providing both services as well as disservices. The following few sections document some recent sociosexual happenings that cannot be divorced from this novel and transformative socio-technological intervention.

The Sexocalypse. As ominous and conspiratorial as it sounds, according to mainstream news sources (Holohan, 2019; Kaplan, 2020; Norton, 2021; Woodyatt, 2020), health news sites (Migala, 2020), and religious alternative press (Collins, 2021) U.S. citizens are having less sex. As mentioned in chapter one, certain sources have referred to this sexual phenomenon as the tragic punny term *sexocalypse* (Holohan, 2019; Julian, 2018). More times than not, the journalists who wrote these pieces as well as the studies they cited reporting the crisis called into question the traditional definition of sex as cishet intercourse. What makes this reported national sexual crisis even more notable is that it started years before COVID-19 went viral, globally.

For example, one study that was featured in these broadcasts hypothesized that a pre-COVID sex drought might have been due to changes in sexual norms, as well as the stress and busyness of modern life where leisure, work, and intimate relationships are expected to be juggled (Bodenmann, Atkins, Schär & Poffet, 2010; Ueda, Mercer & Ghaznavi, 2020) alongside a steady stream of online entertainment, which then competes with sexual activity (Amichai-Hamburger & Etgar, 2016; Bodenmann et al, 2020; Twenge, Sherman & Wells, 2017; Wellings, Palmer, Machiyama & Slaymaker, 2019). While as a critical media ecologist I cannot objectively determine why this alleged phenomenon has arisen with absolute certainty, throughout the remainder of this chapter, and with interdisciplinary rigor, I trace out two key ongoing events which have transpired alongside this supposed sexual end of the world (sexocalypse) for millennials, Gen Z folks, and any and all future generations to come. My hope is that in my documenting these happenings I can capture a fuller contemporary U.S. sociosexual landscape.

#MeToo. Years before the #MeToo campaign was popularized by numerous rich White femme celebrities, and eventually co-opted by corporate neoliberal Democrats #TimesUp organization, Tarana Burke created her own initiative "metoo" to tell harassment and violence survivors that they are not alone, establishing pathways to healing (Chicago Tribune, 2021; MeTooMvmt .org, 2018). After countless people spoke the phrase, it spread worldwide and was translated into dozens of languages. As it did, the purpose expanded, "meaning many different things to different people" (Bowen, 2021d, p. 2), and grew beyond Tarana's initial solidarity initiative with low-income Black women into a conscious statement for many types of people, gaining exposure and tragic resonance with other marginalized folks (Snyder & Lopez, 2017).

But a problem has arisen with expansion. For instance, Burke spoke to this problem herself when she visited the Bowling Green State University campus on April 30, 2019, as a part of a lecture series hosted by the BGSU University Libraries called Ordinary People, Extraordinary Stories. During this hour-long speaking event, Burke made a call out to the audience. She said:

> …there is always some group (right?)…that doesn't get enough attention. We can talk about how little they talk about Black women and girls, you know who else they don't talk about? --You got time?...We don't talk about Indigenous folks – who have the highest rate of sexual violence in this country…the media doesn't talk about so much…but, guess what? While they're not talking about it. It's still happening – everyday – in our communities. And so, we cannot wait for them…for the CNN special, the MSNBC…before we recognize what's happening right in front of us. That hashtag [#MeToo] spread across all of our timelines for days and days and days. People around

the world raised their hands to say me too and their hands are still raised. They're still

waiting. They want recourse – they want something (Burke, 2019).

Justice has yet to be provided, our arms are tired, and we want and deserve real social change.

Like anything else, the #MeToo era cannot, and should not, be understood as having

occurred in a vacuum. Throughout the 2010s, a bunch of scholarly books, articles, and personal

memoirs were written on topics about mounting, but dismissed, feminine rage. Some select titles

included: Flowers's (2015) "Refusal to forgive: Indigenous women's love and rage", Bitch

Media's (2018) *The Future is Furious*, Chemalys's (2018) *Rage Becomes Her*, Doyle's (2019)

Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers, Chu's (2019) *Females*, and West's (2019) *The Witches are*

Coming, all speaking to differently situated accumulations of lived female and feminine rages.

After being inspired by these works, I wrote a piece myself entitled *Requirement Politics*

in which I argued that an expression of feminine righteous rage has been a long time coming for

anyone paying attention, both figuratively and literally. I elaborated that one major foundation of

feminine rage revolves around our everyday lived experiences of sexual violences, in which

harassment and rape have been used against millennial feminine presenting folks as weaponized

tools of systemic violence (Bowen, 2022). Outside of the previous works I cited, I also refer to

Sianne Ngai's (2009) work *Ugly Feelings* in which she documented extensively about how,

throughout our lives' we have been and are told our feelings are ugly. Said otherwise, from

mainstream and digital medias to in-person socialization, feminine folks are told we feel too

much and are "crazy" for feeling at all (Ngai, 2009). Those of us who feel face consequences.

By utilizing poetic inquiry in *Requirement Politics: Poetry as Feminist Response to*

Institutional Reluctance and Dismissal, I revisited my chapter on the #MeToo campaign, putting

it into conversation with key poems I wrote between 2016 and 2021. Following Faulkner's

(2020) definition, poetic inquiry is a mode of feminist methodology that combines poetry, autoethnography, and academic research findings as a means of speaking truth back to power, deliberately collapsing "the false divide between the private and the public, as a form of embodied inquiry, and as a feminist political response" (p. 1). The poems and personal narratives I featured throughout represented some distinct aspects (institutional politics, laws and everyday discourses, and rage as a means of cathartic expression) expressing my experiences of sexual harassment, violences, and societal dismissals, to purposefully add consequential flesh to the body politic. As such, throughout, I present my theoretical framework *requirement politics* which I argued, when elucidated within through the feminist methodology and method of poetic inquiry, "offers anyone interested in grappling with the messy, and often volatile, norms present in this world" (Bowen, 2022, p. 25) aiding critical feminist scholars and laypeople alike. Thus, *Requirement politics* is a critique of higher education, and any other corporatized institutions in the neoliberal U.S. To do so, it dissects the body politic through slice-of-life experiences, revealing grotesque and dehumanizing logics of late-stage present-COVID-19, U.S. capitalism.

It serves as a conceptual tool to nuancing sexual violences, which "can and should be refashioned and repurposed" (Bowen, 2022, p. 25) beyond the topic, "in curious exploration and for critical investigation" (p. 25). Theoretically, I combined the media ecological tenant of breakdown as breakthrough (McLuhan, 1970) with insights from critical poetic inquirers (PIs) enacting a meaningful (Anthym, 2018), culturally relevant (Redman-MacLaren, 2020), and positioned (Davis, 2021) inquiry. I conclude with a call to change the current system, and to audit and acknowledge our current realities in all their challenges and opportunities, harnessing collective power to holistically generate human-centered forms of legitimacy, justice, and value.

A crux of the piece is an implied reminder that contrary to common tropes that describe the body like a machine, the human experience is always messier than binary archetypes. Thus, breakdown often doesn't appear as we may expect. Therefore, I argue feminist text should take on equally nuanced forms, and have begun to (Faulkner & Adams, 2021). If we choose to make repetitive paths of critical poetic and lived inquiries that combine raw poetry, narrative accounts, and critical academic scholarship to dissect the body politic (Bowen, 2022) it will become norms because, as I argued, "anything becomes normal in repetition" (p. 8).

Present-COVID-19. As I write this chapter, the pandemic rages on with Delta and Omicron as the dominant variants. On Twitter, and other digital spaces, I have made it a point to put out feelers throughout the course of the pandemic inquiring about whether, or not, it has occurred to us that this is the first pandemic in human history in which we have been capable of successfully enduring a mass isolation and what one TikTok disability advocate has also referred to as a mass disabling event (Barbarin, 2020). In other words, we truly have no concept of the prevailing consequences of remaining physiologically distant for this extended period of time.

The longer this all goes on, the longer I can't help but notice that those who don't live alone have clearly lost sight of the ramifications of those of us who have remained in prolonged isolation since March 2020. We've collapsed our societal telescope and are pretending it might still allow us to see into the distance of our relations. If we were being honest, all we ever had were guesses to begin with, we can't see – anything – and the faster technologies develop, the worse our hypothetical views into the future inevitably become. As phenomenologist Don Ihde (1990) wrote extensively about in his book *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth*, we can't return to any form of mythical non-technological garden. And, as discussed, our

world has drastically changed in the last 30 years. Thus, we have no options but to galivant around on isolated adventures into an uncertain apocalyptic future.

Not enough people are talking about the harm being inflicted on those who for whatever reason who are not capable of being vaccinated, and now forced to continue living in an isolation that started March 2020 or risk their health and well-being in the laissez-faire rarely masked world. Prolonged pandemic life is exhausting for everyone, especially those with children under five (who still cannot get COVID vaccinated) (Kimball, 2022), the elderly (Leonhardt, 2021), the immunocompromised (MacMillan, 2022), and essential workers (teachers, childcare, health, food service, delivery workers, etc.) (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021) who do not have the privileges of working from home (den Houting, 2020).

For those of us forced into extreme isolation for this prolonged period of time, interacting with other people (online or in physical space) can reinvigorate and remind of a larger connection to the world. An additional layer of social isolation takes the form of a significant amount of the public subscribing to disinformation campaigns about COVID-19 being a "Plandemic' (Nazar & Pieters, 2021). Another reason stems from many people (including those who make decisions for institutions) reporting and forcing a return to in-person meeting programs and activities as if the pandemic is over, despite the loss of over a million U.S. citizens, and as Delta and Omicron cases continue to rage around worldwide (BBC.com, 2022).

Often, if one expresses concern about mask wearing, vaccines, or social distancing, they are responded to with anger and/or resentment (Goldstein, 2021). Generally, researchers have found that the type of strategies one uses to cope also factor into their perceived quality of life, including exercise, being outdoors, and virtual communications (Clair, Gordon, Kroon, & Reilly, 2021) as well as mindfulness, substance use (alcohol, marijuana, stimulants, etc.) (Park,

Finkelstein-Fox, Russell, Fendrich, Hutchison, & Becker, 2021), sexual expression (Bowling,

Montanaro, Guerrero-Ordonez, Joshi, & Gioia, 2021), and play (Tonkin & Whitaker, 2020).

As I extensively demonstrated in "Requirement Politics", life is messy, anything becomes

normal in repetition, and we only know what we know (Bowen, 2022). Those who have lived

alone since March 2020 likely cannot fully grasp the consequences experienced by those who

have lived with abusive partners, or with anyone in limited space (and time) to themselves while

experiencing the numerous, ongoing, and compounding global crises (Human Rights Watch,

2021). On one hand, we need to be real about the potential mental and physical health challenges

faced, especially by marginalized groups (Black, Brown, disabled, no / low income, houseless,

LGBTQIA+ folks, etc.), the elderly (who often do not have the access or necessary skills to

navigate alternative forms of digital communication), and immigrants (who experience language

barriers, culture shock, stigma, etc.) who were already recognized as at high-risk for isolation

(AARP Foundation, 2020; Donovan & Blazer, 2020; Tulane University, 2020; Wu, 2020).

On the other, novel social opportunities have manifested for those who have been alone

and do have access to social technologies (Donovan & Blazer, 2020; National Academies of

Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education,

Health and Medicine Division, Board on Behavioral, Cognitive, and Sensory Sciences, Board on

Health Sciences Policy, & Committee on the Health and Medical Dimensions of Social Isolation

and Loneliness in Older Adults, 2020; Wu, 2020). Lastly, I am interested in nuanced ways in

which neurodivergences (like ASD) reveal different orientations and experiences of

autonomously decided isolation, which sometimes differ from universalized neurotypical

assumptions (Orsmond, Shattuck, Cooper, Sterzing, & Anderson, 2013). Either way, as den

Houting (2020) explained, "There is a vast difference between choosing self-isolation out of

preference, and choosing – or being forced into – self-isolation of out necessity" (para. 10). This study and more continue to illustrate how the ASD experience has been misrepresented and flattened in research regarding social connection needs (Pellicano, Brett, & den Houting, 2021).

Those who have spent this time isolated could know either considering many of us are all still so immersed in the thick of it. Like a fish in water, we don't know how to identify our own surroundings (McLuhan, Fiore & Agel, 1968). Again, my hope is that disclosures within this project, temporally documenting and unpacking accounts of the transition might one day in hindsight shed some light on how this "envirusment" (Bowen, 2021a) may have altered millennial and Generation Z folk's lives for those who have had the socioeconomic privileges to sustain prolonged isolation and/or access to digital spaces that provided alternative discourses. Personally, I have noticed myself respond to quarantine hyper-isolation by taking longer untraveled drives and been trying to document the ways the privilege of owning a car has historically shielded U.S. White folks from inequities.

Critical media ecologists, like Sarah Sharma, John Dowd, Carolin Aronis, and I, would likely agree that our present-COVID-19 lives now reveal more of them than ever before. What I am mainly pointing out is that because of wider access to the Internet, that this is the first time in human history that U.S. millennials and Gen Z citizens (if their lifestyle allowed) could have been capable of nearly complete physical isolation since March 2020. Furthermore, this is the first pandemic they could sustain this while also remaining emotionally and intellectually connected to alternative discourses within digital spaces, like TikTok. And at what costs?

We know that prolonged solitary confinement has been used in U.S. prisons, and that the United Nations has equated it to torture (Melzer, 2020). But, when isolation is pandemic, perhaps a part of the "cringe-factor" of algorithmic "knowing" intimate parts of our data reveals an

indicator of overall relationships. We are not Only our data, yet our co[de]pendency reveals to us the parts of our data that have been attributed to us, whether we like it or not.

Throughout the pandemic, in every type of social media I am on, I have witnessed millennial and Generation Z feminine presenting people come out in droves about their acknowledgements for the first time that they are autistic, bisexual, a lesbian, queer, have ADHD, transgender, non-binary, the lists go on (Bowen, 2021b). What does it mean about these two generations of feminine folks pre-COVID "normal" that so many of, especially the most marginalized femmes/non-binary, people are only – now – during a global catastrophe forcing prolonged isolation, noticing these integral parts of their identities? A perfect example is how the reification of these grand cultural delusions, have ended up vanishing before our mind's eyes when those of us with the privileges to stay, for an extended period, in the comfort of their homes as well as reliable and ubiquitous Internet access to enter pre- and present-COVID-19 novel digital spaces of solidarity.

Serendipitously enough, a silver-lining of this otherwise traumatic ongoing separation, for those of us with those privileges, has been a digitally fabricated and potentially false sense of security in technological isolation. In other words, thanks to fields like psychology, sociology, and media and communication, for decades, if not centuries now we have known that dominant ideologies have vast effects on our individual, social, and systemic lives. But arguably, until this pandemic we have not embodied the heart-wrenching truth that there are few things more tragic than being so lonely from the pandemic that you decide to risk contracting a deadly virus for a few moments of in-person contact. Unfortunately, as many are all too familiar, realistically, there are many things more tragic. But this is something, until this moment in history, I had not seen

stated explicitly. And writing a dissertation discussing the concept of *touch hunger*, before the pandemic even hit, has put the prolonged isolation of this experience into fuller perspective.

One, potentially provocative, yet historical example of how isolation might serve us useful, pandemic or not, was written by Nazi sympathizer Martin Heidegger (1926) in a letter to his mentee and controversial lover Hannah Arendt:

> This 'withdrawal' from everything human and breaking off all connections is, with regard to creative work, the most magnificent human experience I know – with regard to concrete situations, it is the most repugnant thing one can encounter. One's heart is ripped from one's body (as quoted in *Letters, 1925-1975*, Ludz & Shield, 2004, p. 40).

He continues in this letter to Arendt by explaining, "With the burden of this necessary isolation, I always hope for complete isolation from the outside – for a merely apparent return to other people – and for the strength to keep an ultimate and constant distance" (Heidegger, 1926, p. 40). Although this letter was written in 1926 after the 1918 flu pandemic that reportedly ended in 1920, what I argue we might glean from his account is an interesting lived knowledge and experience garnered from both self-imposed or even pandemic prevention forms of isolation.

The point being, as stated at the beginning of this chapter, from a media ecological approach when a novel "medium" (or technology) is introduced into an environment, it mediates our sense-making differently. By tracing out the foundational trajectory of the U.S. nation since its origin, as well as sociosexual relations, and the emergence of COVID-19 we can begin to reveal taken for granted biases built in as features of said system, enlivening erasure. Each medium offers services and disservices of this unprecedented isolation (Meyrowitz, 1986). For example, within late-stage neoliberal capitalism many mechanisms mentioned in the above section on how to cope with COVID-19 have been co-opted, such as mindfulness (Purser, 2019).

Primarily, Purser (2019) coined his term *McMindfulness*, or a form of capitalist spirituality that is "void of a moral compass or ethical commitments, unmoored from a vision of the social good, the commodification of mindfulness keeps it anchored in the ethos of the market" (p. 17). As such, the present-COVID-19 environment has manifested in the form of both unforeseen sociopolitical, biological, and sexual complications, on the basis of one's social location, and due to prolonged isolation, that people are not ready or willing to accept or think about, related to all aforementioned the social structures, ideologies, normalities, and resulting social breakdowns as breakthroughs discussed thus far. For instance, if a cisman in his own or anyone's else's shared quarters has never had the exciting opportunity to help clean it before, he's in luck! This pandemic could easily act as his grand debut on the house-working scene. I argue we should all walk away from this period of self-isolation with a new appreciation for housework, and those who have sociohistorically been forced to complete it sight unseen.

Ironically, on the flip side, global Centers for Disease Control (CDC) agencies have released numerous reports that arguing that people are not isolated – enough. For example, the British Colombia CDC (2020) has received plenty of global notoriety for suggesting citizens masturbating, take part in cybersex, and/or "use barriers, like walls (e.g., gloryholes), that allow for sexual contact but prevent close face-to-face contact" (para. 10). Eventually, this advice did make its way to U.S. sources, like the New York City Health Department (2021) which released an extensive list of sexual recommendations to any and all sexually active citizens who might need them, including, but not limited to: getting vaccinated, COVID-19 testing, avoiding sex parties and other gatherings, being consistent with sex partners, having sex in larger, more open and well-ventilated spaces, using hand sanitizer, wearing masks, avoiding kissing, cybersex, gloryholes, condoms / dental dams, and "washing up before and after sex" (pp. 1-2).

Although at first read, this all may be seen as funny or taboo, these measures are being disseminated to the public for valid reasons. As I discuss at length in the following chapter, sex education in the United States is insufficient at best. And so, since all preexisting societal issues have simply been inflamed by this pandemic, hygiene concerns remain and are now, arguably, only more valid than ever before. In hindsight, public health issues, from basic hand-washing habits (Strochlic, 2020), wearing seatbelts (Roos, 2020), to now mask wearing (Prasad, 2020), have long been responded to by the public with a rather surprising amount of targeted hostility.

As a result of the financial and political co-opting of the U.S. health system, it has been hard enough to get citizens into regular check-ups with the primary care provider, let alone to a specialized clinic like Planned Parenthood in order for them to be tested and diagnosed for sexual transmitted infections, etc. And what makes matters more complicated, according to PlannedParenthoodAction.org (n.d.), is that over the course of the last few decades, Republican Targeted Restrictions on Abortion Provider (TRAP) laws have dangerously chipped away at Planned Parenthood clinics across the country (para. 1). For those who do not know, these laws not only impose unnecessary requirements on abortion providers and women's health centers under the guise of "women's health" (para. 2), but with "no medical basis" (para. 6) they make it more difficult for people to access abortion in their state, devastating access to safe, legal abortion in Texas (para. 3) and have shut down "health centers; making safe, legal abortion hard or even impossible to access…leaving hundreds of thousands without care" (para. 11).

Beyond the inexcusably overt bodily autonomy disregard these laws ensure of those capable of becoming pregnant, when one considers these Republican TRAP laws in the context of the recent U.N. report on climate change, they become even more pandemically devastating. The Planned Parenthood (n.d.) website stated explicitly that, "traveling longer distances to

abortion providers is especially burdensome for low-income people who have to find the money for transportation, take time off from work, and secure childcare" (para. 10). I would argue, these ongoing constraints, when put into conversation with the introduction of the birth control pill on society, and the feminization of labor that was discussed earlier on in this chapter, among other factors. These pre-existing conditions, and more, were similarly investigated by Amy Blackstone (2019) in her book *Childfree by Choice: The Movement Redefining Family and Creating a New Age of Independence* as the Childfree by Choice lifestyle (Blackstone, 2019). Within the last few years, more and more articles and books have been published on this phenomenon of folks choosing to be voluntarily childless (Harrington, 2019; Rodgers, 2021).

With these ongoing events on the ecological table, it's similarly important to keep in mind that having children has an enormous environmental impact (Shead, 2021). And knowing what we now do from the U.N. report on climate change, this should be of grave concern (Meredith, 2021; World Meteorological Organization, 2021). Therefore, as discussed throughout this chapter, the United States is a country based upon exclusionary White supremacist colonialism. The capitalist structures built on top of this foundation cannot be divorced from this base. Thankfully, more recovery work than ever before is being done by critical scholars of all kinds detailing the trajectory of how biases are built into this system (Sharma, 2019) and all the technological limbs built within and from it (Benjamin, 2019a; Benjamin, 2019b; Mullaney, Peters, Hicks & Philip, 2021; Nakamura, 2008; Noble, 2018).

Over the course of centuries, those in religious, scientific, and political power (primarily White cishet males) led, hoarded wealth, and subjected all citizens (both enslaved and free) to various ideological renditions of racisms, sexisms, and classisms (among all other discriminations) upon which capitalism depended to reproduce the status quo of each age (Kendi,

2016). And as this occurred, the U.S. system (which, again, according to Sharma [2020] can be likened to a systemic technology) used these oppressive forces to divide and conquer those in this nation, ensuring the country was comprised of a majority White folks through centuries of genocide, slavery, and population control (Carter, 2007; Kendi, 2016). Now, today, try as both neoliberal corporate options masquerading as U.S. political parties (Democrats and Republicans) might, they cannot divorce what is occurring as a resulting of the deliberate population control tactics and manifest destiny that the nation was founded upon.

In the next chapter, I more extensively discuss how sex education, preferences, and intimacy literature reveal to us a more fully fleshed out the sociosexually violent U.S. landscape.

CHAPTER THREE. SEX EDUCATION, SEXUALITY, AND INTIMACY STUDIES

Following trends of the previous chapter which covered the overarching context of the U.S., this third chapter explores the contemporary sex education landscape, before overviewing relevant topics and discourses in human-human sexuality and intimacy studies, respectively.

United States Sexual Education

According to D'Emilio and Freedman (2012) in their work *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, contrary to historical tropes of colonial Puritanism and sexual repression revealed that, "not all colonists were Puritans, those nonconforming, largely middle-class English men and women who attempted to establish a community of saints in seventeenth century New England" (p. 15). Much like today, they reported that young U.S. colonizers learned about sex from either observing family or from moral instruction from parents or the church (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012). Unfortunately, thinking back to discussions of colonial rhetorics from chapter two, these stereotypes of sex were also used to justify domination of Indigenous and African communities. Although I cannot speak for them, I imagine this is why in their recent work, *Everyday Violence: The Public Harassment of Women & LGBTQ People,* Simone Kolysh (2021) concluded by recommending, "a deeper exploration of citizenship status and everyday violence in the United States and abroad because everyday violence is a global problem, but it cannot be solved via colonial or imperialist means" (p. 166). In other words, these foundational forms of U.S. discrimination are still perpetuated in contemporary society.

Historically, D'Emilio and Freedman (2012) recorded that during 1600-1800, or what they called the settlement Reproductive Matrix, "English colonists brought to America a set of stereotypes that differentiated Europeans from Africans by assigning to the latter a sexual nature that was more sensual, aggressive, and beastlike than that of Whites," (p. 35) continuing on to

explain that these racist stereotypes, "help[ed] justify their economic and social control of Blacks" (p. 35). Most notably in regards this project, these sexual historians unpacked how Enlightenment views on individual happiness applied primarily to men, as did binary gender medical conceptions, which encouraged men, not women, to prioritize their own sexual pleasure (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012). Although I do not have the space within this particular project to extensively overview the nuances and ongoing tensions regarding the history of U.S. sex work, it is important to mention that D'Emilio and Freedman (2012) noted that the multi-pronged organized agitations against prostitution can be traced back to at least the 1830s in this nation. Said directly, the researchers detailed that, "businessmen and male civic leaders joined feminists and ministers in an effort to eradicate commercialized vice…permanently alter[ing] the face of prostitution in America" (p. 208). Stigma on this labor still influences concepts of sex today.

Contextually, and demonstrating these complex struggles further, as time progressed, the authors referred to social goings on as shifting from Divided Passions (1780-1900) where, "reproduction ceased to be the primary goal of sexual relations, romantic intimacy and erotic pleasure played larger roles in sexual relations, while an ideal of self-government and the internalization of sexual controls replaced the regulation of morality by church and state" (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012, p. 166), into a shift Toward a New Sexual Order (1880-1930) in which, uncoincidentally, the introduction of birth control on society was personally, political, and legally contested, and yet for better or worse, launched the U.S. into a new sexual era (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012).

Specifically, an era where they described eroticism was seen more positively, as well as "the growing autonomy of youth, the association of sex with commercialized leisure and self-expression, the pursuit of love, the visibility of the erotic in popular culture, the social interaction

of men and women in public, the legitimation of female interest in the sexual: all of these were to be seen in America in the twenties" (p. 233). The final section of their accounts of sexualities detailed "The Rise and Fall of Sexual Liberalism, 1920 to the Present", stating:

> Whatever the outcome of the current political conflicts over sex, Americans will have to take account of the legacy of four centuries of change. Birth control is so embedded in social life that a purely reproductive matrix for sex is no longer even remotely possible. Women's role in the family and the public realm has altered so profoundly that a gender-based system resting on female purity is not likely to be resurrected. The capitalist seizure of sexuality destroyed the division between public reticence and private actions that the nineteenth-century middle class sought to maintain. Perhaps what the study of America's history allows us to say with assurance is that sexuality has come to occupy a prominent place in our economy, our psyches, and our politics (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012, pp. 387-388).

In other words, these foundational sexual meaning-makings pervade all preceding renditions of individually internalized, societal, and systemic sense-makings.

Within the last couple decades, conflicting perspectives have been discussed in various feminist spaces, due to the Third Wave Feminist defenses of bodily autonomy and sexual expression. It's crucial to remember feminism is not a hivemind. For example, Snyder-Hall (2010), accounted for tensions between feminist aims of gender equality and sexual pleasure:

> One side seeing evidence of gender oppression and the other opportunities for sexual pleasure and empowerment…This wave respects the right of women to decide for themselves how to negotiate the often contradictory desires for both gender equality and

sexual pleasure. Third-wave feminism actually exhibits not a thoughtless endorsement of 'choice,' but rather a deep respect for pluralism and self-determination (p. 255).

Later in this chapter, I expand on this pedestaling of the Enlightenment subject, connecting it to how this historical equation of this subjectivity with White cishet male centralizing humanness founded and continues to complicate contemporary present-COVID-19 U.S. sociosexual relations. When I say "cishet", I mean cisheterosexual, or someone who is cisgender (a person who identifies with the gender assigned at birth based on binary biological sex) and heterosexual. I detail both of these terms more extensively later on this chapter, challenging binary concepts. For now, with this background in mind, I discuss the stranglehold on U.S sex education funding.

Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage (AOUM) Programs

> In the second decade of the 20th century, Dr. Ella Flagg Young's strategically fragmented argumentation strategy helped her to garner support for the first sex-education program in U.S. public schools. She integrated arguments in favor of public sex education into other conversations and used the ideologies undergirding those conversations to convince people of their rationality (Jensen, 2010, p. 149).

As shown above, little do many know, public sex education in the U.S. was begun by Ella Flagg Young, who made the case for the social importance of these initiatives. Thinking back to our discussions in chapter two regarding rationality (prided over emotional and embodied logics), this bureaucratic rhetorical appeal should look familiar (Jensen, 2010). Then, as Orenstein (2016) noted in her work *Girls & Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape*:

> In 1981, partly as a reward for the New Right's support of his presidential bid, Ronald Reagan signed what was nicknamed 'the chastity law,' the first legislation requiring that

federally funded sex education, as its sole purpose, teach 'the social, psychological and

health gains to be realized by abstaining for sexual activity' (p. 209).

Over time, and with each preceding POTUS, increased funding was delegated to abstinence.

In contemporary times, content requirements of U.S. sex education have been settled at

the state and local levels in two ways. The first has been by implementing policy legislation, and

the second is via funding designation (Guttmacher.org, n.d.). On a federal level, exclusionary

programs, like abstinence-only, began in 1981, and have received the bulk of the funding since,

despite being markedly insufficient compared to Comprehensive Sexual Education (The Society

for Adolescent Health and Medicine, 2017). The Sexuality Information and Education Council of

the United States (SIECUS) (2014) has defined Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) like so:

Sex education programs that, in school-based settings, start by kindergarten and

continue through 12th grade. High-quality CSE programs include age, developmentally,

and culturally appropriate, science-based, and medically accurate information on a broad

set of topics related to sexuality, including human development, relationships, personal

skills, sexual behaviors, including abstinence, sexual health, and society and culture. CSE

programs provide students with opportunities for learning information, exploring their

attitudes and values, and developing skills (para. 1).

For some context, there was no designated federal funding for evidence based CSE until

fiscal year 2010 (FutureofSexEd.org, n.d.). Jointly, the Dedicated Federal Abstinence-Only-

Until-Marriage Program (AOUMs) funding report (SIECUS.org, 2018) showed a concerted aim

to uphold AOUMs under a rebrand as Sexual Risk Avoidance programs (Griggs, 2017). And, in

2018, the Trump administration reprioritized abstinence programs, yet again (Donovan, 2017).

The result of this funding stream absence (Donovan, 2017) is that CSE largely has not existed (FutureofSexEd.org, n.d.). Citizens should take issue with this because, as Dastagir pointed out, young people who do receive abstinence-based sex education then often look to violent and inaccurate pornography to learn about sex and sexual roles (Dastagir, 2018). As I mention in my #MeToo book chapter, what makes this worse is that, "traditional ideologies of sex shame are ventriloquized in everyday conversation, American law, and media representations. This trifecta has normalized the idea that victims should be seen as guilty parties in the verbal, physical, and/or sexual violence they experience" (Bowen, 2021d, p. 7). In the meantime, another result of a lack of formal sex education has been Internet users filling the gap.

Informal Alternative Digital Sex Education

As discussed in the first two chapters, media ecologists have argued that technologies offer us both services as well as disservices. However, technologies are also designed and produced in order to solve anticipated and ongoing, very living, problems. Therefore, responding to blockades on CSE, that exists within the already heavily sexually commodified and saturated neoliberal transnational and global media (TN&GM) landscape, certain entrepreneurs noticed a gap in this market. As a result, prior to the #MeToo era, one main way in which teens and adults alike may have become informed on topics like consent and pleasure, were through apps like Tabu, Juicebox, Scarleteen, Project Consent, and Sex Ed Plus (Auteri, 2016). Shortly thereafter, international scholars took note of the way the internet has provided welcome alternative spaces for digital sex education. Additionally, sex educators, more interconnected than ever before, exchange key insights regarding how to develop their digital literacy skills, in order to ensure content is accessible (Oosterhoff, Müller, & Shephard, 2017).

As we learned, the COVID-19 lockdowns during March 2020 (which forced a massive

shift to online education) broke down and broke through countless taken for granted mores of

education -- writ large. And, considering the grim traditional circumstances of sex education in

this country, when the pandemic hit, these newfound efforts are arguably one area which was

able to thrive and grow despite this lockdown. For instance, after inquiring about this topic and

through interviewing sex educators, Suzannah Weiss (2021) of "The Lily" has learned that:

> …the coronavirus pandemic making in-person classes logistically difficult or canceling
>
> them altogether, these limitations have had a silver lining within the sex ed space…when
>
> schools offer sex ed remotely, the options for curriculums, discussion formats and who
>
> has access to the classes expand. What's more, new kinds of classes outside school
>
> settings have gained traction, from online sex ed for adults to porn literacy to programs
>
> combating the stigma of sexually transmitted infections (para. 3).

Noticing this pattern, another reporter from OZY by the name of Hirschfeld (2020) asserted that,

"the pandemic is proving the perfect testing ground for sex education apps" (para. 1), specifically

recommending a Planned Parenthood sex education chatbot released called Roo.

These conversations are crucial to be having during these already trying times

considering that, according to Guttmacher Institute researchers, even before COVID-19, young

folks in low- and middle-income nations already experienced pervasive inequities in receiving

reproductive and sexual information, health, and rights for generations (Riley, Sully, Ahmed &

Biddlecom, 2020). In fact, a recent study, published by researchers from the same organization,

reported that these issues have only gotten worse over the course of the pandemic, "in new and

harmful ways" (Sandinsky, Nuñez, Nabulega, Riley, & Sully, 2020, para. 2). Although,

traditionally, the U.S. has not been considered a low- (gross national income per capita of $1,025

or less), lower-middle-income ($1,026-3995), and/or middle-income ($3,996-12,375) country

per say, according to Per World Bank classifications (Sully, Biddlecom, Darroch, Riley,

Ashford, Lince-Deroche, Firestein, & Murro, 2020), considering the state of our sex education

system, I argue similar issues have arisen in the U.S. during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Until these alternative forms of more comprehensive digital sex education outlets

emerged on the social scene, there were barely any spaces for everyday people to learn about the

aforementioned nuances of consent, pleasure, and sexual preferences. In the next segment, I will

now review two distinct terms which Abstinence Only Until Marriage (AOUM) programs (and

most contemporary institutions around the world still) conflate: biological sex and gender.

Biological Sex, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

> The histories of both the colonized and the colonizer have been written from the male
>
> [sic] point of view — women [sic] are peripheral if they appear at all. While studies of
>
> colonization written from this angle are not necessarily irrelevant to understanding what
>
> happened to native females [sic], we must recognize that colonization impacted males
>
> [sic] and females [sic] in similar and dissimilar ways (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p. 121).

Binary Concepts

If one subscribes to binary conceptions from sociology, the terms woman/man refer to

gender identity, and the words female/male describe biological sex. Thus, even in a traditionally

definitive sense, these are two distinctly different characteristics that have been heavily

convoluted throughout everyday conversation and systematic literature. Since the dawn of both

descriptors usage, conflation of these words implied that everyone was cisgender. For example, a

person with cisnormative "female" external biological genitalia was then avowed with a

feminine gender.

Many laypeople and academics alike claim this traditional everyday usage has been accepted within the lexicon and should now be unquestioned. But I contend that this historical and systematic wrong does not make any difference. The two terms are distinctly different. And they should be respected, and used, as such. Just because they have been incorrectly and interchangeably used, for quite some time, does not mean we should continue doing that. When we know better, we can begin to do better. For these reasons, in the remainder of this next section I elaborate on differences between sex and gender, as well as some sociohistorical complications and losses which manifested, as a result, such as vulva erasure and devaluation.

Biological Sex.

…the category of sex tightly holds women. For the category of sex is a totalitarian one, which to prove true has its inquisitions, its courts, its tribunals, its body of laws, its terrors, its tortures, its mutilations, its executions, its police. Its shapes the mind as well as the body since it controls all mental production. It grips our minds in such a way that we cannot think outside of it. This is why we must destroy it and start thinking beyond it if we want to start thinking at all, as we must destroy the sexes as a sociological reality if we want to start to exist (Wittig, 1992, p. 8).

One's body is their biological sex. Thus, biological sex (female/intersex/male) is not performed, per say. It is comprised of one's sexual organs, chromosomes, and their hormonal chemistry. And there are many possible variations that can emerge. Point being, unless one's prerogative is to reduce someone down to their biological makeup, the terms female/intersex/ male should not be used to describe someone - especially not as one's gender (which largely does not dictate one's performed personhood beyond vocal tonality, which still greatly varies).

Therefore, as one might imagine, there is an unlimited amount of (binary-blasting) possibilities for this characteristic to manifest, the details of which are well beyond the scope of this project.

Furthermore, as a critical feminist scholar, I would be remiss not to reiterate the understanding that biological reductionism has been outdated by at least fifty years and is historically linked to a rationalization of objectifying, and ultimately, dehumanizing forms of sexisms, and interlocking racisms. Thinking back to the foundational concepts of colonial domination that were discussed in chapter two, these logics led to botched medical knowledge of the female body, despite the fact that human bodies are largely the same, besides hormonal and chromosome differences. These foundational concepts of patriarchy and colonialism have also led to normalized male fantasies and linguistic manifestations in medical literature, like the recently debunked macho sperm myth, that had long attributed imbalanced credit to the sperm during conception as compared to various anatomical movements and the egg (Martin, 2018).

Realistically, if one has the financial and cultural means, their body can be altered, dramatically, if they choose to partake in hormone therapies to transition. With that said, hormones can dictate vast differences in the entire systemic inner workings. This is not to say that one is determined solely by their biological or hormonal make-up because we are all more complicated autonomous beings. However, it is to say that since we now do know that the sociohistorical and institutional universalization of the male medical body has occurred, which has led to an necessarily uninformed medical model (and in certain cases, fatal female symptoms) that could -- and should -- have been avoided (McGregor, 2015).

The key take away from this breakdown being that from a media ecological approach when the novel "medium" of a universalized male medical body was introduced as normal, it mediated our sense-making differently. To understand the sense-making processes of that, look

no further than the foundational origin and trajectory of the U.S. nation, including all preceding

rhetorics and logics of capitalisms, sociosexual relations, as well as the long and nuanced

historical inaccuracies regarding biological sex, which medically reveal taken for granted biases

built in as features of said system, regarding the still living erasure of non-White cismale bodies.

For example, Cavanagh and Sykes (2006) in their article "Transsexual Bodies at the

Olympics" detailed that sex had since the dawn of athleticism been a characteristic used to

historically disqualify or gatekeep cisfemales from participating in the Olympics. To bring this

full circle, and back into contemporary times, the authors documented how advancements in

medical science regarding hormone replacement therapy and top/bottom surgeries, were used as

a tool of power to rationalize and legitimize common day transsexual discrimination and

disqualification. Thus, on one hand, they explained that, although biological sex has always been

more complex than a binary concept linguistically names, it is nevertheless zeroed in on in

relation to sports performance, due to the muscle development advantages of testosterone. One

historically unfortunate example of this was the 142 cisfemale Soviet Era Olympians ordered to

take testosterone under the guise of simple "vitamins" (Aykroyd, 2019, para. 10).

On the other, Cavanagh and Skyes (2006) spoke critically about how this type of

mentality has been taken too far, and in fact has, thus, been used to justify further discrimination

and marginalization of transgender and transsexual athletes. For instance, they pointed out that,

despite taking testosterone injections, transsexual men in particular rarely face discrimination,

whereas transsexual women on estrogen are commonly stigmatized. By invoking Butler's

concept *gender trouble* they argued that the Olympics have always transcended boundaries of

"natural", mortal human bodies, and performance for spectacle. Relatedly, Cavanagh and Sykes

(2006) highlight the scientific acknowledgement that sex of the body is increasingly unstable, also arguing that it is absurd to reinforce such an inherently inadequate XX/XY-based sex-test.

Existentially, they attributed Olympic practices, and the incongruity of social response to masked anxiety and fear, back to our own morality. They saw this phenomenon as a predictable backlash to any social indeterminacy, which contradicts the universalizing logic and practices of modern scientific thought, which arises whenever alternatives to traditions emerge. According to Cavanagh and Sykes (2006), this fragile epistemological resentment and controversy was inflamed throughout the 1990s but were never sufficiently quelled by any scientific technologies which claimed to be capable of justifying a boundary between "male" and "female" bodies, masking the inevitable morality of us all. Regardless of intention, the binary justified more harm.

Vulva Erasure / Devaluation. Speaking of binary fueled harm, Irigaray (1985) detailed how "female genitals" and pleasure have been historically absent and seen as flawed by the male-dominated scientific community. This sexist casting bled into the larger societal perspective which saw cismale genitalia as the only anatomy worthy of consideration. This prioritization of cismale anatomy not only devalued cisfemale anatomy, but also, through medical practices, relegated ciswoman's pleasure to a mystery. Ironically, Irigaray's piece did linguistically equate women with "females" in the same way "woman" has been deemed synonymous (cisnormatively) with a female body composition. It goes to show how recent the linguistic conflation of biological sex with gender was in the 1980s, and how necessary recovery work is that decouples these terms as distinct, especially in a vast majority of the hard sciences.

Either way, as discussed, the taken for granted normality of these misnomers has resulted in a stunted sexual imagination, which set the stage for ciswomen to be disvalued as objects, for the purpose of being taken by and for cismale pleasure in patriarchal White culture and

Foucauldian genealogies of heteronormative sexual oppression. And, according to Irigaray, this devaluation of the vulva, and women's desire, as objects, was perfected as an art throughout Western culture. Particularly, they argued this diversified eroticism of femininity has been considered too much and not enough at the same time; perpetually kept on the temporal shelf as a beautiful object for exhibition and solicitation of male subjects.

Irigaray documented that, unlike the external genitalia of cismales, the vulva and vagina touch themselves because they have been denied pleasure within the scene of a patriarchal civilization. Due to this systematic sexual neglect and gendered divisions of labor, they explained that the sociohistorical alternative ciswomen begrudgingly accepted was one of intimacy via the role of motherhood. Lastly, Irigaray called into question whether ciswomen can realistically assert a right to their own pleasure without a deconstruction of and/or separation from the system which historically deemed them as nothing more than possessable objects (Irigaray, 1985). These cissexist and biologically essentialist rhetorics have distinct, yet interlocking, human implications from ones portrayed via sociohistorical trajectories of sex.

Gender. So, what is gender? Some have argued gender (most broadly described, on a spectrum, with the terms woman/non-binary/man) is a performance. Theorists such as Connell (1985), West and Zimmerman (1987), and Butler (1990, 1993) claim that gender is the actions one undertakes to display, and thus, perpetually interact with, throughout the course of their lives, that cannot, and should not, be reduced to one's body. For this reason, and more, Monique Wittig (1992) in their book *The Straight Mind: And Other Essays* asserted that, "a materialist feminist approach to women's oppression destroys the idea that women are a 'natural group': 'a racial group of a special kind, a group perceived as natural, a group of men considered as materially specific in their bodies" (p. 9). Continuing this thought**,** Haraway (1994) testified that,

in contrast with who wrote the bulk of traditional accounts of history, women have been, "excruciatingly conscious of what it means to have a historically constituted body" (Haraway, 1994, p. 75) and that that has been a "conscious achievement, not a natural fact" (p. 77).

With all of the above in mind, it is imperative we remember and consistent remind others, gender and sex are social constructs. And once we, as a U.S. nation, accept this, we can begin to address what Wittig (1992) stated:

> For women to answer the question of the individual subject in materialist terms is first to show, as the lesbians and feminists did, that supposedly 'subjective,' 'individual,' 'private' problems are in fact social problems, class problems; that sexuality is not for women an individual and subjective expression, but a social institution of violence (p. 19).

Women have always been more than one who is "biologically female" in sex organs, chromosomes, and chemical breakdown. Would we call someone less of a woman if/when she reaches menopause? No, that would be outright wrong. Thus, we all benefit from reflecting on the implications of the reductive basis on which the conflation of these two terms is grounded. If one chooses to define gender or sex as linguistically interchangeable in all instances, they also negate entire lived experiences on the margin, that include, but are not limited to, intersex and nonbinary persons. A groundbreaking study found at least 11% of the U.S. populace identifies as being non-binary (Wilson & Meyer, 2021). These folks may identify using (neo)pronouns like the singular meaning of they/they or another form of alternate such as xe/xyr, ze/zir, or ey/eir.

With that said, it also cannot be understated, that cis-, non-binary folks, and trans- women – alike -- are more than having: more estrogen than testosterone, female breast tissue, menstruating uterus, and a vulva. In other words, contrary to popular belief, none of us know

what anyone's biology is just by looking at them. A person is more than their chemistry, chromosomes, and genitals. We cannot divorce these linguistic reductions from the historical.

Cisnormativity. Cisnormative and exclusive language, should not be reinforced, and/or subtlety tolerated because language usage is the way we instill and reproduce all instances of reality. For example, many people commonly say that binary gender socialization begins at birth. And for a long time, I agreed. But really, because of increasingly sophisticated and more broadly affordable access to reproductive technologies, this socialization begins much earlier. Namely, since advancements in the 1970s, if and when parents use digital medical tools, in efforts to seek out and be told by medical experts about the bio sex of their unborn child(ren). From there, typically well-intentioned parents then begin communicatively and materially framing who this new little human will be. To do this, U.S. parents have consulted what they have been told about gender/sex their whole lives; pulling from binary scripts of gender, which they have been told allegedly "match" a binary (and, thus, cisnormative) concept of biological sex assigned at birth.

However, **i**f someone were born and deemed "biologically male" at birth and was avowed to be a "man" by their parents, but later in life decided they do not personally identify with the cisnormative gender role of "man", they would be transgender. For the first time in human history, due to the popularizing usage and deconstruction of these binary concepts of sex and gender, much like other cultures who have always embraced gender fluidity, U.S. millennials and Gen Z are now realizing they identify outside binaries. If so, any one transgender person may, or may not, decide to transition their presentation by publicly grooming or dressing in ways which are, more or less, traditionally feminine or masculine according to cultural norms.

Heteronormativity. Heterosexuality is if/when one is attracted to someone else who identifies as "the opposite binary" gender from them (ex: man/woman). On the sexual preference

flip side, one is homosexual if/when they are attracted to others whose gender is like theirs. Both of these binary concepts of sexual preference become much more complicated once you acknowledge the sociohistorical conflation between sex and gender. With this said, "heteronormativity" is a set of assumptions that is common in the U.S. sociosexual landscape that socializes a presumption that anyone is heterosexual unless proven otherwise.

Circling back to the beginning of this chapter, Puritanical religious themes generally ground these assumptions. And over the course of centuries, heteronormativity as a concept has been normalized in everything from legal doctrine to everyday conversation, and predominant cishet media representations. For example, hypocritical White cishet Western male discourses, such as those preached by U.S. religious right organizations, Catholic Church mainstream dogma, and conservative political pundits have long referred to this hegemonic concept.

Specifically, in the public eye they condemn all forms of sexuality and intimacy which stray from cisheteronormativity via sociopolitical rhetorics as well as news media content, stigmatizing queerness as sexualities divorced from family and procreation. But, behind closed doors, conservative preachers (like Jim Baker, etc.) have been found guilty of sex scandals and Catholic priests are molesting children. For hundreds of years, for reasons which can be connected back to colonialization have cast personal gratification and pleasure as selfish, disgraceful, and unclean (Edelman, 2004). With all this said, a transgender person may or may not be homosexual. Gender, biological sex, and sexual preference are three different, and non-mutually exclusive demographic characteristics, that cannot be accurately used synonymously.

Binary Dismantling

Despite the linguistic, rhetorical, and media manifestations of cultural and material oppression of ciswomen's and other more marginalized LGBTQIA+ identities, relations, and

sexualities as summarized above, in the United States of America, and most other countries in the Western world, cultures have mistakenly reinforced binary gender and sex. It is crucial to mention, the world is full of other culturally normalized gender and sex classifications that extend beyond limitations of this piece, expanding into validly blurred experiences and multiplicities of gender, sex, and attraction fluidities. Thus, intersex bodies and other genders have always existed, and to ignore them is to erase many non-Western and indigenous cultural histories. Economically in the U.S., these reductions also reify rigid binary archetypes of gendered products, perpetually generating profit for the wealthiest classes.

I close out this segment on binary sex, gender, and sexual preferences, with a reminder that, as I write this, it is a truly unprecedented and transitional time to be alive. According to Kemp and the *Digital 2021 April Global Statshot Report* (2021) thanks to mobile devices, 60% of the global population now has financial means and access to internet connection, more than ever before. Nationally, the Pew Research Center (2021) also reported that 93% of Americans now use the internet, with 77% of the population gaining access via high-speed broadband.

As stated before, 1.2 million Americans (11%) recognize and put a non-binary gendered way of life into practice (Wilson & Meyer, 2021). Moreover, despite sociohistorically cisnormative and biomedical binaries which make intersex rates challenging to determine, it has been estimated that 1-2 in 100 people are also intersex (PlannedParenthood.org, n.d.). With these two considerations in mind, I argue we cannot understate the influences of our technological human extensions, like Web 2.0, which have allowed -- for the first time in mass in human history -- for these sociologically defined concepts to finally gain attention and generate social conflict and/or alternatives for those who were socialized into more traditional understandings.

We are alive during a time where older traditions are colliding headfirst with the new. This chaotic push and pull is what social change, as it happens one conversation at a time, looks like. We each have a choice to accept or reject what we have been socialized into being. As the evidence I have provided in this chapter shows, I argue we would all be better off if we worked toward breaking out of these colonially and conceptually ingrained, binary boxes. If we want to live in a more openly communicative and broadly understanding society, not constrained by social constructs of Western superiority, we have a responsibility to recognize these norms and resulting practices. Arguably, we owe it to our children and fellow humans to give them enough lifelong freedom to choose who they will be, and are welcome to be, throughout their lives. Unfortunately, not everyone has had that freedom since some have not been deemed human.

Human-Human Sexuality and Intimacy Studies

Humanness

Deconstructing humanness within her edited collection *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis,* Katherine McKittrick, (2015) showcased select manuscripts, which each explored:

> …the ways in which those currently inhabiting the underside of the category of Man-as-human --- under our current epistemological regime, those cast out as impoverished and colonized and undesirable and lacking reason --- can, and do, provide a way to think about being human anew. Being human, in this context, signals not a noun but a verb. Being human is a praxis of humanness that does not dwell on the static empiricism of the unfittest and the downtrodden and situate the most marginalized within the incarcerated colonial categorization of oppression; being human as praxis is, to borrow from Maturana and Varela, 'the realization of the living' (pp. 3-4).

Following in the tradition of Sylvia Wynter, said scholars expanded on how humanness has been limited since its conception. To make sense of this, we should return to the last chapter discussions on racisms. As ruminated there, Kendi's recovery work *Stamped from the Beginning* documented how U.S. religious, scientific, and political establishments were used to dehumanize those deemed non-White against a demarcation of anti-Blackness (Kendi, 2016). Throughout her life's work Wynter advocated for a reconceptualization of this naturalized reductive White Man-human, arguing it is this system of meaning and being mediating, and reifying, dehumanizing anti-Blackness. In the following chapter, I discuss advancement of some technologies, and how this human bias that Wynter, and others, spoke to are built into many extensions still today.

More recently, other scholars have written extensively about the conceptualization of humanness. For instance, in the book *Bodies of Information*, Roopika Risam (2019) addressed the idea of realism by first vocalizing what credentials have qualified someone as being seen as a universal subject. She explained that this definition has been historically connected to certain demographic characteristics, which have determined someone as being seen as most human. Risam stated plainly that what made someone human is being male, bourgeoise, and White.

Aside from the obvious sexism, classism, and racism of that phenomenon, this is troubling for many reasons. One of which being: as a result of this normalized archetype of "most human", those who have then gone on to create technologies (also, largely middle- or upper-class White men) have implicitly modeled these technologies in the image of this same universal Enlightenment subject; obscuring women and the global South (Risam, 2019).

In her chapter, Risam continued on to explain that this rigidly framed basis for human realism was founded on the imagery of the White male Enlightenment body. She explained that this equation has led to a servitude orientation of machines and AI technologies that have

correspondingly "Otherized" and "feminized" (i.e. Siri, Alexa, and Sophia) (Risam, 2019; Costa & Ribas, 2019). A year later, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2020) in their book *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an AntiBlack World* urged readers to not forget that, "anti-Blackness – if it is a system rather than a ground – will have to confront that which exceeds its structure of stable replication and confounds its adaptive operations, which are the very conditions that generate mutational possibility" (p. 214). In fact, in a rather McLuhanesque form, they continued to argue that "if history is processual and contingent, then art holds the potential of keeping possibility open or serving as a form of redress. In other words, art can be a remedy and may be a means of setting right a wrong" (Jackson, 2020, p. 214). Recovery works are transformative.

Disabled Embodiments and Sexualities

This phenomenon becomes more interesting when considered in conversation with another group of people commonly stereotyped as acting "like robots," and who are often times ostracized and treated as "inhuman, and as lacking in agency and autonomy" (Keyes, 2020, p. 16) for thinking in transformationally unorthodox ways: autists (Asperger, 1944; Draasima, 2009). For example, in chapter five of Maxfield Sparrow's (2020) edited collection *Spectrum: Autistic Transgender People in Their Own Words,* entitled "Bodies with Purpose: An Exploration of the Intersection of Autistic and Transgender Coding in Star Trek", Gil Goletski argued that Data, an android character from within the popular sci fi series *Star Trek* is, "coded as a superhuman autistic savant – a literal walking, talking supercomputer with unlimited access to boundless information, yet Data struggles to accomplish tasks as simple as understanding an offhand use of sarcasm" (p. 37). Futuristic representational fantasies aside, this casting of an android, or bot, as resonant with autist experiences has human implications. Only recently are these castings of autistic folks being framed in a more destigmatized way (Rozenkrantz, 2022).

On a different but relatedly mechanistic frequency, a German artist by the name of Louisa Clement was recently featured in a short docu-piece on the news site Deutsche Welle (2022) for installing an alleged replica of her personality, or what was referred to as a "multi-optional identity," (para. 1) with an interactive AI chat bot, inside three dolls, each made in her image. She said she did so to artistically reveal experiences of detachment and loneliness while communicating via virtual means in the present-COVID-19 digital age (Deutsche Well, 2022). In the case of this project, events like these call into question the entire definition of humanness.

Furthermore, contextually, those who fall on the autism spectrum (ASD) have been discussed in literature regarding neurotypes created and diagnosed primarily by those who are deemed neurotypical (until proven guilty as divergent from this alleged norm). Recently, it has come to light that a broader engendered experience of autism has always existed (Bowen, 2021b), exemplified by, among others, what Singer called *neurodiversity* (Singer, 2016). For these reasons, in recent years, late-in-life (validly self- and/or professionally) diagnosed (Schroeder, 2021) ASD adults have come forward, advocating for more expansive diagnostic criteria dependent upon lived experiences rather than observable traits, so that others do not go undiagnosed (Scattoni et al., 2021). For these reasons, within my piece in *In Media Res,* I suggested that, like fish to water, these unintelligible pollutants, since the origin of a patriarchal civilization (or *menaissance*), have been racist, sexist, classist, reifying discriminations. Therefore, they interact, secreting forms of naturalized ecological catastrophes (Bowen, 2021b).

By revisiting these texts on Enlightenment defined humanness, and viewing them through a binary busting critical media ecological lens of breakdowns as breakthroughs, it becomes clear that racialization and neurotypicality reveal novel insights. As discussed in chapter two, like *Requirement Politics* this approach enables one to see that, "one man's systemic beauty has

always been another person's breakdown" (Bowen, 2022, p. 16). To unpack what we may glean by peering into this lens further, the following large section overviews swaths of literature regarding human-human sexuality and intimacy.

Relational Injustices

In her 1971 feminist manifesto *I Want a Wife*, Judy (Syfers) Brady (2017) said the following about wives' inhuman sexual role in, presumably, cisheteronormative marriages:

> I want a wife who is sensitive to my sexual needs, a wife who makes love passionately
>
> and eagerly when I feel like it, a wife who makes sure that I am satisfied. And, of course,
>
> I want a wife who will not demand sexual attention when I am not in the mood for it. I
>
> want a wife who assumes the complete responsibility for birth control, because I do not
>
> want more children. I want a wife who will remain sexually faithful to me so that I do not
>
> have to clutter up my intellectual life with jealousies. And I want a wife who understands
>
> that my sexual needs may entail more than strict adherence to monogamy. I must, after
>
> all, be able to relate to people as fully as possible (para. 8).

Before neutrally digesting a review of general literature on sexuality and intimacy, it is essential we remember what was discussed regarding the #MeToo campaign aftermath, as well as the historically and sociosexually violent U.S. landscape. As demonstrated by Brady's parodical rendition as to why wives are desirable to cismen, I argue that these macro contexts must first be understood in order to fully grasp in tandem what was discussed in the previous section on humanness, which grounds relational injustices. A such, in their work *Situating Gender in Critical Intercultural Communication Studies*, Lengel and Martin (2011) remind that:

> Historicizing the imagined timelessness and naturalness of male and female attributes
>
> reveals the power relations that underpin ideologies of gender. Attention to historical

forces and contexts also facilitates the analysis of how some ideologies of gender assume

hegemonic proportions in a given society (p. 339).

This kind of historicization of the micro, within the meso, and the macro, like Lengel and Martin

advocate for above, are imperative for an ecological comprehension of this, and any, landscape.

Sonu Bedi took a unique feminist approach to contemporary intimacy in his work called

Sexual Racism: Intimacy as a Matter of Justice. In the piece, they utilized a critical race lens and

argued that intimacy is a matter of justice (Bedi, 2015). Through a revisit of sociological (Rawls,

1971/1999) and philosophical (Nussbaum, 2001) works, alongside a recent research study

unveiling White favoritism on OkCupid (Rudder, 2014), Bedi argued that a website function that

allows users to filter potential suitors by race more readily enables implicit American racism in

online dating website/apps. Contextually, they assert this form of sexual racism should be

understood as prohibiting intimate justice, and thus, capability for human dignity (Bedi, 2015).

All withstanding, contrary to Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) and Simpson's (2016)

research, Bedi's perspective supports a normative trope of love as ubiquitous and central to

human dignity. Their piece offers an alternative account of intimacy, challenging White

neutrality, racial stereotypes, and the preference for White romantic/sexual partners (Bedi, 2015).

Another study, which hailed the importance of liberation from these normative sexual scripts,

focused on a broad range of long-term heterosexual and LGBTQ partnerships and approached

sexual intimacy as one part of a larger picture of "relationship work" (Gabb, 2019, p. 1). For all

couples involved, longevity of a relationship and intimate knowledge were seen as valuable.

The year prior to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, adrienne maree brown

(2019) published their edited collection entitled *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*.

In this work they defined the concept "pleasure activism" in just and actionable terms, as:

…the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy. Pleasure activism asserts that we all need and deserve pleasure and that our social structures must reflect this. In this moment, we must prioritize the pleasure of those most impacted by oppression (p. 9).

In brown's (2019) view, "pleasure activism is us learning to make justice and liberation the most pleasurable experiences we can have on this planet" (p. 9) with presence, practice, happiness, self-care, and a healthy balance between commitment and detachment.

In many ways, good sex is like a good horror movie, anticipation is everything. Many cismen have made terrible horror movies, thinking they made masterpieces because those closest to them did not have the heart to tell them the truth. What many U.S. millennial and Gen Z ciswomen, forced into heteronormativity, have only recently begun to admit publicly is that they have barely ever had fulfilling sexual experiences with cismen (Loofbourow, 2018; Preston, 2019). On the forefront, more likely than not they may have given those men their sexual satisfaction, but they have received nothing similar in return (Loofbourow, 2018).

This is elaborated on within the relational needs section. Despite this, one study reported many ciswomen continue to opt into heteronormative monogamous relationships in college, despite this not being generally advantageous for them (Wilkins & Dalessandro, 2013). In the following sections, we move into options that exist beyond heteronormativity. Characteristically, differences emerge within LGBTQIA+ sociosexual relations and partnerships.

Queerness, Lesbianism, and Singleness

Comparatively to cishet relations, Gabb (2019) found that an "absence of normative sexual scripts enables queer couples to more readily manage sexual discrepancies" (p. 2). Moreover, they learned that LGBTQIA+ couples were more likely to embody a lighthearted

approach to sexual hiccups, responding with humor, openness, and mutually satisfying sexual novelty. On the flip side, Gabb (2019) found that heterosexual men in particular, "were not able to do so and instead found the experience of sexual dysfunction personally undermining" (p. 3).

Culturally, a recent study found that due to widespread economic and ideological change (Berlin, Furstenburg, & Waters, 2010; Henig & Henig, 2012; Settersten & Ray, 2010) instead of associating home ownership, financial stability, and marriage as adult, middle to upper class college-aged people now associate adulthood with achieving emotional maturity by proxy of heteronormative (Ingraham, 1994) monogamous relationships (Dalessandro, 2017), despite LBGTQIA+ social progress (D'Emilio, 2006/2014). Unfortunately, due to prevailing gender inequalities, maturity is not perceived or received equally. For instance, emotions are still perceived to be feminine (Ngai, 2009; Schrock & Knop, 2014) and emotional disconnection is seen as a masculine trait (Kimmel, 2008). Ironically, the previously cited masculinity scholar Michael Kimmel has since been accused of sexual misconduct by at least one of his PhD advisees (Flaherty, 2018), further solidifying his point that a perceived threshold of emotionality as a sense-making tool within cishet binaries requires more from women and less from men.

Furthermore, although all groups inquired about the experience have expressed interest in casual hook ups (Reid, Elliott, & Webber, 2011), women are still policed and stigmatized by other societal members for their actions (Hamilton, 2007; Wilkins & Dalessandro, 2013), which then translate into experiences of personal ambivalence about their own autonomous sexual expressions (Bell, 2013; Bogle, 2008; Stepp, 2007; Sweeney, 2014). This becomes more interesting when we broaden the lens to intersectional and Black feminist approaches. For example, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) asserted that race, class, and gender discriminations intersect, and compound, shaping lived experiences. Contextually, much like how neoliberalism

bleeds into every sphere of our lives (including sexuality), these intersections' structure whose individual intimate lives are hegemonically shaped and guided (Jackson, 2011; Ward, 2015). On the flip side, these dominant hegemonic guidelines incline who among us are historically erased.

Lesbian Sexuality. For example, Marilyn Frye (1983) in her book *The Politics of Reality* described lesbian bodies and sexual experiences as, "inarticulate and confined to the pre-linguistic and pre-cognitive realms of consciousness" (p. 311). Zita (1990) echoed Frye's work, stressing that even lesbians themselves struggle to make intelligible what she called their own "lesbian authorship of self" (p. 341), or the articulation of their own desire and sexual expression, when forced to manifest them within naturalized heteronormative frames (Zita, 1990). Interrogating these themes further, Morrish and Sauntson's (2011) piece focused on discourses of "female masculinity and power" (p. 123) within 1980s/1990s lesbian erotica; aiming to, "uncover ideologies in the texts" (p. 123), which they argued, "offer[ed] new symbolic territory for lesbians to explore" (p. 125). These texts mediated realities into being.

Echoing the sexual lightheartedness reported in Gabb's (2019) recent findings regarding the LGBTQIA+ community, Morrish and Sauntson (2011) described lesbian sexual expression as a form or space of play, "in a world where women's access to sexual gratification had been restricted, stigmatized, and subject to repression" (p. 125). These scholar's findings suggest that this playful sex space made room for multiplicitous identificatory, reciprocally respectful, and sexually fulfilling possibilities. Similarly, within Judith Butler's (1993) work on the *lesbian phallus* she argued that through "aggressive reterritorialization" (p. 86) the phallogocentric sexual imaginary can be displaced; opening the way for transformative lesbian alternatives, in which, "the phallus can be symbolized by an arm, a hand, a knee, a pelvic bone" (p. 88).

Likewise, Morrish and Sauntson (2011) spoke to the fluidity of lesbian "desire practices" (Munt, 1998) and gender expressions through discussions of both the "eroticization of…power dynamic[s]" (p. 136) and embodied versatility of butch and femme gender performances; proposing these behaviors, "can function to present a radical critique of heteronormative gender discourses and ideologies" (p. 127). For these reasons, Morrish and Sauntson (2011) concluded that both Butler's *lesbian phallus* and Zita's "lesbian authorship of 'self' have been transgressively attained within the "politically challenging and liberating" (p. 137) genre of lesbian erotica (Morrish & Sauntson, 2011). Their rationale was that the unique medium of text simultaneously borrows and removes the phallus, resulting in phallogo-decentralization and a nuanced reciprocal reprivileging of it for mutually beneficial pleasure between women (Morrish & Sauntson, 2011). Author's intention aside, I see this as a rather critical media ecological approach to how texts can be used for resistance. Next, we discuss stigma around singleness.

Feminine Singleness. Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) chose to flip the heteronormative script by outlining five everyday claims (social construction, social category, discourse, personal narratives/subject positions, and politics) and detailing out what they saw as a dysfunctional literary pattern regarding single women. Throughout their piece, these themes frame worked their feminist discursive analysis and problematized the polarizing ideological implications they engendered (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003). For instance, the author's critical evaluation of singleness literature challenged, "…normative assumptions about femininity necessarily requir[ing] connection with a man," (p. 491) which normatively prescribed life markers (marriage/children) to women as our default condition (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003). This singleness stigma was known before COVID and has ongoing present-COVID-19 implications.

Most notably, Simpson (2016) traced evidence of what they believe suggested a, "…shift in the centrality of partnership status" (p. 385) in society today. Said otherwise, they found that while single women were once considered deviant or deficient, now a combination of changing social relations points toward the autonomous reclamation of singleness. Similarly, behavioral science professor, Paul Dolan's (2019) book *Happily Ever After: Escaping the Myths of the Perfect Life* even reported never married women as living the longest and most content lives (Dolan, 2019). These conflicting social narratives will be factored in during my analysis section.

Interpersonally, Simpson's collected accounts lend credence to Dolan's findings, providing a background on a radical shift in the social conception of womanhood. Contextually, some attribute this to a recent wane in partnership significance (Dunne, 1999; Simpson, 2016) becoming increasingly common in contemporary society, and further exacerbated by COVID-19.

Companionship

As stated, an integral part of understanding contemporary U.S. sociosexual contexts can be found within literature regarding relational and sociosexual needs. After referencing those texts, I conclude this chapter by summarizing some key ways in which pre-COVID relationality has reportedly been altered by the emergence of the Internet, and particularly Web 2.0, as well as some ways in which concepts of human-human intimacy elucidate the larger U.S. landscape.

Relational Needs. From a more characteristic approach, some studies on intimacy has reported emotional intimacy increases with relationship duration, while sexual desire decreases (Regan & Berscheid, 1999; Impett, Strachman, Finkel, & Gable, 2008). One study's findings suggested that a way to bypass this trajectory is through purposefully imposing modes of identity differentiation (Schnarch, 1991). In other words, some scholars have suggested that people in committed monogamous romantic relationships (who do desire to retain the partnership during

the long term) should ensure they sustain their own autonomous identities, as to not develop fusional intimacy. Otherwise, they risk becoming overly enmeshed with them in the traditional fashion of quintessential romantic love (Ferrerira, Narciso, & Novo, 2012).

In Ferrerira et al.'s (2012) previous example, intimacy was understood to be a multisystemic inter- and intrapersonal process, which must involve people who have a "high enough level of personal development so that his or her individual identity is not threatened when he or she is in an intimate relationship with a partner" (p. 266). Connecting this phenomenon back to binary conceptions discussed earlier in this chapter, some have argued that because past intimacy literature (grounded in these social conflations) functioned within a binary gender divide, emphasizing a feminine assessment of intimacy (affection and expression) that findings have likely silenced the unique attributes and meanings of masculine (sexuality and physical proximity) intimacy (Basson, 2001; Prager, 1997; Perel, 2008). An additional literary shortcoming one study discussed was the overwhelming focus on subjective experiences which they believed may negate a fuller dyadic picture (Ferreira et al., 2012). In response to these literature gaps, Ferrerira et al., (2012) recommended an integrative construct of differentiation; synthesizing many theoretical approaches and enabling a better understanding of the complex experiences of couplehood as related to romantic and sociosexual intimacies.

A years later, one study, that did choose to analyze couples as a unit, was completed by Yoo, Bartle-Haring, Day, and Gangamma. These researchers chose to examine associations between communication, emotionality, sexual satisfaction, and overall relational satisfaction. Their findings indicated that relational satisfaction of husbands was higher when wives reported sexual satisfaction (Yoo et al., 2013). Moreover, the inverse of this dynamic was not found. In other words, Yoo et al. (2013) reported, "female partner's sexual satisfaction may be crucial for

their male partners to feel good about their relationship, possible because being a good sexual

partner is an important goal in the relationship for the male partners" (p. 288). These findings

add a certain dimension of cisheteronormative potentiality for the future of sex in a sociosexually

violent present-COVID-19 U.S. context where an orgasm gap pervades as norm. In the following

chapter, I dig much more deeply into some technological insights as to how.

A prerequisite of relational intimacy is an enacted individual willingness to become

vulnerable and engage in self-disclosure (Brewer, Abell, & Lyons, 2016). However, this

phenomenon is, again, complicated further by considering the fact that one study based upon "a

national probability sample…of 987 White or Black/African American [cis]women aged 20-65

years, with English as first language, living for at least 6 months in a heterosexual relations" (p.

1) reported that 75-90% do not regularly experience orgasm during sexual activity (Bancroft,

Loftus, & Long, 2003), and 5-10% of ciswomen have reported not experiencing orgasm at all

(Lloyd, 2005). A more recent study by Frederick, St. John, Garcia, and Lloyd (2017) concluded:

> Consistent with both feminist and evolutionary perspectives, orgasm frequency was
>
> lower among women than men. Relatively few heterosexual women orgasmed through
>
> vaginal sex alone. Orgasm frequencies for heterosexual women only approached those
>
> for men when other behaviors were added to sexual intercourse (e.g., oral sex, manual
>
> stimulation). These findings are consistent with the view that there are biological
>
> differences between men and women in likelihood of orgasm during intercourse. The
>
> findings, however, indicate that this orgasm gap can be reduced by addressing
>
> sociocultural factors and by encouraging a wider variety of activities when men and
>
> women are sexually intimate. The fact that lesbian women orgasmed more often than

heterosexual women indicates that many heterosexual women could experience higher

rates of orgasm (p. 286).

Now, during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, these findings should be contextualized further,

considering "unprecedented health-related anxiety, financial insecurity and other significant life

changes" (Klein, 2021, para. 4) as well as ongoing COVID bodily insecurities and fatigue

(Bernstein, 2021). Curiously, earlier findings about the cisheterosexual orgasm gap led

researchers to study the association of sexuality research, as compared to characteristics of

distrust, manipulation, and willingness to exploit others, otherwise known as Machiavellianism

(Brewer, Abell & Lyons, 2016). Although significantly underrepresented in research, Brewer,

Abell, and Lyons explored various functions that a woman's decision to fake orgasm may serve.

On one hand, Brewer, Abell and Lyons (2016) hypothesized that, "avoidance of sexual

intimacy may be viewed as self-protective" (p. 157). For example, previous research studies have

suggested that women who have pretended to orgasm and otherwise display a false sense of

sexual satisfaction have done so in order to retain mates, avoid partner distress, and maintain

their partner's sexual interest (Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010; Kaighobadi, Schackelford, &

Weekes-Shackelford, 2012). On the other, one study correlated faking orgasm with previous

experiences of engaging in infidelity and an anticipation of cheating on partners again (Ellsworth

& Bailey, 2013), which corresponded with a Machiavellian display of dominance and desire for

exerting power; generally prioritized over partner affiliation needs (Koladich & Vernon, 2016).

However, a recent study by Chadwick and van Anders (2022) expanded upon the gray-

areas of *orgasm coercion*, "refut[ing] the notion that wanting to ensure a partner's orgasm is

always positive and demonstrate how orgasm can be a site for exerting power and control over a

partner," (p. 17) while reminding that "sexual minority women and gender/ sex/ual minorities

were significantly more likely to have ever experienced orgasm coercion compared to sexual minority men and sexual majority women and men" (p. 12). With these nuanced discussions of power and orgasms in mind, regardless of intentions, the impact of the orgasm gap pervades.

Another study some years earlier by Witherow, Chandraiah, Seals, and Bugan (2015) chose to interrogate findings published by Smith, Lyons, Ferris, Richters, Pitts, Shelley, and Simpson (2011), exploring a connection between sexual frequency and relational satisfaction. Contextually, they considered many recent studies which examined sexual and nonsexual motivations for women's engagement in sexual activity, which reportedly varied from increased emotional intimacy to material rewards, and an increase in their general well-being (Murray, Milhausen & Sutherland, 2014; Maseregian, Shifren, Parish, Braunstein, Gerstenberger, & Rosen, 2010; Mark, Herbenick, Fortenberry, Sanders, & Reece, 2014). Witherow et al. (2016) concluded their piece by speculating that, "sexual frequency is a matter of relational negotiation and in a sense a 'choice' or a 'mutual agreement' instead of a casual effect of intimacy levels within" (p. 284) a relationship (or in all their participant's case, a marriage). With this correlation explicitly noted, in the next section we expand on sociosexual needs.

Sociosexual Needs. To begin, one way we might make sense of these findings is by putting them into conversation with other recent studies, which urged considerations of how demographic characteristics may intersect and influence individuals' sexual boundaries and interests throughout the unique course of their lives (Lodge & Umberson, 2013; Paine, Umberson, Reczek, 2018). Tangentially, these findings become more ecologically rich when noting them within the pervading context. For example, previous theorists have argued there has been a "sexualization of lives" (Hawkes, 2004) in the West, that has placed excess pressure on a lifelong pursuit of work on oneself and their relationships (Giddens, 1992); including the

perception of sex as a problem that should be managed with a solution (Furedi, 2004). From a market perspective, especially a critical one, we know solutions to this have been technologies.

However, for Birnie-Porter and Lydon (2013) sexual intimacy follows an interpersonal model that, "is not simply sexual activity but instead, at its core…is an experience of intimacy," (p. 238) which they argued can be characterized using prototypes. Following that logic, in their understanding, sexual intimacy is a sub prototype of intimacy with its own unique qualities (consensual, senses, natural, eye contact, seduction) and can be classified as having what others have referred to as *fuzzy boundaries* (Rosch, 1978; Birnie-Porter & Lydon, 2013). My question at the end of this chapter probes into whether marketed technologies are capable of solving human-created systemic problems of imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 1997) constructed upon aspects of the human experience that are truly unquantifiable.

As demonstrated thus far, one of the ways I go about describing this very human-made U.S. problem is by using Simpson and Gangestad's (1991) term *sociosexuality*. They used this term they coined to discuss a cultural context involving casual sex practices/desires, motivations associated with desire(s) for novel sexual expression, engagement in impersonal relations with partners, and varied desire to attract and retain partners. In a broader relational context, the same researchers noted that individuals who are motivated to and choose to engage in casual sex also desired an eventual long-term, committed relationship (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). I find this term has broader contextual usefulness in detailing the present-COVID-19 U.S. landscape.

By combining these insights with Maslow's (1966) hierarchy of needs and Murray's work on male affiliation, dominance, and sex needs (Murray, 1938), Marelich and Lundquist created their own needs-based sexual intimacy scale (Marelich & Lundquist, 2008). Correspondingly, and considering the cismale gender bias of the original study this scale was

built upon, these researchers found that, "men showed higher factor loadings than women for the items [Need] sex with a lot of partners, [Need] somebody to love, and [Need] the ability to order my partner to have sex with me if I want to" [Marelich & Lundquist, 2008, p. 184, emphasis theirs]. As mentioned, these relations have changed drastically with the emergence of Web 2.0.

Long Distance Relations. As discussed in chapter two, literature from the late 1980s reported that increasing social acceptance and opportunities for women to more readily attain academic, military deployment, emigration, occupational, and other lively pursuits outside the home, led to an altering of the ways in which romantic couples experienced their bonding and independence (Johnston & Packer, 1987; Stafford, 2005). As they say, hindsight is 20/20. And so now, in hindsight, certain curious scholars have come to question the prevailing literature on relational maintenance, which presumed geographically close relationships as norm. With this came assumptions that these relations were, "driven by notions of social exchange" (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004, p. 28) where distanced loved ones were physically absent, but psychologically present (Boss, 1999). Thus, long-distance relationships depicted in this scholarship were generally framed as suffering from proximal-based barrier deprivation (Attridge, 1994).

However, even then, not everyone agreed. Namely, two studies produced by Marston and colleagues (1987;1998) provided contrast to this dominant read; examining the representational and/or ecological validity of subjective meaning, as not to marginalize or disqualify outlier experiences. One study by Arditti and Kauffman (2004) took these findings further, examining how a social constructionist framework may emphasize individual interpretative realities of, "relational maintenance, commitment, and subjective meanings around relationship strengths and difficulties" (p. 47). In doing so, these works provided rare insights and evidence of alternative

meaning systems regarding bondedness, interdependence, and commitment. It is this kind of adversarial research to which this project will contribute.

Within their respective works, these rogue scholars also suggested certain ways in which ambiguity tolerance may interplay with an individual's sense of interdependence and motivation within their relationships (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004). Temporally and materially, we know now the dawn of the Millenia, and millennials, brought countless changes. With the emergence and increasing advancement of the Internet in the Western world, numerous multimodal and multidimensional technologies have emerged changing the means through which people communicate (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004). Notably, Stafford found that proximally close face-to-face interaction is not necessary for intimacy (Stafford, 2005). For these reasons, scholars have since revisited the taken for granted assumptions about the effects of distance, interrogating their preconceived notions with fresh technologically mediated perspectives.

In the last decade, for instance, more scholarship has been written about how long-distance relationships have been classified as problematic or atypical in comparison to geographically close couplings (Maguire & Kinney, 2010; Bergen, 2010). In fact, some studies have even argued that the stability, satisfaction, and trust in long-distance relationships has been, "equal to or better than those" who report being geographically closer (Stafford, 2010). As Jiang and Hancock (2013) point out, this makes more sense, when considering how intimacy is a subjective act dependent upon whether or not a "discloser feels understood, validated, and cared for" in an interaction (p. 558), necessitating a subjective account for reconsideration.

More studies have been completed in the last decade examining subjective assessments of communication formats within romantic relationships (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014) and their resulting effects on relational quality (Saadatian, Samani, Parsani, Pandey, Li, Tejada…Nakatsu,

2014; Yang, Brown, & Braun, 2013). Inevitably, geographical separation does lead to reduced interdependence, restricted communication, and aggravated uncertainty, which further complicate relational maintenance (Stafford, 2010). Even so, considering technological ubiquity, one study investigated how different paper, audio, visual, and digital communication formats were perceived as meaningful over others (Janning, Gao, & Snyder, 2018). Particularly, Janning et al. (2018) were interested in assessing how, "definitions about the meaning of shared space have been reshaped in the context of increasingly mobile lives and increasingly multilocal relationships" (p. 1282); adding to literature about certain mediums richness over others.

These findings were further supported by previous long-distance relationship research which found that shared activities and face-to-face interaction were, "critical for relational quality and endurance" (Stafford, 2010, p. 286). Relatedly, the term sociomental spaces has been offered to describe the phenomena of a couple's gratifying feeling of togetherness, regardless of geographical distance. Kolozsvari (2015) argued this mentality is, "just as real as physical spaces" (p. 112). However, as far as materiality is concerned, thus far, there has yet to be a one-to-one match for the romantic physical in proximal distance (Kolozsvari, 2015). In the following chapter, we begin to discuss advanced sex devices which claim to solve this problem.

Taking a rather media ecological approach to technologically mediated preferences, Janning, Gao, and Snyder (2018) reported that certain audio and/or visual mediums enable feedback immediacy, and thus, do allow for, "a wide range of [verbal and nonverbal] cues" (Stafford, 2005, p. 90). Said otherwise, regardless of intention, Janning et al.'s study took a rather media ecological approach because they sought to extend how novel audio and visual "mediums" introduced into our virtual environments have mediated our sense-makings differently, and in ways that have made differences. Thinking back to biases which grounded

interpersonal research, which prioritized in-person physically proximate sociosexual relations over long-distance ones through other mediums, these oppositional research studies broke down and provided breakthroughs, beginning to illuminate taken for granted biases built in as features of systematic communication research literature. This unveiled naturalized erasure and opened doors to other ways of thinking and being about how relationships can take form.

Other researchers have agreed with sentiments of this media richness theory, reporting that high levels of intimacy are achievable through screens or speakers (Kolozsvari, 2015). Phenomenologically, one study found that factors such as thoughtfulness, intimacy, and ease were indicators as to why certain mediums have been perceived as more meaningful than others (Janning, Gao, & Snyder, 2018). Another study examined how perceived intimacy may be connected to cue multiplicity, synchronicity, and the mobility of the communication medium (Jiang & Hancock, 2013), paying special attention to the interstitial natures of Web 3.0 devices (Dimmick, Feaster & Hoplamazian, 2010). In our present-COVID-19 world, these proximally innovative challenges reveal implications regarding how we think, see, and enact intimacies.

Echoing these more academic sentiments, Peggy J. Kleinplatz and A. Dana Ménard (2020) in their book *Magnificent Sex: Lessons from Extraordinary Lovers* concluded by stating:

> Optimal sexual experiences involve being totally absorbed and immersed in the moment, an intense connection, being erotically intimate with another person, communicating empathically, taking risks, surrendering to one another, being authentic and accepting the very real possibility of transcendence and transformation… (p. 184).

These author's work overviews the largest in-depth collection of interviews of this kind, finding:

> Magnificent sex requires growing beyond the conventional sex scripts most people learn in their youth. Disappointing sex lives can change. The goal here is not merely to discard

sex guilt, shame and inhibition. Rather, it is to jettison the entire aspirational package of

paint-by-numbers sex…" (pp. 184-185).

Said otherwise, according to Kleinplatz and Ménard, the findings of the aforementioned

literature on sex, gender, sexuality, and socially alleged normalities, have limited sociosexual

conceptions of what sex is and could be. Due to these heteronormative and cisnormative

conceptions of sexuality, the authors ended their text, transparently, by admitting, "optimal

sexual experiences require a choice to proceed up the mountain and a willingness to take on the

challenges that arise. This can be risky and will certainly involve some discomfort…"

(Kleinplatz & Ménard, 2020, p. 186).

Missing Humans, Missing Data

In 1988 Haraway detailed her term *the God Trick* which she used to illustrate

insufficiently representative myths often perpetuated through social scientific methods and

beliefs (Haraway, 1988). These ideological orientations and practices are still alive today.

Having now reviewed institutional and academically generated research on sexuality and

intimacy, it is crucial before ending this chapter that I remind readers about the fact that subject

pools of the bulk of academic research studies are comprised of White and traditionally college

aged folks (The Editors, 2018; Hanel & Vione, 2016; Jacewicz, 2016). The taken for granted

normality of these practices has been found not only to skew research data and study findings by

excluding older participants, historically, intentionally, targeted marginalized people groups

(HITMPGs), but it also ultimately leads to incomplete, substantiated, and/or misleading

conclusions about humanity, unwittingly ungeneralizable to the public (Hanel & Vione, 2016).

Whether due to sociohistorical dehumanizing medical racisms, ableisms, sexisms, etc.,

and/or the ongoing resulting injustices, I state this plainly because this scientific phenomenon

inevitably limits the universal potentialities of any one study to represent a fuller fledged justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion of human experiences that neoliberal institutions claim to honor (Graham, 1992; UC San Francisco, n.d.). Equally important to note are the technological challenges that the Internet has extended into research regarding participant recruitment and engagement, considering rigid academic costs and time constraints (Crawford, Hokke, Nicholson, Zion, Lucke, Keyzer, & Hackworth, 2019). This is by no means an excuse for exclusionary academic practices, rather one critical media ecological explanation, demonstrating how deeply and invisibly these biases are baked into systematic technologies.

In 2020, Legacy Russell released her book *Glitch Feminism*, full of artistic beauty and biting feminist rethinkings of cyberfeminism. Her book serves as a queer Black cyberfeminism manifesto profoundly celebrating the embrace of raw humanness that has since been cast out as an imperfection, or, as she states, a glitch (Russell, 2020). Russell's work is completely alive with the glimmers of future potentialities and righteous dissent that Black feminist revisitations of the present demand and have long warranted from this cruel calculated world which has condemned historically, intentionally, targeted marginalized people groups (HITMPGs) to death. I welcome the chaotic and catastrophic becomings that her work spoke into reality. Legacy Russell said it best, "Let the whole goddamn thing short-circuit" (Russell, 2020, p. 153).

As scholars informed by Black feminist activists, the same year, D'Ignazio and Klein (2020) described how their methodological proposal within *Data Feminism* is grounded in an actionable commitment and way of thinking about data used to tune the standard data practices and challenge the existing inequalities which are reinforced by their unfair distribution of power. Which means, these scholars call for co-liberatory oriented interventions into harmful and

oppressive norms guiding contemporary data science (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020). In chapter five, I explore my own form of data feminism using critical feminist rhetoric and discourse analyses.

Having now overviewed extensive discussions on human-human sexual education, sexuality, and intimacy research, my probing question in order to shift the focus from all the research discussed in this chapter showing that feminine and LBGTQIA+ folks are disvalued, with implications for ways that process can be interrupted into the next chapter on sociosexual technological advancements is: if biomimetic devices represent sexual technologies pushed to a sexually autonomous extreme for vulva-havers, might these transformations then catalyze cisheterosexual male sociosexual adaptations within the late-stage present-COVID-19 context?

CHAPTER FOUR. SEXUAL TECHNOLOGIES: PRE- AND PRESENT-COVID-19

According to the Adam Curtis's (2011) three-part docuseries entitled *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace*, the thought processes which undergird much of Silicon Valley (a world-renowned epicenter for engendering high technologies and innovations) were born out of the Objectivist philosophic system of Ayn Rand. A logic of which, as was discussed more extensively in chapter two, is founded upon manifest destiny colonialism and capitalisms. In other words, Rand claimed that (although humanity is alone in the universe), through rationality, all innovations, and happiness were possible. By the 1990s, this mentality had infested thinkers of Silicon Valley, introducing some key everyday rhetorics and discourses that have persisted to this day, regarding for profit future technological promises (Curtis, 2011). As such, these ideologies have since been leveraged and patched into preceding ways of being by sextech brands interested in appealing to U.S. consumers already long steeped in market logics.

In this chapter I overview pre- and present-COVID-19 sex tech to demonstrate how each systematic medium interlocks, compounds, and informs the proceeding iteration, linking them back to the rhetoric and discourses which precede them, as detailed in the first three chapters. First, I trace out a brief history of various sexual technologies, exploring how, pre-COVID, orgasms had long been cast as the goal of sexual experiences (for some more than others). As first noted in chapter three, market logics aimed to fill the orgasm gap, leading to increasingly inhumane and efficient technological inventions aimed at intensifying pleasure. Next, I trace out some other increasingly algorithmic digital medias, from advertisements, to pornography, as well as social, dating, and hookup apps, like Instagram, Fetlife, Tinder, Feeld, Only Fans, and TikTok, beginning to discuss how they may incline U.S. sociosexual technological relations. I then transition into some ways present-COVID-19 sextech usages have reportedly changed,

ending the chapter by reviewing these key everyday rhetorics and discourses that have persisted regarding for-profit future technological promises.

Pre-COVID Sextech Usage

> Man [sic] becomes, as it were, the sex organs of the machine world, as the bee of the plant world, enabling it to fecundate and to evolve ever new forms. The machine world reciprocates man's [sic] love by expediting his wishes and desires, namely, in providing him with wealth (McLuhan, 1997, p. 46).

The provocative-looking McLuhan quote above has been understood for its surface meaning of understanding the ways "Man"- aka humanity run by patriarchal figures - has created extensions of "Himself" to meet "His" own needs (Morgan, 1972). Said otherwise, according to technofeminist Donna Haraway, "gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism" (Haraway, 1994, p. 72). In her book *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (2008) Nakamura discussed at length the technologically built-in racisms and biases of past mediums, like photography, and how those practices translated into the digital environment in remediated forms. To ground her claims Nakamura utilized work from ethnic studies scholars Omi and Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* as a theoretical foundation (Nakamura, 2008).

Despite the sociohistorically problematic nature of this royal We, that has been associated with a White cishet masculine universality, I argue this quote can be used to illustrate our sociosexually violent landscape. If what I traced out in chapters two and three is correct, McLuhan's quote can be used to unpack implications of colonial rhetorics of domination and

innovation occurring at the direct and indirect expenses of especially Indigenous, Black, and Brown cisfemale bodies, but also all others and the planet.

Additionally, referring once again to my framework of *requirement politics* more extensively overviewed in chapter two, in which, "one White cishet man's systemic beauty has been another person's breakdown," (Bowen, 2022, p. 18) McLuhan's quote can be used to further reveal additional ways in which imperialist patriarchal White cishet narratives have become universalized. Linguistically and institutionally, this Enlightenment subject universalized synonym has been so taken for granted throughout history that its waters are quite literally invisible to those who don't have the marginalized eyes to see issues with it. Considering the patriarchal religious history of the field of media ecology, this is to be expected. What might the field of media ecology look like if gender/sex were acknowledged as creations?

Personally, I argue many insights can be gleaned by combining traditional media ecological tenants of breakdown as breakthrough with the critical theoretical concepts I suggest in my critical media ecological framework, executing a case study on sexual technologies. By doing so, as I aim to throughout this project, novel critically inclined media ecologists can more realistically and intimately begin to unpack foundational definitions of humanness. This is necessary to do because, as critical scholars like Lisa Nakamura, Sarah Sharma, Ruha Benjamin, Safiya Noble, and Mar Hicks have recently argued, these default settings of humanness are being built into each of our preceding technologies. These processes occur implicitly, as well as explicitly, illuminating dehumanizing implications of the sociosexually violence U.S. landscape.

Sex Toys

Dildos have been traced back tens of thousands of years to ancient times (Hinde, 2015). For sake of the needs of this project, I remain within 200 years, and mainly focus on the last fifty

years. Each of these topics can and have been written about in entire books of their own, but my purpose in overviewing them is to trace a basic background on biomimetic sex technologies.

As discussed in chapter three, sexualities have always been more complicated in the U.S. sociohistorical context than the flattened repressive tropes many of us are generally led to believe in medias. In the next section, we consider how technologies factor into these ideological trajectories, making some distinctions between solo masturbation and partnered sex. First, we briefly discuss basic sex toy types marketed to vulva-havers (vibrators and dildos). Next, we shift into sex toys with long-distance capabilities. Then, we move into the main focus of this project, discussions of certain biomimetic sex tech devices, marketed to vulva-havers.

Vibrators.

In the 1800s, industrialization transformed many aspects of life, including medicine. English physician Joseph Mortimer Granville invented an electric vibrator in 1883, although similar machines like Dr. George Taylor's steam-powered "Manipulator" table massager were already in use in France and the US (Bell, 2018, para. 6).

As discussed in chapter two, colonialism into industrial capitalisms drastically altered relations. As Weber detailed, this effected every facet of our lives, including our sociosexual normalities. To better understand this phenomenon throughout this project (as I did in my article *Towards a Gender and Media Ecology: Critical Media Ecology* where I first present the framework within this project), I extend Andrey Miroshnichenko (2014) work *Human as Media: The Emancipation of Authorship*. While he observed that humans are media because of citational practices, I saw a world of opportunities for combining feminist and other critical theories to expand on more ways humans have acted as medias, contributing to the recent wave of critical recovery work.

Among other recommendations for future directions provided at the end of *Towards a Gender and Media Ecology: Critical Media Ecology* (2022) I specifically highlighted, were regarding potentials I found in this approach for critiquing the universalized male medical body. Bell (2018) also spoke to this reductive taken for granted cishet patriarchal male medical field:

> Fern Riddell, a specialist in Victorian sexuality, confirmed, "Victorian doctors knew exactly what the female orgasm was; in fact, it's one of the reasons they thought masturbation was a bad idea." They knew about the function of the clitoris, some physicians going so far as to remove them as a "cure" for nymphomania. Only one doctor of the era—women's health advocate Clelia Mosher—actually talked to women about their experiences, confirming that they did masturbate (Bell, 2018, para. 18).

Bell (2018) explained that in 1974 (thinking back to chapter two, the same decade as the birth of neoliberalism), Dell Williams established Eve's Garden, "the first business in the United States exclusively devoted to women's sexual pleasure and health" (p. 30). Less than a year later, Williams was publishing feminist forward classified advertisements in the infamous Ms. Magazine, using the punny tagline, "We grow pleasurable things for women" (p. 33). Inspired by Austrian psychoanalyst, Wilhelm Reich's work *The Function of the Orgasm,* which postulated that, "…there was a connection between sexual energy and life energy…maintain[ing] that a 'satisfied genitalia' was a precondition for social productivity and psychic equilibrium" (p. 33), her mission was to, "…be a tangible expression of the women's movement" (p. 33). Explicitly, Reich claimed sex and politics are integrally connected, leading him to argue that repression has dire consequences.

I argue, beyond even those that he charged therein, there are a surplus of naturalized others. As such, masculinities scholar, Patrick D. Hopkins (1998), explained in *Sex / Machine*:

It is a highly interactive picture. Existing sex roles and ideas of gender affect how

technologies are used, which ones come to dominate in a particular context, and even

what things are defined as technology. However, the technologies themselves often

change sex roles and even notions of gender. They reorganize social systems; they permit

us to step outside gendered social spheres whose boundaries are braced by technological

limits on communication, labor, and mobility; they let us extend and alter 'our place' in

the world (p. 14).

Being that we know a majority of physicians have been cishet males, perhaps this is also why it

was not until 1981 that we had the first anatomically correct image of the clitoris (Russo, 2017).

Making matters more complicated, due to puritist U.S. sex norms discussed in chapter

three, obscenity charges were commonly being enforced until the late 80s. For instance, as

Lieberman (2017) described in her work *Buzz: A Stimulating History of the Sex Toy*, Forbidden

Fruit, a cisfemale-friendly sex-toy store and facilitator of sex toy parties were raided in 1989 for

such a charge, despite the company owner clinging to rhetorics of selling their products for

"artistic, educational, and scientific purposes" (p. 4). Again, the rhetorics of rationality pervade.

Moving into the 1990s, much like more recent sex education apps, markets of the decade

came to fill the tense societal gap between sexual freedom and obscenity. Reminiscent of

Tupperware parties of the late 40s and 50s, the new wave of direct-sales pyramid scheme type

sales called "Passion Parties" for sex toys arrived on the sociosexual scene (Lieberman, 2017, p.

5). Lieberman (2017) explained that the way these forward-thinking entrepreneurs peddled their

risqué products was once again through utilization of loophole rhetorics, that they were being

bought and sold either for, "bona fide medical, psychiatric, judicial, legislative, or law

enforcement purposes," and/or for, "higher artistic, education[al], or scientific purposes" (p. 5).

A decade later, during the 2000s, these marketized rhetorics shifted once again from less educational claims to them being "novelties" which served "no medical purpose" (Lieberman, 2017). Lieberman contextualized that this type of rhetoric was necessary for these products because of anti-sex-toy laws in certain states, like Texas and Alabama that have since been declared invalid. Besides all of it, one of the most interesting rhetorical aspects Lieberman (2017) noted regarding the Texas law, specifically, is that in 2008, sex toys were portrayed by the court not for masturbation, but for, "intimate conduct with a partner in the home" (p. 8). Most importantly, unpacking this cisnormative sex divide further she stated explicitly that:

> The line of distinction between masturbatory use and use in a couple wasn't the only double standard in sex-toy law. There was also a difference in the legal standard between [cis]male and [cis]female sexuality. While vibrators and dildos were illegal in many states at the time I was selling them, Viagra was not only legal but covered by health insurance. Not only was [cis]male sexual dysfunction considered a legitimate medical problem, but the pill used to cure it was advertised openly on national television—and even endorsed by former U.S. Senator Bob Dole. Meanwhile, someone could get arrested for selling a clitoral vibrator in a private home in Texas (Lieberman, 2017, p. 9).

Keeping in mind the amount of sexual shame that specifically feminine presenting people have been socialized into and subjected to, the socially constructed illegality of sexual regression in many parts of the U.S. on top of the erasure of cisfemale anatomy (mentioned back in chapter three), just added insult to injury into the already violent sociosexual landscape. As a previous sex toy sales representative herself, this is the market that Lieberman (2017) disclosed that, "many of the products we sold were marketed with the idea that sex was either gross or a chore to be endured," (p. 12) because "God forbid any woman admit to actually enjoying the act of

fellatio" (p. 13). We can make sense of this from a media ecological approach because these technological "mediums" introduced into the environment influenced sociosexual sense-making.

On one hand, as discussed in chapter two, these technologies were built on top of foundationally inequitable institutions which canonized U.S. Whiteness, sexisms, and classisms. Also discussed in chapter two, on another level, designers (largely White cishet men) born and raised into this system, unaware of their own implicit biases from being a product of said system, have reproduced with and from mindsets of rationality into hyper-irrationality, and innovation, birthing all preceding forms of capitalisms. Then, as overviewed in chapter three, considering the lack of comprehensive sex education, binary constructs of gender, sex, and sexuality, rampant and naturalized dehumanizations, relational injustices, the increasing normality of long-distance relationships, and a flattened representation in scholarship, we can begin to understand how and why non-White cishet men have been erased as sexual subjects. Historically, it has been profitable to promote sexually regressive norms, not empowering ones.

Dildos. According to Hallie Lieberman (2019) in her article punily, yet aptly, called *If You Mold It, They Will Come: How Gosnell Duncan's Devices Changed the Feminist Sex-Toy Game Forever*, "dildos weren't even that accepted in subcultural crowds—in the late 1960s and early 1970s" (para. 4). Meaning that, at the time, prevailing rhetorics of, "'free love' didn't necessarily extend to masturbation" (para. 4). Additionally, prior to the 1970s, dildos (phallic shaped sex toys created primarily for penetration) were generally designed and sold only by able-bodied cishet men, made of heat-treated rubber: a chemical smelly and irritating material.

As Lieberman's (2019) title explicitized (much to obscenity law writer's dismay!), thanks to the concerted efforts of disability activist, Gosnell Duncan, "Silicone dildos were [eventually] produced under the brand name Paramount Therapeutic Products" (para. 7). Although, at the

time, his goal was to fill a market for disabled folks (like himself), he reached barriers, which

took the form of both U.S. federal Comstock Laws (passed in 1873, criminalizing the mailing of

"obscene" items: abortifacients, sex toys, letters with sexual info etc.) and feminists alike:

> …the dildo was a source of feminist debate and consternation, especially among lesbians.
> According to Heather Findlay, 'No other sex toy has generated the quantity and quality of
> discussion among mostly urban, middle-class White lesbians as the dildo.' Some lesbians
> viewed dildos as 'male-identified' and thus fundamentally incompatible in an essay in the
> book *Coming to Power*, dildos were a 'no-no' because they were 'men's ideas about what
> lesbians did.' Using them, or fantasizing about using them, made you a Bad Lesbian
> (Comella, 2017, pp. 53-54).

Moreover, Lynn Comella (2017) explored the larger context of this feminist contestation

in her work *Vibrator Nation: How Feminist Sex-Toy Stores Changed the Business of Pleasure*:

> For years, Williams refused to carry dildos, because she personally didn't like the way
> they looked and figured that other women didn't care for them, either. 'Why did they
> have to look like penises was my big thing,' she told me. But customers began to request
> them, and Williams ultimately realized that feminism's focus on reclaiming the clitoris
> notwithstanding, there were women who enjoyed that feeling of having something inside
> them (Comella, 2017, p. 36).

As detailed above, despite some negative feminist accounts of penises and penis-shaped sex toy

products, a significant amount of vulva-havers expressed interest in them (Comella, 2017).

As time progressed, and long-distance capacities emerged, teledildonics arrived on the scene.

Teledildonics. As discussed in previous chapters, the Internet has revolutionized sexual

experiences. i.e., in 1975, a U.S. tech pioneer by the name of Ted Nelson minted the term

"dildonics", to describe landmark electric feelings of touch and sexual expression capable of being simulated through dial-up Internet connections (KIIROO, n.d.). With the emergence of more fast-paced and reliable digital connections, as well as high-tech sex tech, came expanded potentialities that were – for the rest of humanity up until that point – proximally untappable.

For example, Howard Rheingold (1992) in his work *Virtual Reality: The Revolutionary Technology of Computer-Generated Artificial Worlds—and How It Promises and Threatens to Transform Business and Society*, updated Nelson's term, conceiving the concept "teledildonics". Otherwise known as cyberdildonics, according to Rheingold, teledildonics is the name for virtual sexual encounters while simultaneously using more advanced and interactive technologies. In other words, the term describes specifically the use of extensions which mimic sexual actions.

This descriptor has provided a linguistic name for technological advancements in haptic technologies (vibrations, motion, force), as well as the theoretical foundations on which a more sophisticated form of biomimicry (the focus of this project) has been built. In the time past 1991 when Rheingold coined his term, and as McLuhan and McLuhan (1988) detailed in *Laws of Media*, people have pushed the physically close and long-distance capabilities of this novel digital phenomenon. Over the course of the last 5 to 10 years, in particular, there has been a notable shift in language usage from sex "toy" to sex "device", denoting various escalations in sophistication of technologies, which optimize human realism brought about by biomimetics. This rhetorical shift denotes a respectability from silly novelty into seriousness and practicality.

Sex Devices

In 2017, McArthur and Twist coined the term *digisexuality* to describe folks who have found that the usage of "sophisticated, immersive, and appealing" (p. 1) sexual technologies is

preferred to them compared to "direct sexual interactions with humans" (p. 1). Alongside VR headsets and massive online immersive games, biomimetics are advanced sexual technologies.

Biomimetics. By design, biomimetic technologies are meant to mimic human touch, feeling, and technique. For example, the brand Lora DiCarlo (whose email advertisements are the focus of this project) sell a variety of devices, which simulate manual, oral, and genital sexual stimulations. As discussed in chapter one, the questions that come to mind with the emergence of these devices are: "Why is this happening? To whose benefit? Whose cost?" And "Can they replace human touch?" But, as a critical feminist rhetorician and media ecologist, methodologically, I am most concerned with market orientations and neoliberal marketing rhetorics used to sell biomimetic sex tech, that often signal to future technological promises.

To elaborate, from what I have observed thus far, brands like Wow Tech USA (known for the Womanizer, Womanizer Premium among others), Lora DiCarlo (known for the Osé, Osé 2, among others), and Lelo (known for Sila, Enigma, and more) have sold the most successful biomimetic sextech marketed to vulva-havers thus far, following and speaking certain rhetorical trends of female empowerment and futurist technological presumptions of efficiency (Weber-Steinhaus, 2020). For example, their brand marketing language often linguistically places orgasms on a sexual pedestal, understandable and resonant when perceiving through a cybernetic, objectivist, and rational, framing efficient climax as the goal of sexual experiences.

As such, implicitly sold with these technologies is the assumption that these technologies allow users the ability to surpass what has, until this point in his-story, not been accessible, financially, or otherwise, to vulva-havers: autonomous, expansive, and satisfying sexual experiences. Said otherwise, in the grand scheme of human existence, until very recently, vulva-

havers have been seen and spoken about commonly as a group less biologically interested or able to have orgasmic or fulfilling sex overall (Castleman, 2013; Russo, 2017).

This narrative was derived from sociohistorical and scientific misnomers that vulva-havers generally reach orgasm at a much slower pace than penis-havers and are content experiencing life in a sexually devalued position, framing that as a natural condition. Making matters more complicated, despite brand promises, outside of biological mechanisms, there aren't objective ways to quantify sexual satiation and fulfillment. In brief, this is because who we are and how we experience the world, sexually or otherwise, cannot be described using biology alone, while avoiding problematic biological essentialism and/or reductionism. One way in which we are taught reductionisms is through deeply propagandized advertising campaigns.

What's Datafied Advertising Got to Do with It?

Regarding sex tech specifically, Bell (2018) explained that doctors tried to use vibrators to treat a variety of diseases but did not find a use for them. Therefore, in 1915 the *American Medical Association* described the industry as a delusion and a snare, forcing producers to shift gears and advertise them as home appliances for any age or body type in the general public. Ironically, these ads were widely distributed in newspapers, religious outlets, and popular magazines, like *Good Housekeeping*, claiming that they cured a whole host of ailments. Again, they were able to get away with this through the strategic use of suggestive rhetorics, which hinted to using them for self-pleasure, but simultaneously evaded obscenity laws (Bell, 2018).

As mentioned in chapter two, if Leder's (1990) work *The Absent Body* holds true, and scientifically backed advanced sextech are more ubiquitous and integrated, they increasingly recede from focal awareness as they make room for modes and experiences that they introduce into society (i.e., becoming environmental). This relates to media ecological concepts I build

upon throughout this project like reversals, extensions, short circuits, and autoamputations. For example, one of McLuhan's (1997) lesser-known quotes is the following:

> One of the merits of motivation research has been the revelation of man's [sic] sex relation to the motorcar. Socially, it is the accumulation of group pressures and irritations that prompt invention and innovation as counter-irritants. War and the fear of war have always been considered the main incentives to technological extensions of our bodies (pp. 46-47).

As true as McLuhan's quote above may be about war and fear of war, in the context of products marketed to U.S. feminine folks, other motivations have taken precedent to primarily drive sale products, instead often centering around bodily upkeep, alteration, and reproductive rights. In that case, an argument could be made about how broadly one defined "war," building off what some have described as the "war on women [sic]," referring to reproductive rights (Rani, 2020).

Connecting the dots between the quote at the beginning of the pre-COVID sex tech usage section to this one, we see that McLuhan goes on to explain that motivation research, often times capitalized on by advertising stakeholders, exploits war and fear of war to the fullest extent of the law. Being that law is another form of technology, serving as an extension of the political body, it is crucial we remember the context advertisements and laws alike were created in, for what purpose, and to whose benefit? Addressing the first point of this quote segment, we must remember the purposes and who largely benefitted in the U.S. from cars.

Despite the universalized demonstration of what the motorcar did for "man's [sic] sex relation," we know that cars, upon first release were only financially accessible to those of a certain status. Among other campaigns, as mentioned in chapter one, Sloop's (2009) "People Shopping" manuscript extensively detailed the equation of U.S. nationalistic and commodified

rhetorics of specifically purchasing the automobile. Unfortunately, what is often left out of these conversations is the overarching context of the White Flight spurred by this travel mode. In other words, regardless of intention, the introduction of the car into society, accessible only to those who held a certain level of financial security (mainly White folks), has been universalized throughout history, and this universalized reduction has human implications. The United States, and the Western world generally, cannot be held accountable without acknowledging this.

Secondly, in the U.S. context specifically (and as I detailed in my forthcoming piece *Requirement Politics* first mentioned within chapter two of this project), rape and other types of sexual violence are used as weapons of war waged by military forces, as well as human traffickers here and overseas (Herman, 1989; Peltola, 2018; Rubin, 1975). Depending on one's definition of "war" or "fear of war," the implications can be further expanded. For instance, human traffickers are everywhere, even in so called "peace" societies (those not actively at war).

Thirdly, if we consider the enormous rate of CPTSD from sexual violences that are not being criminalized in the U.S., alongside the PTSD of military operatives arriving home from officially documented war zones around the world, ecological implications are staggering. In other words, we must contextualize this in the sociosexually violent U.S. context (Bowen, 2022). As stated in chapter two, tracing out the imperialist capitalist White supremacist patriarchal system of the U.S. enables an understanding of how naturalized biases bred toxic masculinity, sex violences, dehumanization, war, and all other oppressions as features of the current system.

What does any of this have to do with advertising? Dehumanization is a multipronged process that becomes normal in repetition. One model through which this process has been explained is called *The Pyramid of Hate*. According to the creators, the Anti-Defamation League (2018), this model begins to trace out an understanding of how seemingly inconsequential and

isolated incidents of biases, build into substantial acts of bias, discriminations, motivated violences, and societally gross acts of violence, like genocide (Anti-Defamation League, 2018). With all that said, this project can now benefit from the fact that documentarians have already approached the topic of sexism and sexual objectification of feminine bodies in advertising.

For instance, Sut Jhally (2010) released a fourth edition of the documentary centering around Jean Kilbourne's research regarding advertising depictions of women. Like the previous installments of his films by the same name, *Killing Us Softly 4: Advertising's Image of Women* featured her extensive and poignant commentary whilst providing seemingly endless depictions of the female body posed in glamorized, sexualized, and objectifying positions. According to Kilbourne, in instances where text is present in an advertisement, it is typically seen framing the imagery of female bodies with demeaning and regressive notions of femininity. In attempts to problematize this, Kilbourne explained certain effects of a prolonged exposure to these images.

While still presenting countless examples of debasing print and television advertisements of the female body, and much in the way that would likely be fruitful for me to do within my own dissertation project, Kilbourne connected this mediated cultural phenomenon to a broad range of societal issues (toxic masculinity, eating disorders, the devaluation of feminine everything), linking them to fundamental inequities. This Jhally film differed from previous ones in its critique of increasingly advanced editing software, which enable creation of meticulously airbrushed beauty standards; emulating Whiteness, thinness, and humanly impossible aesthetics of perfection (Jhally, 2010). Similarly, it is beneficial to detail how the advancement in these technologies might play into the discourses surrounding sextech and create a sexually violent context of contemporary America overall. Next, we discuss the introduction and influence of TV.

Television

According to McLuhan, and as discussed, with the implementation of any new technology comes an extension and autoamputation of applicable senses. For him, these sensory processes in turn create unforeseen consequences. Throughout his life's work he also argued artists and their art act as a social buffer between rapidly paced technological advancements and the public (McLuhan, 1997). Beyond art, in McLuhan's most extensive chapter of *Understanding Media*, he described the visual dominance solidified through TV as a medium. In its traditional format, he explained that, on the TV, fans want to see their "stars in a role," (pg. 318) which acts in contrast with film, where he claimed they want to see "the real thing" (pg. 318). On a related note, he was crystal clear about a pedagogical need to understand and exploit these inclinations of TV to gain insight into our reality (McLuhan, 1997).

One textually tangible proof of influence that McLuhan had on society came in the form of Neil Postman's (1985) *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, in which he talked extensions differently. Likewise, compared to his professor's one book chapter, Postman wrote his whole book on TV. Most relevant to this project, Postman (1985) said, "…lies have not been defined as truth nor truth as lies. All that has happened is that the public has adjusted to incoherence and been amused into indifference" (p. 110).

Postman believed the constantly available flashy entertainment distracted people from introspection (Postman, 2006, p. 120). He went as far as to argue, "we do not doubt the reality of what we see on television" (Postman, 2006, p. 79). Postman attributed this societal blind faith in TV stereotypes to their being readily able to, "recede into the background and become our culture" (Postman, 2006, p. 79). Its power was in full TV format: visual spectacle. Little do

many know, seven decades prior, British writer Rose Macaulay's (1919) forgotten dystopian piece called *What Not* featured the same ideas that made Huxley, Orwell, and Postman canon.

Either way, television as a medium is especially important to consider in relation to this project because as Case (1996) explicated in her work *The Domain-Matrix: Performing Lesbian at the End of Print Culture,* representationally they have set the scene for a world and sociosexual relations undivorceable from commodity fetishism for many decades now:

> The economics of the TV screen brought an intensification of advertising and thus commodity fetishism into the domestic space. The classic capitalist project of creating a private, bourgeois space in contrast to the public one (see the discussion of Barker in section IVc, "Blanking Out") was being restructured by the screen. The marketplace entered the living room. Moreover, the marketplace entered every narrative and news broadcast. The effect of watching footage from Vietnam interspersed with ads for toothpaste or weight-loss programs intensified the role that commodity fetishism could play within multiple discourses and subjects. As TV time expanded throughout the day, the repetition of commercials pounded "home" the allure of commodities. Commodity fetishism flourished within "private" spaces, once designed as removes from the bustle of the marketplace. The screen became the prime site for flashing corporate images and logos (pp. 292- 293).

Furthermore, these media trends are unique because they are remediated within the remix culture, mediated through computers or smart devices and then shared on a variety of digital platforms (Lessig, 2008). In recent years, a number of digital and increasingly algorithmic television programs have emerged on the streaming scene (Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, etc.), pushing limits of participants and viewers ideas of physical and virtual relational experiences.

For instance, on the (2020) program "Love is Blind", people searching for love are divided by cis- and heteronormative and binary concepts of bio sex and gender, only allowed to hear the voice of those they speak with on the other side of a wall, whose ultimate goal is to get engaged without ever having seen their match. Gameshow wise, there is (2020) "The Circle", which isolates participants in a seemingly soundproof apartment complex, only allowing them to verbally communicate via a specially fabricated social media platform (of the same name). Participants may or may not be the profile user they create (a phenomena otherwise known as "catfishing"; a term popularized by "Catfish: The TV Show" [2012]), with the ultimate goal of flying under the radar, and/or gaining popularity among the group, in order to win prize money.

On a more physical side, pre and present-COVID-19, the (2014) program "Sexy Beasts" pairs heterosexual suitors up after covering them in elaborate, yet playful, prosthetic makeups, claiming to remove the outer beauty, to focus on personality and ulterior forms of relational compatibility. More recently, the (2019) TV show "21 Again" demonstrates a generational divide and bridge between Gen X, millennials, and Gen Z, by giving mothers of Gen Z daughters a makeover to look like they're in their early twenties now. The show enables conversations between Gen Z daughters and their Gen X or millennial moms illuminating ways in which generationally socialized sexisms, shame, and a lack of sex education are now converging and still being experienced by Gen Z feminine folks in the digital and increasingly algorithmic age.

Finally, the (2020) show "Too Hot to Handle", begins by setting the scene of a variety of fictious reality TV shows where a collection of cisheteronormatively attractive, thin, and/or fit individuals are brought together in a tropical island paradise, only to eventually be interrupted by a cone-shaped algorithmic assistant, heavily surveilling and penalizing them of thousands in potential prize money each time they perform a sexual act: kissing, heavy petting, or sex of any

kind. The patterns in shows detailed above speak to an overarching context of financial and linguistic frames and motivations, which send contradictory messages of sex shame, and yet a prevailing commodified and normalized sexual oversaturation and objectification. Arguably, few media genres solidify these stigma, taboos, and contradictory themes more than pornography.

Pornography

Being that we are sexual beings, pornography as a genre of any one media has followed and been generated in every medium imaginable. However, like any genre and/or medium, it has a history, and thus is not neutral, and should not be described as such. For instance, Ronald Regan era conservatives (McDowell, 1986) and second-wave radical feminists alike have documented a plethora of potential harms caused by pornography, on the basis of either general obscenity laws and/or foundationally socialized and internalized norms of patriarchal dominance, violences, and subordination depicted within (Dworkin, 1985; MacKinnon, 1986).

Their critiques comprise rich embodied experiences, which bore a variety of valid angles of internalized cisheteronormativities, sexisms, racisms, ableisms, and classisms. For instance, cisfemale faking of orgasms in porn is rampant throughout the industry. From a media ecological approach on orality and literacy, arguably outside this context, moans could be seen as one of the sincerest forms of flattery because non-verbal sounds predate a human use of language (Ong, 2013). What does it mean if moans are the sincerest form of flattery, yet, feminine folks both in pornography, as well as their everyday sex lives are socialized into faking their orgasmic moans?

And, according to Donovan and Slade (2019) in their docuseries *Generation Porn*, 18 to 34-year-olds make up almost two-thirds of Pornhub site users. What might this mean about our sociosexual norms? Especially within a context where tech firms are well-aware that web-based surfing tools, email, and social medias are as addictive as gambling (Orlowski, Coombe, &

Curtis, 2020). These sites are for-profit enterprises that are highly crafted by White cishet men at the multifold expense of, especially Black and Brown, feminine folks both on and off the scene.

Understanding the introduction of these sexual medias on society, extends far beyond the scope of what is mentioned here. For sake of space, I limit discussions of pornography to briefly note what has been argued about it, unpacking key implications that its introduction into society may reveal. The medias we consume, pornography or not, feeds us. Christine L. Nystrom (2021) said it best:

> They got in as food: through the mouth. This is, of course, one of the most primal and persistent conceptions of the origins of one's self, one's thoughts, one's ideas in the history of the world's cultures: that the internalized others who guide our thinking and decisions and behaviors – the disembodied ghosts who animate the human body-machine – got in by being eaten, being ingested: that you are not only what but who you eat (p. 135).

To understand pornography, we should also think back to chapter two discussions of colonialism, capitalisms, and, most recently, neoliberal capitalism. Pornography as a genre, in whatever form of media, then constrained and playable further within the limits of any one medium, looks different. However, another way to understand how this manifests further is by employing a political economic approach. Specifically, by exploring what can be gleaned on a contextual level, when looking at monopolistic ownership by the transnational capitalist class. As neoliberalism enabled deregulation, privatization, and corporatization of medias, fueled largely by advertising shareholders, this also altered the production of pornography overall.

For instance, in *The Price of Pleasure: Pornography, Sexuality & Relationships*, the documentary filmmakers, Picker and Sun (2008), on a micro-level chose to include a

comprehensive mix of voices, showcasing everyone from sexual violence survivors to porn stars, sex industry convention attendees, producers, and distributers, as well as varied feminist and general media critics. This executive decision better exhibited a more fleshed-out perspective on this otherwise often inequitably mediated body politic. On a more macro level, their film confronted the normalized objectification of women in the overall sociosexual landscape, and leaves viewers in a limbo of uncertainty, regarding our ability to stop this violently profitable sector from bleeding into mainstream media and our own personal lives (Picker & Sun, 2008).

From a media ecological approach pornography offers services as well as disservices to our sociosexual sense-making. On one hand, as a genre of medias, it is for-profit entertainment with a purpose: to stimulate sexual arousal and release. However, when one traces out the foundational trajectory of the U.S. nation since its origin, as well as sociosexual relations, and digital adaptations that have taken place during the COVID-19 pandemic we can begin to observe taken for granted biases built in as features of pornography that tell a deeper story. Primarily, one in which the media products of the still predominantly White cishet male media producers, both in medium framing and content, which often caters to a viewership that replicates age-old phallogocentrism and elicits scenes shot from and for a White male gaze.

This all becomes more troublesome in the context of revenge porn sites where digital sex offenders post nonconsensually shared explicit content of others (that has only gotten worse over the course of the pandemic) (Goldstein, 2021), as well as the emergence of deep fake porn, which legal experts warn could epidemically enable digital sex offenders to superimpose anyone's face onto pornographic content, without their consent or knowledge (Selbie & Williams, 2021). With all this said, when breakdowns come to breakthroughs, what can pornography teach about the current U.S. sociosexually violent present-COVID-19 landscape?

Firstly, thinking back to chapter three on sexualities literatures, we must remember that the majority of Americans have not being taught comprehensive sex education. Therefore, some people genuinely, curiously, and eagerly want to know how to sexually express themselves. And, yet they are deliberately being shielded from formally learning. This is not to say that formal learning is superior to all informal methods, but for better or worse, online pornography accessed via apps or tube style sites, like Pornhub, then do end up filling this gap.

Secondly, as stated, content is staged, framed, and molded primarily for the male gaze. This speaks to the traditionally and still predominant White cishet male ownership of medias overall. In other words, humans *as* media, alongside other notions from chapter three, have centered cishet male pleasure and dominance, presenting itself in everything from everyday sociosexual norms like feminine sexual shame, into linguistically taken for granted porn titles, like Hugh Hefner's *Playboy* magazine. Marshall McLuhan's *Playboy* interview is still referenced as one of his most useful works, in which he overviewed many of his hot media theories, displaying them candidly for his presumptively cishet male readers to enjoy (Norden, 1969). Perhaps if his readership were more honest about sociohistorical trajectories of the Western world (sexism, racism, classism, etc.) they would recognize these deeper human implications.

With both revelations about traditional pornography in mind, we now move into ways novel digitals and application social medias have transformed the U.S. sociosexual landscape.

Digital Social Medias

Thinking back to the section on datafied advertisements, the digital spaces on which these advertisers infiltrate our contemporary ecologies are on novel social media platforms. Additionally, in the sex toy and device section, we saw how sex tech has been revolutionized by the emergence of the Internet (Nelson's *electric dildonics* and Rheingold's *digital teledildonics*).

This catalyzing pattern rings true as well when we discuss ways in which human sociosexualities on a relational level have also been influenced by the Internet, and specifically Web 2.0. In this next section, I now overview select applications and websites which have emerged since the early 2000s: dating apps, FetLife, Instagram, Only Fans, and TikTok. After detailing each software type, I briefly discuss their purposes and how they incline U.S. sociosexual relations.

To understand the metamorphosis that matching websites and apps have had on our sociosexual relations, it is important to first acknowledge the way in which societal notions of love have changed from the 18th century until now. Expressly, heteronormativity staunchly controlled social spheres for so long, concepts of romantic love in the 18th century were often centered around heterosexual marriages for economic stability (Illouz, 2013). In their book *Why Love Hurts*, Eva Illouz (2013) argued that "to study love is not peripheral but central to the study of the core and foundation of modernity" (p. 302). In fact, she continued to maintain:

> Heterosexual romantic love is one of the best sites to take stock of such an ambivalent perspective on modernity because the last four decades have witnessed a radicalization of freedom and equality within the romantic bond as well as a radical split between sexuality and emotionality. Heterosexual romantic love contains the two most important cultural revolutions of the 20th century: the individualization of lifestyles and the intensification of emotional life projects; and the economization of social relationships, the pervasiveness of economic models to shape the self and its very emotions.14 Sex and sexuality became disentangled from moral norms, and incorporated in individualized lifestyles and life projects, while the capitalist cultural grammar has massively penetrated the realm of heterosexual romantic relationships (Illouz, 2013, loc. 302 – 312).

Although the focus of this project is not explicitly love or romance, as much as it is about exploring sexualities and intimacy studies, I agree that for sake of understanding a breadth of inherently ambiguous sociosexual ecologies and to further deconstruct arbitrarily distinguished categories, it is crucial to mention how introduction of Web 2.0 apps are influencing relations. Nystrom (2021) spoke to this ecological sentiment when she said, "to study the structure of situations, then, is to study the consistencies in human meaning-making and response" (p. 75).

Applications. Since the birth of the millennial lifetime (1977-1995), websites like Match.com (April 1995), Christian Mingle (2001), and then eventually, apps like Plenty of Fish (2003) and OkCupid (2004) became nothing short of a sociosexual norm. On a spicier note, there have also been websites like FetLife (January 2008) for folks seeking out the BDSM and kink communities. And in the last decade, many more dating apps have emerged on the scene.

Most prominently, Tinder (September 2012), the hook up app (which popularized the trendy language of swiping left or swiping right on someone), and Bumble (December 2014) whose claim to fame is not allowing cishet men to message cishet women first (as cisheteronormative and presumptive as that may be). Recently, despite being released in 2012 (the same year as Tinder), Hinge has also received clout for emphasizing long-term relations. On a queerer note, there have also been apps like Her (September 2013) and Grindr (March 2009) which expand to a more just, equitable, diverse, and inclusive amount of the population. Zeroing in on another sexual angle there is also the app Feeld (July 2014), like FetLife (2008), which connects folks into polyamory, kink, casual sex, swinging, and other alternative lifestyles. Lastly, with the emergence of Instagram (2010) users have reported a marked influx of idealist airbrushed content online, that has since been referred to as *Instagram face* (Nast, 2019).

Present-COVID-19 Sextech Usage

In hindsight, once COVID-19 came to light on a mediatingly grand scale (during March 2020), our interconnected world folded in on itself and into digital spaces to endure the proximal separation of lockdown and ensure individual and collective health and safety. Software like WebEx (1995) and Zoom (2011), as well as apps, like Only Fans (2016) and TikTok (September 2016), that had existed for several years for users of their respective subgroups, suddenly became mainstream for folks seeking out influencer status, income, social connection, and/or attention.

Only Fans

One of the oldest professions on record had a glow up during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although Only Fans originally began in 2016 as a site for users to create nude and other potentially adult content to accumulate paid subscribers (or "fans"), over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, whether due to Beyonce's lyrical shoutout (Holmes, 2020) or unprecedented rates of unemployment (Tappe, 2020) the app made its unusual debut into the public limelight (Boseley, 2020; Friedman, 2021). But, like any other social media platform, first and foremost Only Fans is a for profit application. Which is why, when push came to shove, the owners banned explicit content, creating an uproar from the most marginalized folks on the app, who were most hurt by the temporary decision (Harder, 2021). These events go to show that, despite Only Fans fifteen minutes of fame, the deeply entrenched social stigma on sex work is very much alive and well. As such, being a user does not come without consequences.

TikTok

One psychology study published by Montag, Yang, and Elhai, during March 2021 described TikTok users as, "often adolescents and therefore from a group of potentially vulnerable individuals" (p. 1). Despite the fact the app was previously populated by a majority of

younger (Gen Z) users, a month later, a study was published by Zeng, Abidin, and Schäfer (2021) reporting that, "global lockdowns further catalyzed the massive expansion and diversification of TikTok's user groups…attract[ing] older populations (such as parents and grandparents) and adults of all occupations (such as teachers and healthcare workers) to the platform during the pandemic" (p. 3163). Echoing this observation, according to the Statista Research Department (2021), from January 2018 to September 2021, the app experienced a 45% growth from 689 million monthly active users (MAU) to 1 billion. As a result, also over the course of the pandemic, research on the TikTok app has exploded into growing fields of study.

As of April 2021, Zeng, Abidin, and Schafer (2021) described TikTok scholarship as being groupable into three broad categories, over: 1) the platform's COVID-19 pandemic growth, 2) investigation into technological features of the platform, and 3) behavior and content types. With any new medium comes the positive and negative judgements about their effects on society. TikTok has been no different, receiving criticism about the previously young user base (Montag et al., 2021), oligopolistic status (Gray, 2021), shadow banning (suppressing videos) of disabled, queer, fat (Botella, 2019), and Black creators (McCluskey, 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Rosenblatt, 2021), further "memefication" of intergenerational politics between Gen Z and boomers (Zeng & Abidin, 2021), as well as hopeful connective predictions about community-engaged digital knowledge mobilization (MacKinnon, Kia, & Lacombe-Duncan, 2021).

From a medium perspective, TikTok is much like its briefly timed audio/video predecessor, Vine, in that it is an app which hosts short-form user generated videos, which may or may not be anonymous. While Vine allowed users 6 seconds for their uploads, TikTok began allowing users 15 seconds, originally. Then, expanding the option to 60 second clips. And, now, most recently, up to 3 minutes. This datafied and algorithmic medium, much like what was

discussed on advertising, has ubiquitous qualities, circulating social norms and contestations. So much so that a viral trend has been rumored to promote school violence (Fung & Sands, 2021). However, if TikTok amplifies violence, it could just as functionally amplify support and justice.

It is easy to dismiss digital and increasingly algorithmic spaces away online interactions and exchanges of content as if they are not "real life", as Malcolm Gladwell (2010) has with his stigmatizing and ableist (James, 2019) term *slacktivism*. However, I conduct this analysis, by contextualizing ads in TikToks, to explore why MacKinnon et al. (2021) may have concluded:

> …TikTok is an innovative social media platform that presents possibilities for achieving transformative, community-engaged knowledge mobilization among researchers, underserved health care users, and their health care providers, all of whom are necessary to achieve better health care and population health outcomes (p. 1).

Laypersons and researchers alike have discussed the positive community orientations and solidarity fostered on the app, over the course of this pandemic, like LGBTQIA+ communities (MacKinnon et al, 2021; Ohlheiser, 2020), sex education (genital anatomy, vulvic orgasm, arousal, birth control, menstruation, general sexual health, sexual health practices, communication, and care) (Fowler, Schoen, Smith, & Morain, 2021), Booktok (Merga, 2021), health behaviors, novel COVID-19 findings, and public engagement (Li, Guan, Hammond, & Berrey, 2021), substance use disorder recovery (Russell, Bergman, Colditz, Kelly, Milaham, and Massey, 2021), those grieving (Krutrök, 2021), and neurodivergent folks (Bowen, 2021b).

For reasons like these, Sloane (2021) found that social media platforms like Snapchat and TikTok have been identified as profitable digital spheres of influence, capable of producing huge revenue streams. Another recent study by Unni and Weinstein (2021) concluded that,

The global COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by heightened, compensatory use of social media apps because of social distancing and shelter-in-place orders. Data reveal that on TikTok, a platform heavily used by teens, public health information coexists with copious casual commentary and showcasing of everyday life during the pandemic. The prominence of this documentation suggests uses of social media for connection and com- mon humanity during a novel time of distancing and isolation (p. 868).

Most recently, the entirely audio app Clubhouse (April 2020) has arrived mid-COVID pandemic, offering users a mix of everything from professionality to sexuality, and creative networking.

Urgently, as discussed in the advertising segment, algorithmic gathering of data for advertising shareholders occurs on all of these platforms. Since they are so ubiquitous, it is essential to trace out ambiguous interactions interwoven within this commodified landscape. After all, we do not know the long-term consequences of these digital ecological installations.

Ultimately, over the course of this ongoing pandemic, we have learned a great deal about our fellow humans. Neglect and violences against women (Gregory, 2021), children, and the elderly has reportedly increased (World Health Organization, 2020), people are feeling too self-conscious about their bodies to have sex (Bernstein, 2021), and sex tech sales have skyrocketed (Donahue, 2021; Drolet, 2020; Lee, 2020). From consulting their data on keyword searches, the dating app Feeld has also reported a marked increase in users interested in opening their relationship and/or exploring non-monogamy (Phillips, 2021).

In efforts to divulge implications of these ongoing present-COVID-19 circumstances built upon preceding foundations, in the following chapter, I revisit macro context and micro logics of colonialism, preceding capitalisms, and late-stage present-COVID-19 neoliberalism

(discussed in chapter two), using a media ecological approach and sense-making to link these rhetorics and discourses (detailed in the first four chapters), to analyze Lora DiCarlo adverts. Before launching into that, we now audit some common rhetorics utilized by neoliberal capitalist entrepreneurs.

Un-cash-able Future Technological Promises

As previewed in chapter one and expanded upon in the vibrator and biomimetic segments of this one, the human body has often been viewed, and, thus, described like technology of the age. Theoretically, this view has been called the cybernetic paradigm:

Although there continue to be substantive theoretical challenges to its dominant metaphors, Western scientific medicine views the human body essentially as machine. The machine model carries with it certain implications, among which is the reduction of spirit, affect, and value to mechanistic processes in the human body. This perspective also facilitates viewing and treating the body in atomistic and mechanical fashion, so that, for example, the increasing mechanization of the body in terms of artificial hearts, kidneys, joints, limbs, and computerized implants is seen as an ordinary progression within the dominant model (Morgan, 1998, p. 265).

If what Morgan says is true, cybernetic thought is as taken for granted as a fish to water. And another often invisible insight regarding technologies are the naturalized biases built into them:

In Western culture men have historically been associated with technology, while women are more typically associated with 'nature,' perceived (incorrectly, I would argue) as the opposite of technology. Layering these dichotomies on top of one another – man / woman, nature / technology, nature / culture – tends to influence assessments of technology and gender in particular and often contrary ways (Hopkins, 1998, p. 4).

As Hopkins uttered here, as well as scholars like Drs. Lisa Nakamura, Ruha Benjamin, Safiya Nobel, Mar Hicks, Meredith Broussard, Joy Buolamwini, Cathy O'Neil, Virginia Eubanks, and Sarah Sharma, and data whistleblowers, like Frances Haugen (Allyn, 2021) have since then: technologies are not neutral. Beyond previous discussions, this was also exemplified through Microsoft's Tay.AI, a chatbot they released on Twitter that was socialized into using racist misogynistic classist rhetorics by users in less than a day (Vincent, 2016). Again, in critical feminist and media ecological fashion, when I use the word "technologies" I mean it in the broadest possible sense. In other words, I argue that everything from human tools, like the English phonetic language, to systems of power, like educational and political institutions, are a medium, creating their own environments. Not in a technologically determinist sense, but in way that reveals inclinations. Therefore, if our societies were not built upon taken for granted racisms, sexisms, and classisms, etc., our technologies would not reveal these discriminations.

Regardless of how useful and productive those lenses have been in the past, or continue to be in certain fields of study, for generating ideas and sense-makings about ourselves and our world, they incline limited results. Specifically, ones which bore objective and rational insights. And as some media ecologists, like Professor Emeritus of Communication Josh Meyrowitz, have said, this perspective offers us both services as well as disservices. For these reasons, one of the field of media ecology's founders (as well one of Meyrowitz's PhD mentors in the Media Ecology Program at New York University) inquired about and criticized the perspective, like so:

> Why that should be so, why so many people should so devoutly aspire to the ultimate proof that humans are, after all, only complicated machines, is something a mystery to me. Perhaps it is a symptom of the desperate need for order and certainty in a time of overwhelming cultural change (Nystrom, 2021, p. 74).

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, more people than ever before seem to be becoming keen to the noticeable wear and tear of prolonged virtual communications. For example, some have referred to these discomforts as "Zoom fatigue" (Ramachandran, 2021). One could also argue these manifestations have led to what many have called the "Great Resignation" or the "Great Recalibration" where many (especially millennials and Generation Z) folks in various fields and sectors have quit their high stress, low paying workplaces in droves (Fox, 2022; Smith, 2021). Within the following chapter I conduct my own critical feminist rhetorical and discourse analysis exploring whether Joho's (2020) assertion was right, that "the algorithms defining sexuality suck" (para. 1) because the integration of binary logic encoded into algorithms inevitably fail to capture the complex spectrum of our human sexual expression and explorations (Joho, 2020).

As it stands, cybernetic logics like these ground biomimetic sex tech brands like Lora DiCarlo, linguistically equating the human body to a machine. And I have noticed a handful of persuasive and profitable rhetorics sextech brands used to promise future technological results. If Nystrom's profoundly stated observation about a human desire for order and certainty in times of cultural chaos is true, it serves as an excellent segue into the following chapter, where I conduct a media ecological analysis of why and how future technological discourses resonate.

CHAPTER FIVE. CRITICAL FEMINIST RHETORICAL AND MEDIA ECOLOGICAL

ANALYSES

Subdivisions

Have been built
With wealth
Of sexually
satisfied men,

on top the backs
of women whose
same husbands
have not known
or cared how to
make them come (Bowen, 2021c, p. 8).

As mentioned in chapter one, the information discussed in previous chapters has not

solved the interlocking sociopolitical and sociosexual problems rampant within the U.S.

landscape. And, so, due to the emergence of sophisticated sex devices, within this chapter I aim

to explore:

1. What rhetorical themes occur within these advertisements for biomimetic sexual

   technologies marketed to vulva-havers in the late-stage present-COVID-19 neoliberal

   U.S. landscape?

2. How have biomimetic sexual technologies marketed to vulva-havers effected how their

   sexual experiences are created and maintained in the sociosexual U.S. landscape?

3. How are biomimetic sextech changing vulva-havers sexual sense-making, experiences,

   and relations within the sexually violent late-stage capitalist present-COVID-19 U.S.

   landscape?

Sociosexually, these questions are my entrance into understanding what might be happening.

To demonstrate the usefulness of undertaking a critical feminist rhetorical and gender and media

ecological analysis, herein I conducted a case study of Lori DiCarlo email subscription adverts contextualized in TikTok videos. Specifically, I first overviewed background on my chosen email advert artifacts. Then, I analyzed and revealed major themes found throughout, putting them into conversation with popular culture, feminist, and scholarly articles accrued before, and discussed throughout, this project. Third, I provided background about TikTok videos, or "TikToks," describing the app TikTok (first mentioned in chapter four) to further situate the secondary artifacts of TikTok videos, and innovative research methods and revelations spurred by the app over the course of the ongoing pandemic from November 22nd, 2019, to August 7th, 2021, which is the time frame of my study. Lastly, I analyze major trends revealed in these TikToks, contextualizing the Lora DiCarlo email adverts, for purposes of painting a more comprehensive picture of the environmental discourses and norms surrounding biomimetic sextech advertisements marketed to vulva-havers in the sociosexually violent U.S. landscape.

Primary Data

Lora DiCarlo Email Advertisements (Adverts)

Critical feminist methods and approaches have inspired me to formulate how to analyze my primary and secondary artifacts (Condit, 2004, Condit, 2019; de Hertogh, 2018; Enoch & Jack, 2011; Kroløkke, 2018; Mogashoa, 2014; Stone, 2019). In preparation, over the course of the pandemic, I harvested email adverts sent to me from the biomimetic sextech device brand Lori DiCarlo. In total, I collected 75 Lora DiCarlo email advertisements dated November 22nd, 2019 – August 7th, 2021. To clarify, I stopped collecting advertisements by the latter date because I knew that by that point, I had harvested a substantial amount, enabling me to observe the most salient themes depicted, and I planned to code all of them. Therefore, I needed enough adverts to represent a wide time range, while still remaining feasible to code, analyze, finish this

project, and then defend and revise it by BGSU graduate college deadlines during mid-March 2022. I received them directly to my university email account, after having signed up for their email notification subscription available for registration on their website (LoraDiCarlo.com).

I chose this brand because, although it is quite expensive (and, thus, potentially inaccessible to working class folks) it has made a notable name for itself as a brand. Their first claim to fame were the biomimetic blended orgasms of their device, the Osé ($300), generating $7.5 million in their first year of business. For the record, in the time between my initial interest in beginning and finalizing this project, other biomimetic sex tech devices have emerged at more affordable price points (like the recent TikTok popular portable sucking rose [$40]). The following is an analytic overview of these email advertisements, each representing a theme.

Primary Method

Following recent TikTok research, my method of analysis followed considerations of technological affordances (boyd, 2010; Davis, 2020). In other words, according to boyd (2010), "Analytically, the value of constructing social network sites as networked publics is to see the practices that unfold there as being informed by the affordances of networked publics and the resultant common dynamics" (p. 39). The point being that, although this does not wholly determine one's behavior, the configurations shape user engagement. And, thus, as boyd (2010) continued on in their passage to state, the "…architecture of a particular environment matters and the architecture of networked publics is shaped by their affordances" (p. 40).

For boyd (2010), networked publics are "publics that are restructured by networked technologies" (p. 39). The late-stage present-COVID-19 sexual U.S. landscape could be considered a networked public because as overviewed within chapter four, it is comprised of many of the digital and increasingly algorithmic limbs (websites, apps, streaming, social media

platforms, etc.) that have restructured the ways in which millennials and Gen Z sociosexually relate. In a way media ecologists surely appreciate, boyd (2010) then defined affordances as "ways in which technology structures…that shape how people engage with these environments" (p. 39). That is, in so many words, danah boyd said that the medium is the message of these publics, and that depending on what mediates them, they offer users services as well as disservices.

Additionally, by methodically following in the footsteps of feminist rhetorician Marchessault (2005), I have chosen to critically analyze adverts in order to dig deeper into neoliberal late-stage present-COVID-19 U.S. capitalist email advertisement (November 22nd, 2019 – August 7th, 2021) affordances. Contextually, as mentioned in chapter one, within my lifetime, (allegedly) feminist businesspeople have neoliberally co-opted depoliticized (Goldman et al., 1991) versions of commodified "empowerment" (Ferguson, 1990), trendy "makeover" culture (Jermyn, 2016), "lady boss" rhetoric (Cauterucci, 2018) filled *femvertising* (Windels et al., 2021).

With these neoliberal trends in mind, I suggest an amendment to the traditional media ecological perspective that "the medium is the message." As such, I argue that an interweaving of content is necessary to understand the socially mediated ways in which humans *as mediums* use certain types of language in digital spaces (like email ads and TikToks), instilling implicit biases. To demonstrate, I collected 75 total Lora DiCarlo email advertisements, saving them into a folder on my BGSU email account. From there, I copy and pasted the contents of each one, one by one, into a Microsoft Word file, naming them as the date (month, day, year) I received them.

Next, I created an Excel spreadsheet, organizing all the dates of the advertisements into the order that they were sent to me, and then numbered them for easier systematic analysis.

Then, I began coding these advertisements by organizing their details using the headers: file name, date received (month, day, year), file link (local), ad caption description (email subject line), explicitly used language, implications, visuals, "you" count, "I'm" "I" "my" "me" count, puns (y/n), and suggestive language (y/n). These categories evolved as I primarily coded all 75 of these adverts. As I began, I noticed a pattern where they referred to customers directly by using the noun "you" in a conversational fashion (a total of 368 times), as well as indirectly by providing buttons for subscribers to click that included the words "I" or "my." For example, a button that said, "I'm in!" directed people to buying a product on Lora DiCarlo's website priorly displayed. Or a header implicated customers by using "my," like in the phrase, "THAT'S MY BESTIE," referring to devices anthropomorphically, and using recent TikTok Generation Z slang. In other words, the brand persistently refers to their sex devices as if they are human beings which customers would and should be fond enough of to refer to as their human best friends.

Therefore, my research questions pertaining to this analysis section were, "What rhetorical themes occur within these advertisements for biomimetic sexual technologies marketed to vulva-havers in the late-stage present-COVID-19 neoliberal U.S. landscape?". For sake of time, space, and to maintain a feasible scope of this study, I cannot explain all 75 of the Lora DiCarlo advertisements that I did fully document and code. Instead, the following section showcases 10 of those adverts in depth, representing key themes that were each present most saliently within the ads sent during this time. Again, to clarify, I chose to in depth analyze only these top 10 due to that being the most feasible scope to conduct within this project and meet

deadlines. To be specific, after having completed coding all 75 email advertisements, I then determined thematic saliency by creating a word cloud to identify the most used explicit terms. Next, I proceeded to group them into a category list, depicting salient themes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Advertising Language Word Cloud, 12.28.21

In addition to this, I created a second word cloud, illustrating implications that I saw, exhibiting meanings behind the rhetoric used within these advertisements (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Advertising Implications Word Cloud 12.28.21

As such, the critical feminist analysis of primary data below demonstrates a non-exhaustive list of Lora DiCarlo brand rhetorics sent to customers as email advertisements between the period of November 22nd, 2019, and August 7th, 2021. To understand and consider the additional temporal nature and context of these artifacts as an utterance chain, I discuss each example advert in the chronological order that it arrived in my inbox.

Theoretically, my analysis is also guided by tenants of my critical feminist media ecological framework (a) identification, naming, and language play as reclamation, b) feminist epistemologies, c) institutional barriers, d) womanist/Black feminist thought, e) ecofeminism, and f) rage as empowerment) briefed in chapter one. For purposes of demonstrating saliency of the repeated and intersecting themes ([cis]woman owned, empowerment, COVID, sex education, the orgasm gap, health / wellness, gamification, humanlike, anatomical correctness, and machinelike), I chose to in-depth analyze only 10 advertisements that both a) met each category theme, and b) spanned the time period. To analyze each advert, I first overview explicit words that Lora DiCarlo used. Then, I move into the main aim of the section, unboxing wider implications of the late-stage present-COVID-19 neoliberal capitalist rhetorics employed.

Primary Analysis

Before I launch into the main component of this section, it is important I overview some characteristics about the visuals included in all 75 artifacts. A vast majority of the models depicted in Lora DiCarlo email advertisements appeared to be age 20 to 40, though a few disclosed being in their fifties or older (always White feminine folks). The vast majority of models included were White passing (51%). There were Black (29%) and Brown (11%) models, and others cast in light making them indistinguishably White-washed (9%). Many others were included in the adverts as body parts, holding products: White ones (84%), Black ones (8%), and

indistinguishable ones (6%). This is a product of colonial dehumanization of especially Black feminine folks (hooks, 2014), the historical racisms of photography (Mabry, 2014; Wevers, 2016), as well as colorism (Walker, 1983), texturism, and featurism (TheBlackStory.com, 2021).

Most of the models who had faces showing were feminine presenting (88%), but a few were masculine looking (8%) and/or relatively gender ambiguous (4%) and queer presenting folks. Many times, they had tattoos, wearing underwear and/or a cami tank top with no bra, displaying armpit and leg hair. Out of all 75 email adverts, more than 100 individual images included models holding one of the Lora DiCarlo sex tech devices. A great deal of the time, the models featured in these images, and/or moving gifs, were shown only as unidentifiable parts of human bodies (hips, thighs, groin, legs, hands, chest, etc.) next to Lora DiCarlo products.

Generally, the language the brand appeals to consumers by relying heavily on usage of sexy puns, visual humor, lots of sexually charged adjectives, and otherwise evocative or playful double entendre. Gender and sexuality themed events and holidays (International Women's Day, Prime Day), seasons (Summer), and/or months (Gay Pride Month, Orgasm Month, Anal August, etc.) were heavily leaned on to develop catchy slogans and "limited time" offers, linguistically framed as if customers would miss out on a once in a lifetime opportunity. Lastly, at the end of almost every single advertisement they had a display of products and listed prices.

[Cis]woman Owned. As one of the first advertisements that I coded, this first artifact represents a foundational theme of the overall brand: that Lora DiCarlo began as a [cis]woman owned business inspired by Lora Haddock DiCarlo's own orgasm. Its email subject stated, "Oh Yes We Did!" referring to the brand's prideful accomplishment, excitement, and success about having just won CES 2020. As discussed in previous sections, CE2 2020 is the event that put

Lora DiCarlo on the map in the tech industry world. From then on, this allowed them to generate

exposure, demonstrating themselves as Lora Haddock DiCarlo's [cis]woman owned business.

Figure 3

*Lora Haddock DiCarlo CES 2020 Highlights Video*

As becomes a persistent theme throughout proceeding advertisements, explicitly in this

advert, the brand states that its "mission" and "fearless" concerns involve "health," "wellness"

and sexual "destigmatization." Again, at the time of this email, the language they used was

cisnormative, described as Lora Haddock DiCarlo's brand, "herald[ing]" a "new era" in "female"

"pleasure," "contributing to global transformation," "inclusion" and "innovation." Since they

were new on the market scene, this email invoked opportunities for potential new customers to

engage with them in order to "help" people their "friends" who could "benefit" from "power" of

"pleasure" to "explore," by "shar[ing]" their email, alluding to the idea that this is what their company has to offer. They further cast this image with reviews (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

February 29, 2020 "Oh Yes We Did!"
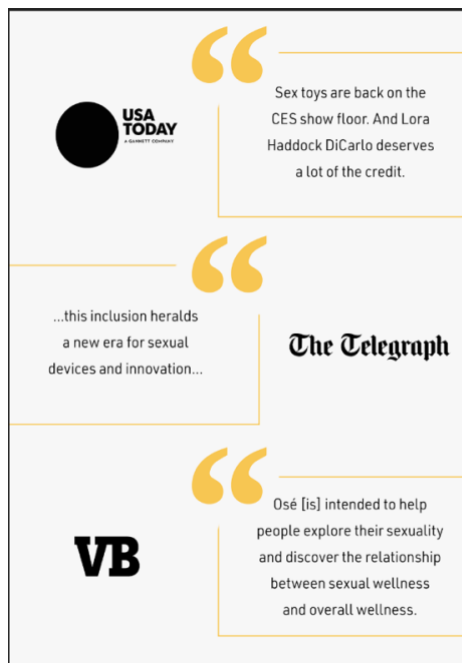
Moving into the implications behind the explicit language they used, from another angle, in respect to stigma and norms, the ways in which this biomimetic sex tech brand leveraged these rhetorics is groundbreaking. On one hand, their having won the CES award, for the first time ever, as a woman owned "sexual wellness" brand is phenomenal. Especially after the adversity they first faced (and have been transparent about pushing back about) by initially being barred from the show floor for obscenity. In this first advert, Lora DiCarlo expressed a progressive mission and enthusiasm for technologically empowering and prioritizing pleasure of those who have been politically and historically devalued in cisheteronormative sex relations.

On that same sentiment, the emergence of these ciswoman owned, and target marketed, products do not exist in a vacuum. The centering of ciswoman business owner, Lora Haddock

DiCarlo, in the included video (about how her orgasm sparked this company) is straight out of a "girl boss" neoliberal rhetoric playbook. As discussed in previous chapters, neoliberal diversity and inclusion rhetoric, on the surface, speaks to justice, equity, inclusion, and diversity. However, upon closer examination, below that surface also negotiates, intersects, and compounds late-stage neoliberal capitalist business logics (and those who ideologically subscribe to them - no matter what they look like), ultimately, prioritizing profit over people.

Empowerment. This second artifact was released immediately following the previous one, on March 5, 2020, and expanded upon the company's general femininity-based empowerment message about "break[ing]" "barriers" to "empower" "pleasure." Unlike the previous email, this one explicitly called out how "well behaved" "women" don't make "history" or "break barriers." It was also the first of many adverts from then on in this collection that centered around a date or month. In this case, the theme was Women's History Month.

Beginning to angle itself as a socially conscious brand dedicated to "honor[ing]," and "understand[ing]" "history," and fostering "liberation," "reflect[ion]," "dedication," and "devotion" of countless generation of women's lifelong homemaking and world-sustaining efforts. In this advert, Lora DiCarlo shared an article link, driving customers to their website, seamlessly interspersed in themes of "independence," "pleasure," "passion," "education," "inclusivity," and "empowerment" gained via buying and learning from them (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

March 5, 2020 "Break Barriers in Your Pleasure"

Much like contents of their first email advertisement analyzed, on one hand, what Lora DiCarlo advocates for is revolutionary and empowering. They build on a basis of reclaiming bodily autonomy, despite sociohistorically shamed and stifled (primarily) feminine pleasure (think: orgasm gap). The brand capitalizes on foregrounding silence breakers, socialized into gender roles, which breed submissiveness, docility, and quiet reproduction of the status quo. They utilize rhetorics reminiscent of transformational calls to action, which include appeals to liberation, freedom, ownership, and self-reflection, in order to be a part of something bigger.

On one hand, Lora DiCarlo's language-usage, diagnoses problems experienced by disenfranchised personal and political actors. On another implicatory side, the solutions they propose are individualized: a choice to be *sexual* versus being *sexualized*. This choice is

allegedly one click away, into their one-stop-shop. However, a question begging to be answered as we dissect more of these ads is: "Can human problems of systemic oppression be solved with individual claims to 'empowerment' through education and technologically based solutions?"

COVID-19. On April 15, 2020, roughly one month after COVID-19 broke world-wide, Lora DiCarlo sent out the third email advertisement I analyzed, with the subject line "Bored Inside? The Entertainment Has Arrived." As implied, their language used within framed lockdowns as a "bored[om]" and "isolate[ion]" problem, resolvable through "entertainment" of their sex devices. As briefly mentioned prior to this analysis section, this was the first email which also displayed how the brand anthropomorphizes their devices. One of their beta testers described their product "Onda" as a "friend" providing "relief" to get their "groove back" (see Figure 6).

For those who are not familiar, Lora DiCarlo's Onda device provides half of what their award-winning claim to fame the Osé does. The Osé won CES 2020 because it offered "dual-touch" blended orgasms by simultaneously stimulating the g-spot, with the come-hither motions of "talented" human "partner['s]" fingers, and "stimulation" of the "clitoris." Much like how the company created the Onda, by replicating one half of its original device (g-spot stimulation), they also created the Baci, selling their clitoral mouth portion of the Osé, separately. As additionally shown in Figure 6 below, the company also began offering a "complimentary" "live" "session[s]" with a "WellSx Coach," describing it as a "value of $45."

Figure 6

April 15, 2020 "Bored Inside? The Entertainment Has Arrived"

"In times like these, I'm glad to have **a friend like Onda.** I've felt so isolated, but I'm happy that I've had the ability to express my sensuality, what a great relief. Thanks Onda for helping me get my groove back."

-Beta Tester

BUY NOW

Each purchase of Onda comes with a complimentary live, one-on-one 25-minute session with a WellSx Coach. A value of $45.

Surely few would disagree that COVID-19 lockdowns threw a wrench into our lives. For millennials and Gen Z folks who have had access to shelter, and the socioeconomic privileges to be isolated inside of them since March 2020 (as discussed in the present-COVID-19 section of chapter two) has not been ideal, but, either way, by now has become the present-COVID-19 norm. Meaning, for those of us who are immunocompromised, have other health experiences which disqualify someone from receiving any of the COVID-19 vaccines, or parents who live with children under the age of five (who, as of writing this chapter, still do not have clearance to get vaccinated), in the U.S., lockdowns have been the norm for coming up to two whole years now.

But, keep in mind, at this point (a month into the pandemic) we still had no idea how long lockdowns might last. Whether that be through masturbation or with (traditionally, human) partners, as their brand's mission aims to combat, casual disclosures about sexuality and our everyday lives serve to destigmatize sexual expression as a normal part of being human.

However, their ad suggests a novel spin on this: that their microrobotic sex tech devices are capable of fulfilling customer's emotional and physical voids, quite literally and figuratively.

In other words, by signaling to the idea that all sexual activity is externally gratified by someone or something, Lora DiCarlo implies "anything a biological human (who in the context of this email advert being sent to customers, might contract COVID-19) can do, their sex devices can do – better." In this way, the language used within this brand's email advertising appealed emotionally to their "VIP list" (the label they used in this correspondence, and many from then on when referring to customers) who were then experiencing many intersecting, compounding, unprecedented, and endlessly uncertain crises. Thus, as remedy for these pandemic lulls, they recommended accessible and commodified alternatives. And even a human consultant, who is part sex educator, part customer service representative to assist in adapting to this new "late-stage present-COVID-19 U.S. capitalist sex with anthropomorphic microrobot devices" normal.

Sex Education. This fourth email advert was received on June 11, 2020, titled simply, **"**The S€x Education You Never Received." The brand likely replaced the letter "e" in "sex" with the Euro symbol for two reasons: 1) because medium-wise the company is well aware that certain words when included in email subject lines will flag a message as "spam." And, if so, the message is less likely to reach a customer's inbox, rather than their junk folder, and 2) it further sends the message that sex equals money. Here Lora DiCarlo casts the nationwide lack of comprehensive sex education as a problem they allegedly remedy as a business. Following the themes of "health" and "wellness" in this artifact, they began explicitly referred to themselves within as a "resource" administering "how to['s]" for "masturbation" and "course[s]" for "people" with "vulvas" regarding "self-pleasure." Additionally, they addressed the experience of

how "intimidating" "women" and "femmes" might be by sex after lifetimes of being "told" their

sexualities are "shameful" (to once again, usher customers to the blog on their website).

Before this foreseeable segue to their website, they have a second article about

generalized and COVID-19 related anxieties (see Figure 8). The ad ended with a third article,

linking directly to their website, with a clickbait title about how "masturbation" "benefits" not

only "vaginal health," but also "self-image" "mood" "immunity" "confidence" and "self-

pleasure." These rhetorics frame Lora DiCarlo as a resource for present-COVID-19 life (see

Figures 7 and 8).

Figure 7

June 11, 2020 "The Sɛx Education You Never Received." Masturbation 101

Figure 8

June 11, 2020 "The S€x Education You Never Received." COVID Mental Health
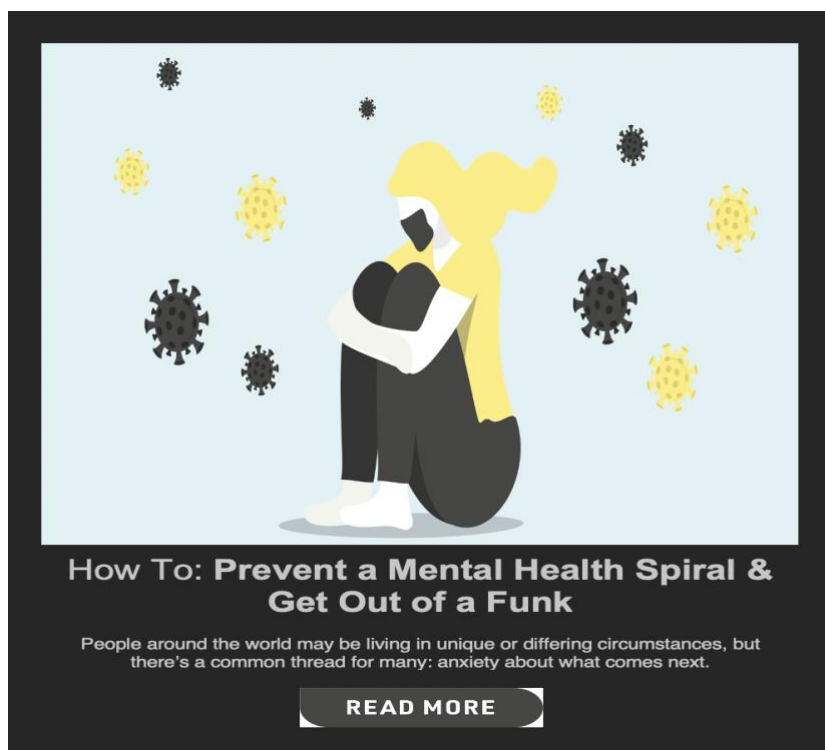
As extensively discussed in chapter three, pre-COVID abstinence-only sex education predominated traditional U.S. formal education spaces, like in-person classrooms, taught, at best, insufficient, and at worst fear tactic and shame ridden inaccuracies about sex. Although comprehensive sex education has existed for several years, proving to be effective in holistically teaching the intricacies of concepts like consent, gender, sex, anatomy, and attractions (for religious-oriented reasons), federal funding of these programs has since been pigeonholed to various non-formally approved subsects of the internet (Pornhub) and other third-party apps.

Although the U.S. is not the only nation that Lora DiCarlo markets biomimetics to, this is precisely the kind of society that the company claims here to fill the void of in this sex ed themed advert. Once again painting themselves as a one-stop-shop resource, the sex device brand does do an objectively more comprehensive job of using anatomically correct verbiage (clitoris, g-

spot, p-spot, perineum, etc.) than abstinence-only sex education curricula. I flesh this out more fully in a following thematic analysis of another artifact, since *anatomical correctness* is another category. For now, consider what it says about the U.S. if for the first time, amid an ongoing pandemic, a for-profit company is stepping in to appropriately educate citizens about basic knowledge of humanness, like vulva anatomy, mental health, and experiencing pleasure?

The Orgasm Gap. Six months into the COVID pandemic, on August 14, 2020, Lora DiCarlo sent our fifth united of analysis called "Time for a mental health break. 3 ways you can care for your total well-being." In this artifact, they advised customers on three different topics (ADHD, telehealth counseling, and the orgasm gap), directing them with links that, as usual, sent them to the blog on their own website. As one could guess, this artifact, once again, served as an opportunity for the company to solidify itself as a "wellness" "sexual health" "resource." By leveraging this rhetoric, Lora DiCarlo again cast itself as a sex one-stop-shop (see Figure 9).

Figure 9

August 14, 2020 "Time for a Mental Health Break..."

As a neurodivergent researcher, what made this email stick out to me was their

mentioning of "ADHD" and the "disparity" in "diagnosis," or (Dx), among "women" and

"AFAB" [assigned female at birth] "people." Linguistically, the company's use of the

abbreviation "AFAB" within this section marked a more inclusive shift in their language choices

than previous references to more binary, and objectifying, concepts like "females." Secondly,

and as noted in chapter three, in recent years, research on neurodivergencies (like ADHD, ASD,

etc.) has exploded. This is, in part, due to neurodivergent folks congregating in digital spaces,

discussing and commiserating with another about failures of a universalized young White cishet

male Dx criteria. By including this, Lora DiCarlo highlighted sexisms and racisms naturalized in

medicine. In the following large secondary analysis of TikTok discourses, I explore this idea

more fully.

Next, in this same artifact, the company shared another link to their website regarding "telehealth," stating that it "offers" "alternatives" that are more accessible in "any field of medicine or study" including, of course, their mainstays of "sexual health" and "wellness." Although it is helpful and considerate for the company to fill education gaps, the fact every single article they link to leads directly to their own website implicates their profit motives. Especially within this context with an increase of commodified wellness products and services.

Lastly, in this advert, they outlined various issues related to "female orgasmic disorder," and/or the "struggle" to "achieve" "orgasms," as well as how this differs from "the orgasm gap." As discussed in chapter three, "the orgasm gap" is a phenomenon in cisheterosexual relationships linked to Irigaray's phallogocentrism throughout history and a devaluation of female pleasure. There are numerous theories as to why the orgasm gap exists, which over the course of this project I have personally tied back to U.S. colonialism, religious fundamentalist purity cultures, Irigaray's work, and recent research within the relational needs and satisfaction segment of chapter three, comparing mixed reviews as to why ciswomen fake orgasms. Either way, for obvious reasons, this biomimetic device company (whose main consumer base are vulva-havers) has a vested interest in framing orgasms as the goal of any sexual experience, regardless of whether that is during masturbation or sex with partners. I return to this idea in the next section on TikTok discourses, when investigating being *sexual* versus being *sexualized*.

Health / Wellness. Shifting gears into 2021, Lora DiCarlo sent out our sixth advert called "New Year, New Wisdom" on January 7, 2021. Thematically, and on brand, as ever, they associated the new year with "health" "wellness," while reminding their subscribers that they are a "resource." This time the company advised readers to "ignore" post- "holiday weight loss BS,"

as well as "tips" on "stay[ing] healthy" and "protected" this "flu season," ending with a third

piece about how "SAD" is "more than just the winter blues" and "what to do" about it.

Figure 10

January 7, 2021 "New Year, New Wisdom"
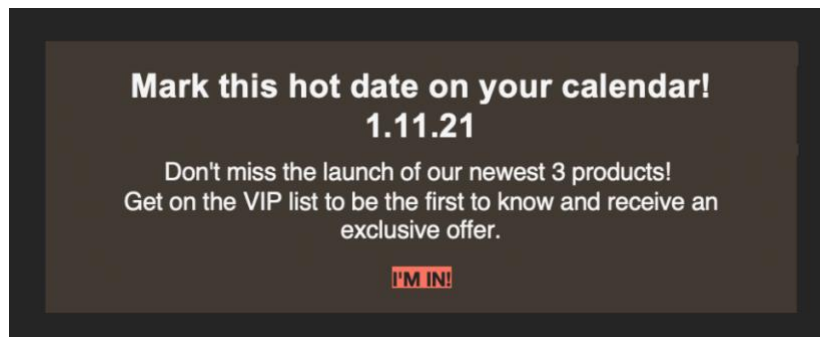
Per usual, the recommendations within this email advertisement, full of intellectually

arousing, identity growing, and body positive essays from their own website's blog, were trailed

by a showcase of their biomimetic sex tech devices currently for sale. Once again here, they

referred to their products anthropomorphically. This time to generate anticipation about a later

moment they would launch three new devices, explicitly describing this as a "hot date." As they

have been known to do, they also referred to their email subscribers who receive "exclusive"

"offer[s]" as the "VIP list." Lastly, as they did in roughly a third of adverts, they fitted the page

with a button for customers to click that says, "I'M IN!" inviting them to engage (see Figure 10).

At this point in coding, the repeated patterns and tactics that this brand uses had become clear.

Gamification. Our seventh salient theme within the 75 total Lora DiCarlo email

advertisements coded involved *gamification* executed through product giveaways and/or

sexually provocative social media competitions. Nick Pelling (2002) coined the intentionally

ugly term *gamification,* giving a name to commercial electronic interfaces that apply game-like

design features to optimize transactions (Pelling, 2011). For example, on February 10, 2021,

Lora DiCarlo sent out of its many Valentines' Day themed adverts. This time they used the discount and holiday heavy themed subject "Save 15% On Gift Cards. The Perfect V Day Gift."

Within, they made emotional appeals to generosity, associating it with a longstanding commodification of Western love. Explicitly, one way they did this by reminding their "VIP list" that they sold "gift cards," portraying them as a "sexier" option, a "one-size-fits-all" for a "lover" or "friend." This relates to the brand's previous usage of the rhetorical trope promoting external gratification, reifying materialism as proof of love. Secondly, the giveaway announced within was touted to have an "$1800 value." In the land of the free, citizens are socialized into hyper-individualism, and love nothing more than a "chance" to receive something for nothing. But in our algorithmic age, all gamified actions are simultaneously datafied, behind the scenes.

Human Likeness. The ever-present, yet taken for granted, datafication of our personal and public lives relates to the next theme found throughout all 75 of Lora DiCarlo's email advertisements: that their biomimetic sex tech devices are humanlike. As overviewed in chapter four, considering the designated purpose of biomimetics is an attempt to replicate human touch and technique, this should come as no surprise. One example of how they send a message that their products are humanlike was evidenced within an ad they distributed to their "VIP list" of subscribers, on April 16, 2021, called, **"**Double the pleasure, double the fun 🔍."

As shown in this email subject line, the brand is no stranger to overusing "punny" and suggestive language and emojis to appeal to their target audiences. Often when doing this they rhetorically blurred the lines between financial and sexual implications. For example, in the subject line they play off the U.S. idea that more is better for quantity and quality. Much like how love is intertwined with money, there is a normalized belief that the same goes for sex.

Figure 11

April 16, 2021 "Double the Pleasure, Double the Fun"

Lora DiCarlo inflames these late-stage present-COVID-19 neoliberal norms regarding attributed values and social relations by using anthropomorphic and evocative descriptors. For example, in this artifact they say they "found" customer's "new" "best friends," when referring to their biomimetic sex tech devices (see Figure 11). They illustrate the eerily humanlike qualities of these products by using words to describe how "impressive[ly]" these "toys" "stimulate" "pleasure points" at the "same time" "enhance[ing]" "sexual experience[s]" and "offering" "endless" "exploration" and "blended" orgasms. Notably, on these occasions they erotically detail how their devices "G-spot massager," and "clitoral mouth" were "designed" to "mimic" the "best" "kinds" of "human touch" and "stimulate pleasure points" (see Figure 12).

Figure 12

Double the Pleasure, Double the Fun" Osé 2
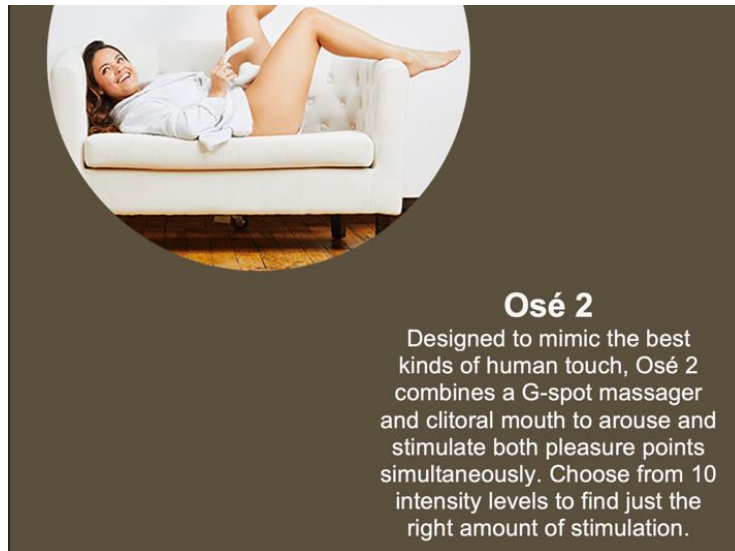
On one hand, the rhetoric used by Lora DiCarlo centers its (presumably, majority) vulva-having customers. The language implies that, despite having been socialized into lifetimes of cisheterosexist norms, sexual shame, and other mediated forms of dehumanizing and objectifying sexualizations linked to the orgasm gap, they are capable of being *sexual* subjects. The brand deliberately bridges tropes of material external gratification with sexual satisfaction, promising biomimetic technological fulfillment once relegated to human-human experiences.

Figure 13

"Double the Pleasure, Double the Fun" Tilt
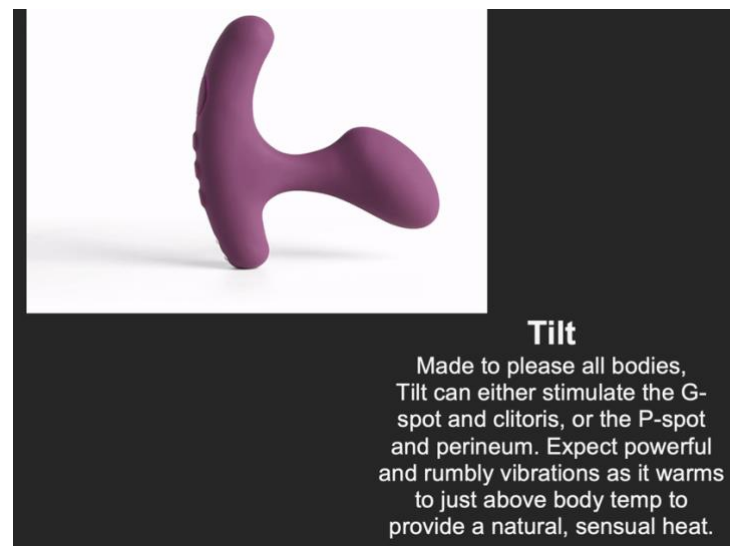
As shown, many of their adverts sensationalize biomimetic sex devices as a replication and simulation of humanness (body temp, technique, etc.), and more, as technoscientific upgrades, which enable and prioritize bodily autonomy and pleasure, enhancing and intensifying orgasms. Despite a cisnormative track-record, by the time that this email was sent, Lora DiCarlo had shifted into using more conscious and inclusive language. Instead, they had begun adopting phrases, like how "Tilt" was "made" to "please" "all bodies" (see Figure 13).

Anatomical Correctness. Since their market debut Lora DiCarlo angled themselves as being a company dedicated to combating socially produced yet naturalized sexual shame and stigma. On May 21, 2021, they shared this ninth email artifact "Hurry! Save $50 on Osé 2 ♡." Besides hosting their own blog on their website, producing sex education and wider health and wellness content, another way they claim to destigmatize sexuality is through what I have chosen to call *anatomical correctness*, or the repeated use of correct, yet stigmatized, terms. For example, in this advertisement they referred to the "clitoris" and "G-spot" (see Figure 14).

Figure 14

May 21, 2021 "Hurry! Save $50 on Osé 2"
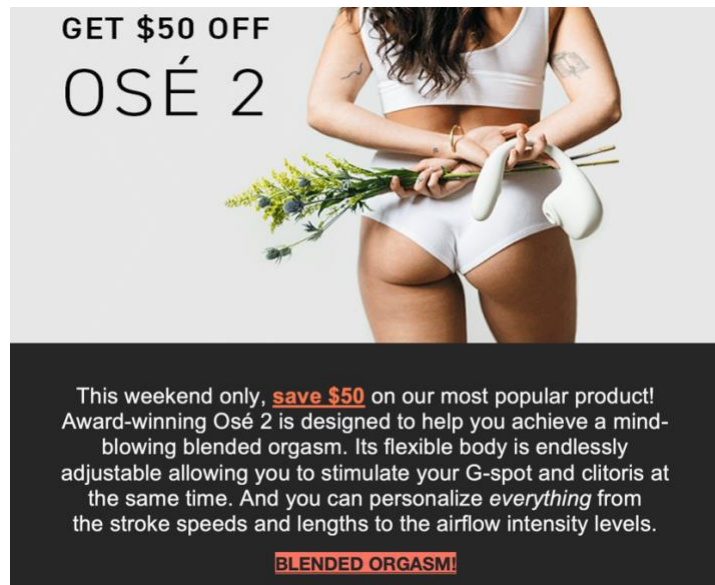
In other words, by playing off the recently controversial buzzword of political correctness, *anatomical correctness* is a means of praxis Lora DiCarlo has employed throughout their collection of biomimetic sex tech advertisements to sexually destigmatize and balance out the sociohistorical erasure of the vulva. This practice is needed because of the linguistic erasure of anatomically correct words about cisfemale anatomy like "vulva" and "clitoris" over more phallic adjacent words like "vagina." The term is also applicable to discuss any sexually stigmatized anatomical part of a human body, regardless of identity (like U-spot, P-spot, etc.).

Machine Likeness. Complementary to themes identified in the category illuminating how these biomimetic technologies are described with rhetorics of humanness, I close this primary analysis Lora DiCarlo sex tech advertisements marketed to vulva-havers by unpacking one final tenth artifact from July 29, 2021, **"**Get up to $40 off these besties ♡." From its fluttering heart emoji used in the subject to Gen Z slang anthropomorphism, this ad is uncanny. The rhetorics use to emphasize and inquire about consumer preferences for types of haptics:

"stroking," "rumbly," "vibrations," "external," "sucking," "rhythmic," "thrumming" all sound more akin to language you might find inside the owner's manual of a car than a human body (see Figure 15).

Figure 15

July 29, 2021 "Get Up to $40 Off These Besties"
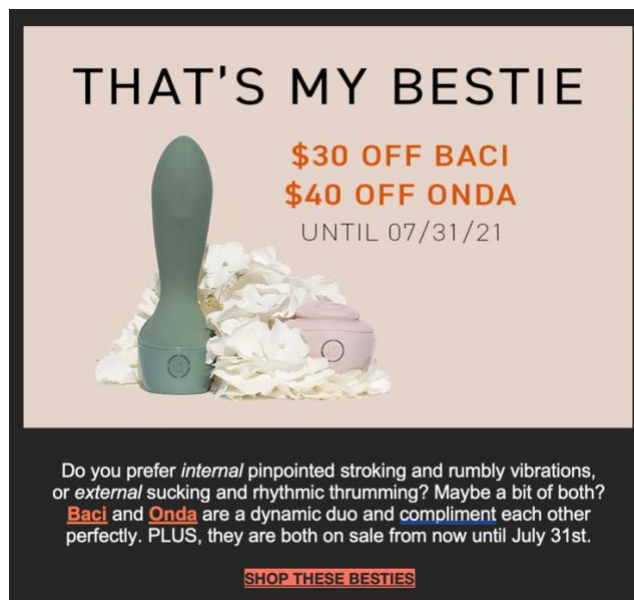
Rhetorically, the [cis] woman-owned Lora DiCarlo brand has taken the old, usually masculinized trope of an automobile being man's best friend (think: McLuhan and Sloop [2009] "People Shopping") extending this rhetoric into the feminine domain by anthropomorphizing their products as a customer's "bestie." A car discourse such as this has long been represented in radio shows like NPR's (1977-2012) "Car Talk" and/or TV shows like "Top Gear," (2002) and "Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee" (2012). And much like a car, their products pricing is out of reach for many, besides those of a certain socioeconomic status and/or access to credit cards. One might ask who is in the sociosexual driver seat come vast normalization of these products.

The mechanical language did not end there and has been evidenced throughout the full collection of these ads, becoming theoretically and practically interchangeable. These are

bolstered by financially and sexually charged terms, rationalizing enhanced blended orgasms: "maximal" "pleasure," "mimic[ing]" "sensation[s]" of a "talented mouth." Imaginatively, the clitoral mouth or "come-hither" "motion" "provide[d]" by these devices could belong to *anyone* the customer desires. Or, profitably, in Lora DiCarlo's favor, *any* (anthropomorphized) *things*.

To be clear, my point here is not that sex with anyone or thing is morally wrong. But that the rhetorics used in these advertisements, as they humanize innovative biomimetic sex tech, they simultaneously mechanize an objectification of humans. Linguistically, they remove the human from the sexual equation – entirely - centering capabilities of a novel microrobot. And (when not on sale), besides the upfront $300 to buy an Osé or Osé 2, I wonder, at what costs?

This is all to say that, as argued since chapter one of this project, these are ironically the same basic mediums (mainly the English phonetic language), justifications, and logics that grounded U.S. colonialism: rhetorics of rationality and innovation. As demonstrated throughout preceding chapters, and documented in this primary analysis, these ideological foundations have been built upon into all proceeding forms of U.S. capitalism, bring us to the current late-stage present-COVID-19 neoliberalism. Incrementally, these changes oriented readers towards seeing themselves as less as biological humans, and more like mechanical beings. Now, I argue this has been pushed to its extreme, and a McLuhan reversal is occurring: the humanization of objects. Next, I briefly contextualize these findings within present-COVID-19 TikTok discourses.

Secondary Data

Present-COVID-19 TikTok Videos (TikToks)

Thinking back to discussed principles of advertising, if I am to gain a near comprehensive understanding of the advertising rhetoric which surrounds these phenomena, I must first explore the unique cultural context, and resulting discourses, which are being

circulated by target consumers and users of biomimetic sex devices marketed to vulva-havers.

Newsom, Lengel, and Cassara (2011) constructed a framework that illuminates, "how the flow of

information through digital and social media can be negotiated at numerous stages by various

agents," demonstrating how, "local knowledge, or what is assumed to be such, once entered into

this process, becomes open to constant manipulation and bias" (p. 1308). Due to these receptive

complexities, the researchers argued it is necessary to interrogate perceived impact of

information on digital and social media, as well as the way it is understood in the distinct

sociopolitical and cultural landscape it exists within (Newsom, Lengel, & Cassara, 2011).

Thinking back to discussions of pre- and present-COVID-19 technological usage within

chapter four, and if what the above advertising scholars have said is true, studying what cultural

themes TikTokers are resonating with on TikTok about present-COVID-19 sexuality is a rich

source of information. For these reasons, throughout the pandemic, I have begun gathering

TikTok videos related to the topic of femme sexual experiences with cismen and personal use of

sextech. For sake of time and space constraints, I have identified 10 videos that serve as

composites of relevant discourse themes which most saliently contextualize the adverts.

Secondary Method

Curious about the connections to neoliberal commodification rhetorics found in the

primary analysis, this secondary analysis explicates discourse conflicts that have arisen on

TikTok over the course of the pandemic. As told in chapter one, if Worthington's (2015)

findings regarding increasingly complex and unilateral digital landscapes are true, feminist

progress in the anonymous (and sometimes nonymous) faces of patriarchal ideologies online

hold promise.

To explore this, I first collected 431 TikTok videos, saving them directly onto my iPhone photo/video library. From there, I moved each video, one by one, into an iCloud folder, naming them based on the general content addressed inside. I chose to save each video because each of them spoke to a topic by and/or about feminine folks, and/or people with vulvas, regarding the current sociosexually violent present-COVID-19 landscape nationally, and often times, globally.

As discussed in chapter four, like many social media apps today, TikTok disperses content to users through an algorithm. According to Smith (2021), the app is, "2021's central vehicle for youth culture and online culture generally," (para. 1) and "…there are four main goals for TikTok's algorithm….'user value,' 'long-term user value,' 'creator value,' and 'platform value'…drawn from a frank and revealing document for company employees" (para. 1). This document Smith refers to here is aptly called "TikTok Algo 101," detailing how this recommendation system accounts for time a user spends watching each video, total likes, comments, and other information like the sound used, hashtags, and caption text becoming, "astonishingly good at revealing people's desires even to themselves" (Smith, 2021, para. 5).

With the algorithm now better understood, before getting into *how* I methodically analyze these videos, I must explain *why* I made these selections of videos to analyze. As disclosed above the TikTok algorithm provided me content that, through its calculations, appeals to me. To operationally demonstrate the resonance of the 431 videos I collected, beyond just myself, I manually harvested metadata, and secondarily in-depth analyzed 10 of these videos that both 1) have gone viral, and 2) represent each of the 10 key discourses, receiving the highest "plays" to "likes" ratio of the 431 total videos I coded. I did this because it is one thing for a video to go "viral," receiving over 1 million plays on TikTok (since virality can mean an enormous positive [supportive] or negative [disapproving] response, that is often indeterminable without closer

inspection of hundreds and/or thousands of comments and shares), but another, more reliable, thing for a TikTok to additionally receive significant "likes."

By conducting the primary analysis above, I identified themes of [cis]women ownership, empowerment, COVID-19, sex education, the orgasm gap, health / wellness, gamification, biomimetics as humanlike, anatomical correctness, and human biology as machinelike. In doing so, ultimately, I argue this indicates a McLuhan reversal, in which we are now seeing the humanization of objects via digital/algorithmic platforms, sold as a substitution for human connection, leading to a massive shift in socio-sexual relations in the developed nation context (Sigusch, 2004; Levy, 2007; Keselj, 2020; McArthur & Twist, 2017; Sharma, 2017; Singh, 2020), and specifically, contemporary late-stage neoliberal capitalist U.S. society. To contextualize these themes further, the following section is a secondary in-depth analysis of 431 TikTok videos, from which I highlight 10 present-COVID-19 sociosexually groundbreaking U.S. discourses.

As discussed in chapter four, TikTok is not exactly a new app. However, as overviewed above, the explosion of users and influx of age groups and specialists has bolstered research. A project of this magnitude, conducted manually, and from a feminist perspective, is rather novel.

Much like my primary data set, I began coding of these hundreds of TikToks in an Excel spreadsheet, numbering all 431 of the video files and deciding upon the headers: my file name, link, user, race, gender, video length, plays, likes, comments, shares, date posted, source description, date input, and keywords. From there, using each saved TikTok file as reference, I individually searched for the username listed as a moving watermark on each video. If the video didn't appear in a top search, I would either: 1) seek out visual characteristics (dress, hairstyle,

makeup of the user), scrolling through their page to find the original, and/or 2) would watch a bit of the saved file, to then search for estimated keywords based on the topic discussed within.

Out of the total 431 videos initially harvested, only 3 duplicates were identified. Additionally, I could not find 93 of these videos on the site/app, either due to a user's having deleted their account, their account having been banned, it being a deleted post, a banned post, or it being an untraceably altered username. With that said, every video was still coded, since (despite it being unreachable on the site) I saved each file separately, retaining its content. What was lost, on occasion, is the ability to consider metadata categories, collected for all other videos in the app, like the: link, plays, like, comments, shares, date posted, and source description. Thus, this thematic analysis of secondary data is a culmination of 428 total TikToks.

Once again, after coding, I created a word cloud, to determine saliency (see Figure 16).

Figure 16

TikTok Word Cloud 12.23.21

From here, I pulled the word list that corresponded to the total amount of repeated words and created a categories list of discourses that were most salient throughout all the TikTok videos. As

discussed above, to determine which videos to highlight in my analysis, I referred to the metadata I pulled manually from the app. Consulting my list of keywords, I found which viral TikToks mentioned each discourse, identifying the one with the highest "plays" to "likes" ratio. Overall, there were a total of 101 viral TikToks amidst the total 431 that were originally coded, which again means that a fourth of the total videos coded had, at minimum, one million views. For good measure, I tabulated a list of top liked TikToks published between March 11th, 2020, and February 23rd, 2021, to determine an average "play" to "likes" ratio of random highly liked videos on the app. By doing this, I found that the percentage for eight out of 10 of them fell below 20%. If the source of these TikToks is correct, my findings are significant (Duribe, 2021).

Secondary Analysis

It bears reminding that before proceeding, the two questions guiding this secondary discourse analysis, which contextualizes my primary artifacts of Lora DiCarlo biomimetic sex tech advertisements, are: "How have biomimetic sexual technologies marketed to vulva-havers effected how their sexual experiences are created and maintained in the sociosexual U.S. landscape?" and "How are biomimetic sex tech changing vulva-havers sexual sense-making, experiences, and relations within the sexually violent late-stage capitalist present-COVID-19 U.S. landscape?" After this final segment, in the next (and final) chapter, these inquiries will be revisited in greater depth, linking back to critical sociosexual ecologies of preceding chapters.

Objectification. To begin, I identified 58 videos about dehumanization, objectification, and being sexualized. The user with the top viral video with the highest "play" to "like" percentage in this category was @ethan_ethanol_ for their TikTok on 7.22.21 with 1.8M "play," 676.1K "likes," and thus, an estimated approval rating of 37% (see Figure 17 below).

Figure 17

TikTok @ethan_ethanol, 7-22
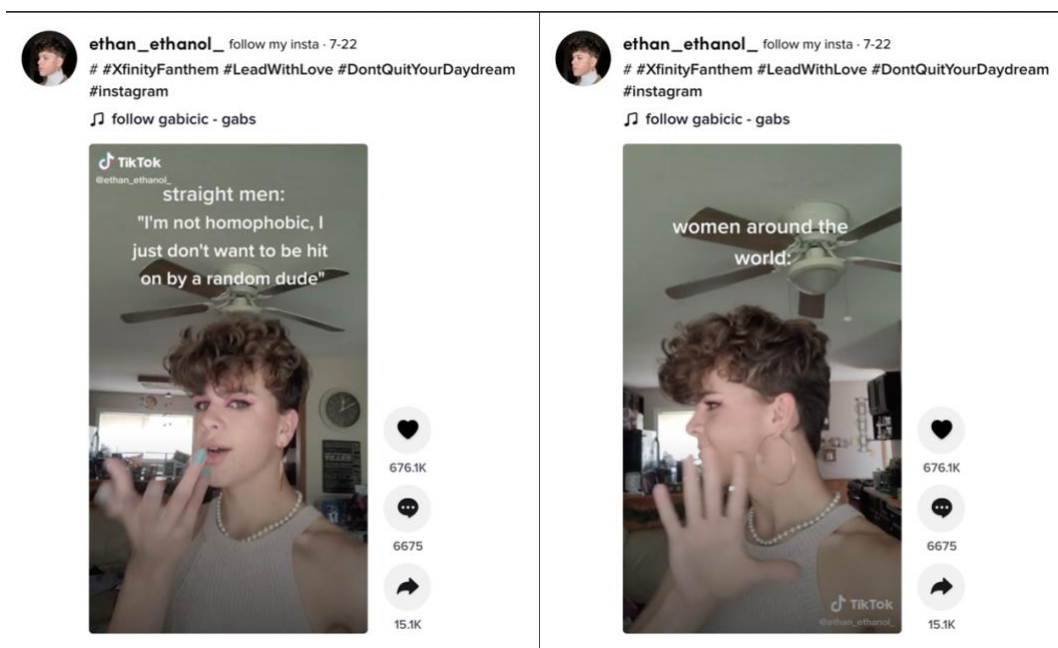
This user's video was a parodical conversation replaying real discussions with straight cishet men and how they fear being treated the way that femmes are by other straight cishet men. It frankly touches upon predatory behavior, sexual harassment, and other forms of normalized sexism, cat-calling, and sexual objectification that occurs in both physical and digital spaces. Frequently within this section there were ties between objectification and commodification. More specifically, a great deal of content about the infantilization of adult ciswomen's bodies.

      Sexual Violences. Secondly, I noted a total of 45 videos about forms of sexual violence (harassment, assault, coercion, etc.). The user with the top viral video and highest "play" to "like" ratio in this category was @hoshimi0.0 for their post on 7.13.21 with a "play" count of 2.4M, "likes" of 940.9K, and thus, an estimated approval rating of 39% (see Figure 18).

Figure 18

TikTok @hosimi0.0, 7-13
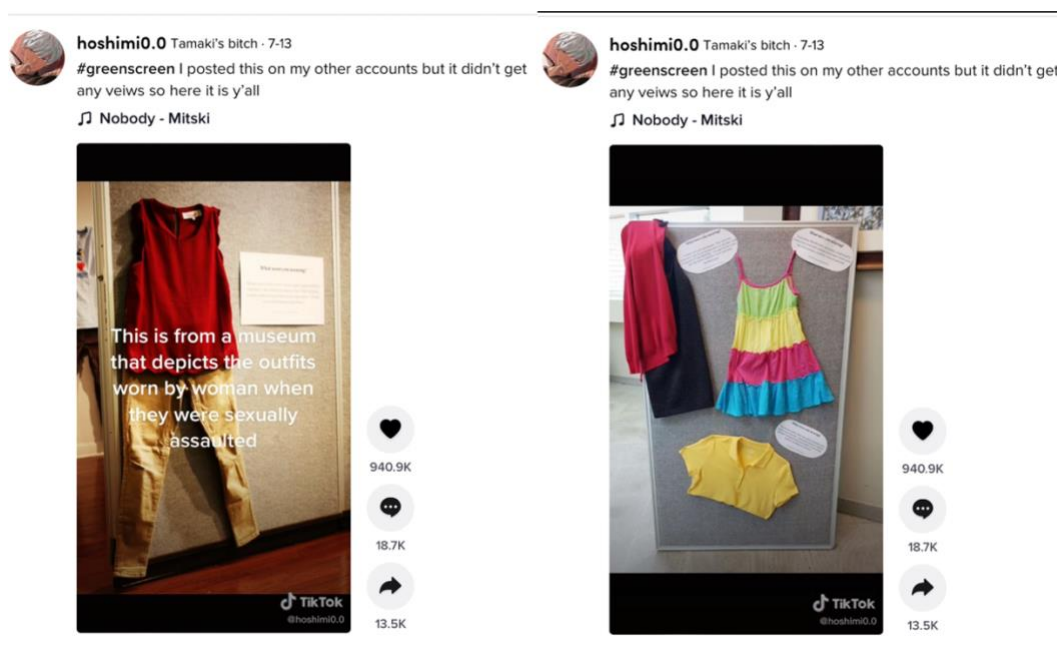
This TikToker highlighted the normality of sexual violences experienced at any age, no matter

what someone was wearing, by presenting a display of museum images from an exhibit depicting

outfits worn by women when they were sexually assaulted. The video's resonance makes sense

in the post-#metoo present-COVID-19 era, considering the rampant rates of sexual violence.

Beyond this, there are creators on the app who publish their experiences in efforts to reassert the

placement of shame / blame upon victims, despite a lack of U.S. criminalization.

      Orgasms /Pleasure. In total, I also identified 45 videos about orgasms and pleasure-

based versus performance-based sex. The user with the top viral video and the highest "play" to

"like" ratio in this category was @tiddygoals for their video posted 6.21.21 with a "play" count

of 1.5M, 356K "likes," and an estimated approval rating of 24% (see Figure 19).

Figure 19

TikTok @tiddygoals, 6-21
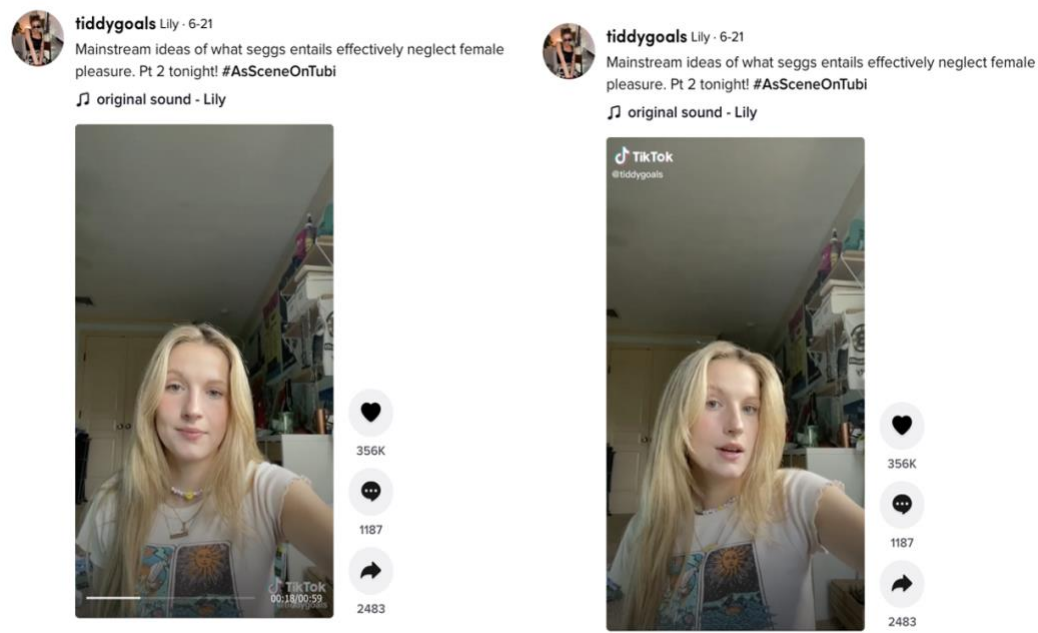
This user's video transparently overviewed rather dense concepts of patriarchal socialization like heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and phallogocentrism. They critiqued the naturalized way in which sex has been defined as intercourse and inquired about the orgasm gap. They connected it to pornographic media depictions, and a lack of comprehensive sex ed, which has created unwritten social rules that neglect and devalue feminine voices, ideas, and bodies. Some videos in this category were sex educators critiquing the norm of performance-based sex. In other words, forms of sex that embrace the experience, rather than pedestaling orgasms as the goal.

Shift. Concurrently, I have classified 39 videos that referenced a type of shift in feminine standards within sociosexual relations (generational, financial, identity standards, personal boundaries, etc.). The user with the top viral video and the highest "play" to "like" ratio in this category was @scorpiolovergirl, for their TikTok posted on 7.12.21. This TikTok had a "play" count of 1.1M, 251.6K "likes," and an estimated approval rating of 23% (see Figure 20).

Figure 20

TikTok @scorpioloveriglr, 7-12

This content creator like many of the other videos I have watched over the pandemic, conveyed

skepticism about the ability to be in a stable relationship with millennial and/or Gen Z cishet men

socialized into a toxic form masculinity, normalized in the sociosexually violent landscape.

Within the roughly forty videos in this category, feminine people are commiserating about the

low bar for cishet men, their weaponized incompetence, bare minimum effort, and red flags.

Self-Realizations. On the flipside of those complaints, I accounted for 32 videos about

present-COVID-19 self-realizations [queerness, neurodivergence, single by choice, childfree by

choice, self-love, growth, divorce]. The user with the top viral video that had the highest "play"

to "like" ratio in this category was @theirongiantess, for their TikTok posted on 7.28.21, with a

"play" count of 1.1M, "likes" of 247K, and an estimated rating of 22% (see Figure 21).

Figure 21

TikTok @theirongiantess, 7-28
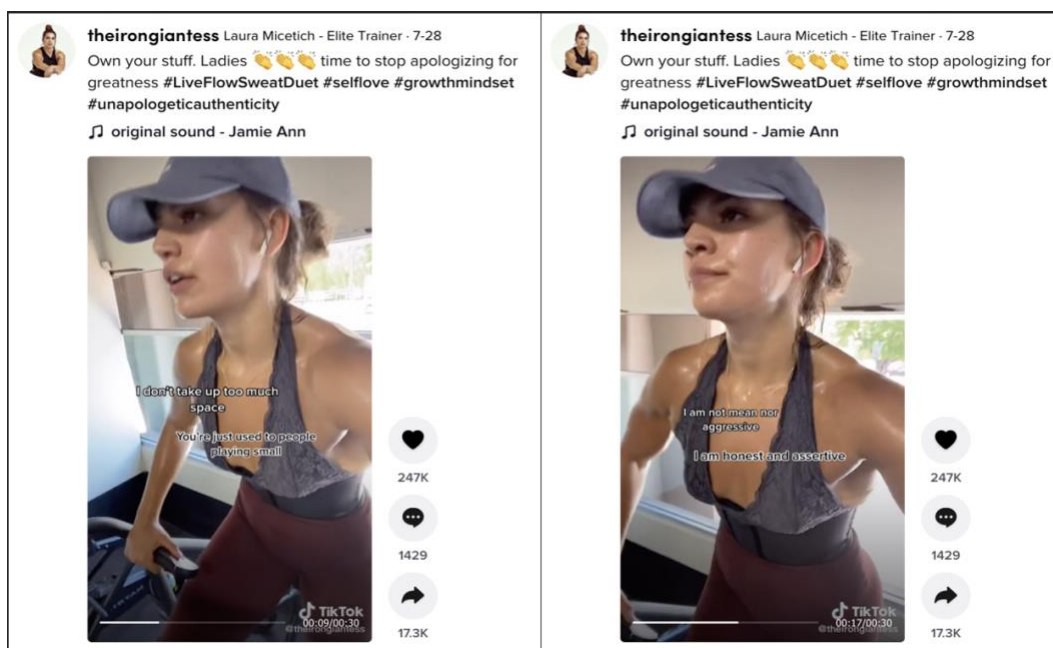
While self-caring on an exercise machine, this user disclosed self-realizations about themselves and others they made over the course of the pandemic. Due to traditional gender roles that have normalized feminine folks shrinking themselves, they unapologetically advised making authentic distinctions between being intimidating / intimidated, usage of space, expression, and comfort. In this collection there were numerous present-COVID-19 accounts of queerness, neurodivergences like (ASD and ADHD), as well as recent romantic and friendship falling outs. Users from the last category often referenced some form of internalized misogynistic norms.

Toxic Masculinity. Relatedly, I identified 28 videos about expressions of toxic masculinity (emotional immaturity, male gaze, prioritizing validation, relational cheating, and other predatory behaviors like pedophilia). The TikTok that was most viral with the highest "play" to "like" ratio in this category was @kierabreaugh for a stitch on 6.22.21. The video was "play"ed 2M times, had 669K "likes" and an approval rating of 33% (see Figure 22).

Figure 22

TikTok @kierabreaugh, 6-22
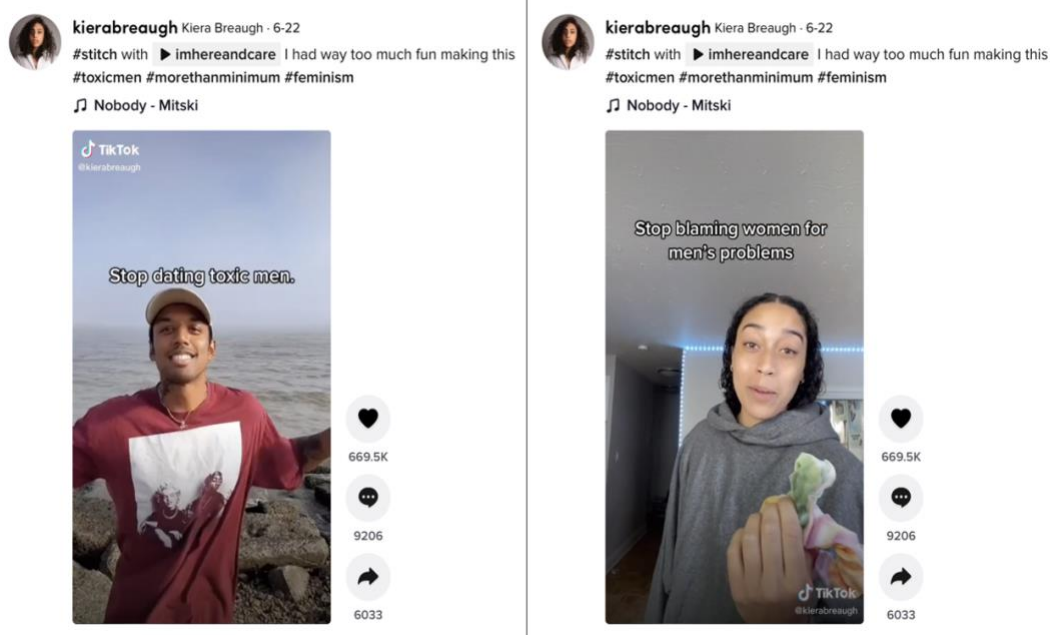
A "stitch" on TikTok is another type of video users can make where they respond to another user's content. If stitches are on, allowing people to do this, the responder chooses a part of the original video to remain, and then follows up with their commentary. In this user's stitch to the previous about dating toxic men, @kierabreaugh mockingly corrected @imhereandcare for mansplaining, gaslighting, and blaming femmes for cishet men's abusive behaviors. In this category, there were other stitches I collected in response to the original, calling it problematic. More broadly, there were people from many different walks of life speaking out about toxicity.

Sex Education. One of the reasons people mistake abuse for normal social relations is the rampant lack of comprehensive sex education in the U.S. And I found 29 videos on this topic (consent, ambiguity, confusion, ignorance, sex shame, abstinence-only and comprehensive sex educations) in total. By my calculations, the user who had the top viral video and highest "play"

to "like" ratio about this was @unclebruiser for a TikTok posted on 5.23.21. It had a "play"

count of 2.2M, likes of 687.7K, and an estimated approval rating of 31% (see Figure 23).

Figure 23

TikTok @unclebruiser, 5-23
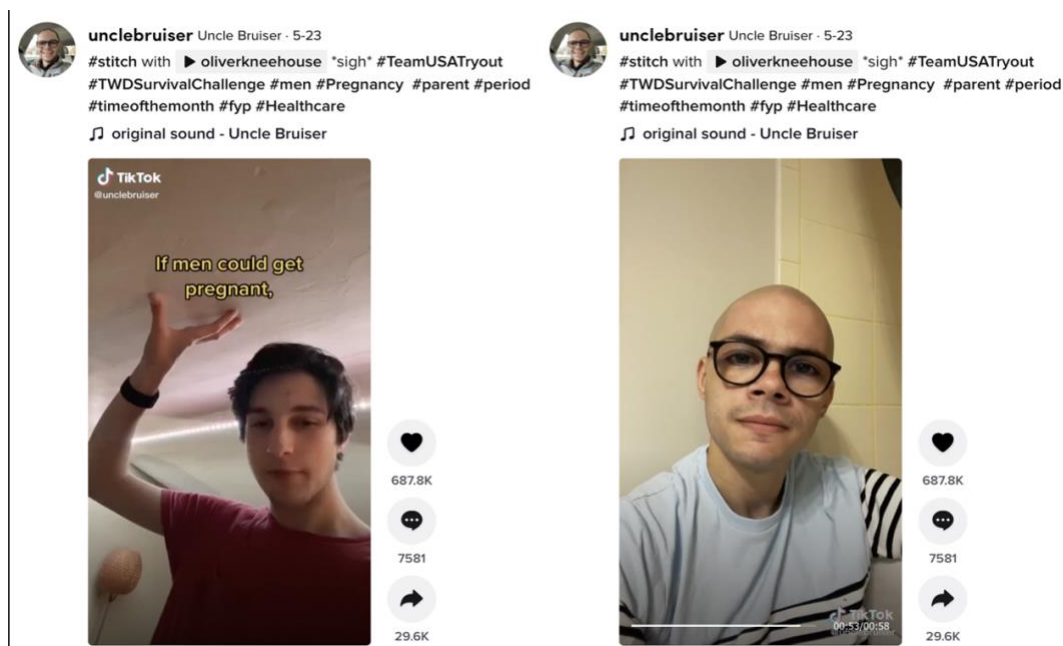
This TikTok video was another stitch, this time in response to the user @oliverkneehouse, who

started a trend about what the world would be like if men could get pregnant. @unclebruiser

satirically covered a vast array of humorously absurd yet somewhat believable examples of this

hypothetical world. Their list included drive through abortions, mandatory parental leave,

universal healthcare, free menstrual products, and free childcare, among others. The truly tragic

punchlines to these jokes are rampant medical sexisms and racisms built into the U.S. institutions

of every kind, of which content creators grouped within this category debated.

COVID-19. As the pandemic continued to rage, and omicron was discovered to be the

new most transmissible variant, I identified 14 videos about COVID-19 (on masking, vaccines,

social distance, transmission). The user with the top viral video and the highest percentage of

"play" to "likes" in this category was @mrs.frazzled for a post on 7.31.21. The total "play" count of 1.7M, and had 341K "likes," generating an approval rating of 20% (see Figure 24).

Figure 24

TikTok @mrs.frazzled, 7-31
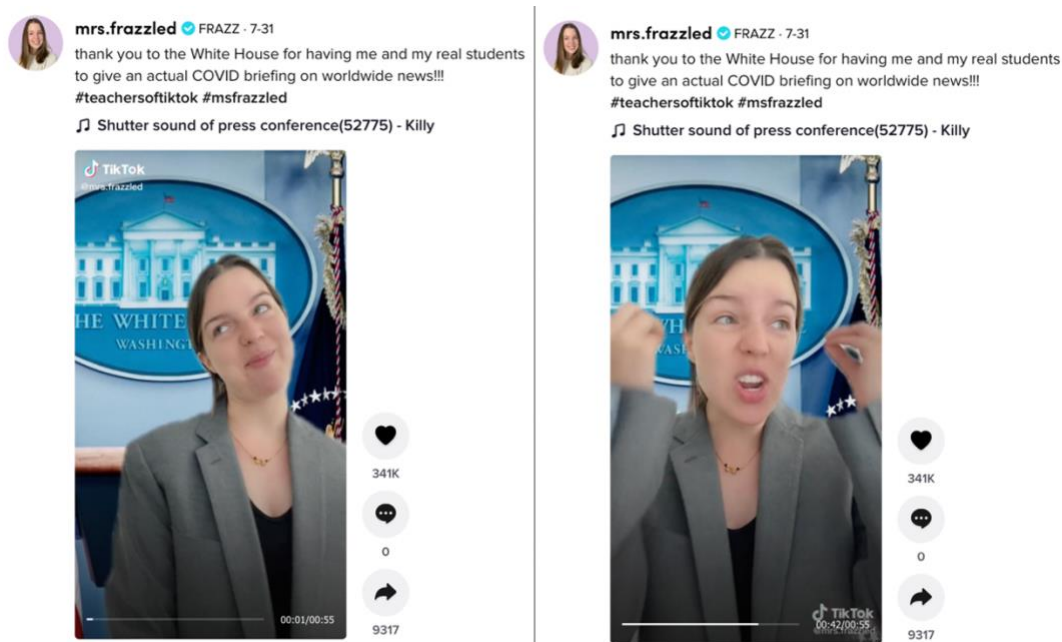
@mrs.frazzled is an account that spun off of the name of the teacher on the 90s TV show "The Magic School Bus." Over the course of the pandemic, they began making content related to COVID and making fun of the brazen irresponsibility witnessed throughout the United States. In this TikTok they pretend to be a White House correspondent during a press conference, using the teacher voice that one would use with preschoolers in attempts to appeal to the U.S. public. More often than not, COVID was the elephant in the app as users went about their usual lives.

Pornography. On an equally pervasive note, I identified 13 videos about pornography (violence, normality) in total. The user with the top viral video and the highest "play" to "like" ratios in this category was @stanzipotenza for their TikTok posted on 7.22.21 with a play count of 1.7M, likes of 543.8K and thus an estimated approval rating of 32% (see Figure 25).

Figure 25

TikTok @stanzipotenza, 7-22
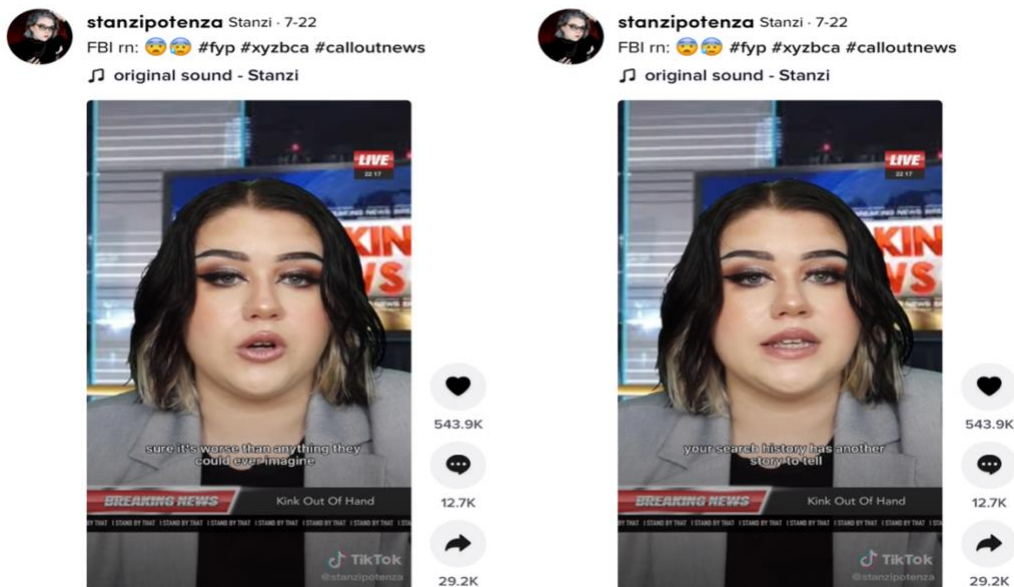
This comedic video by @stanzipotenza is from a series of parodical breaking news stories. This time the butt of the joke is whoever is watching the video since the creator dryly and directly calls viewers out, questioning the acceptability of their kinks, or BDSM (bondage, discipline, submission, and sadism) and/or other fetish interests, in the tone of voice of a news anchor. In lesser popular videos within this category, users quoted anti-sex work feminists like Dworkin. The videos coded into this category paint a vastly normalized picture of modern pornography.

Sex Technologies. Last, but definitely not least, I identified a total of 9 videos about sex technologies (vibrators, biomimetics). The user with the top viral video and the highest "play" to "like" ratios in this category was @cliterallythebest for their TikTok posted on 7.21.21. It had a grand "play" count of 8.7M, "likes" of 2M, and approval rating of 23% (see Figure 26).

Figure 26

TikTok @cliterallythebest, 7-21
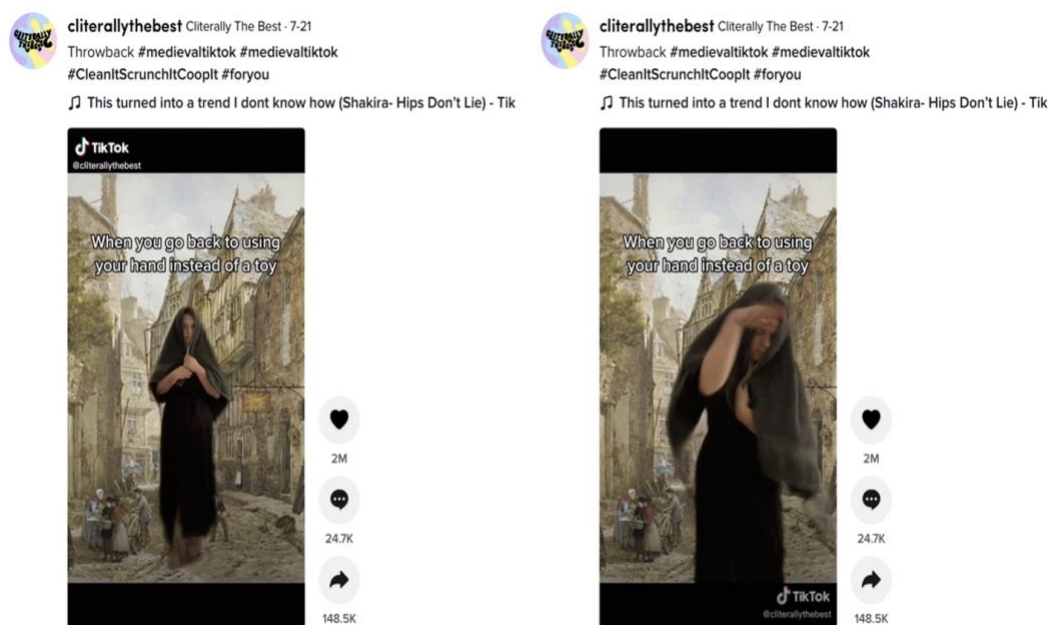
Culminating this analysis with the pièce de resistance of this project, we have user

@cliterallythebest, with a hilarious greenscreen TikTok who equated using your own hands

during masturbation or partnered sex to an act straight out of medieval times. The other eight

videos in this small, but noble, category also associated humor about sexual technology as well.

Thinking back to discussions from chapter three about sexuality and play, this is to be expected.

Findings

In addition to completing these two analyses, I did a side exploration where I utilized my

personal lens as a White queer feminine presenting non-binary person to distinguish some

stereotypical U.S. concepts about race and gender presentation of these TikTok content creators.

I did this not to reify and support these flattened stereotypes, but instead for the purposes of

critically using my White positionality to identify what type of content creators the algorithm

dispersed to me, according to presenting race and gender demographics, in order to make visible

otherwise invisible algorithmic happenings. To be crystal clear, the racial and gender categories I used are not useful. Realistically, they are too overtly limiting to be of any genuine use in encapsulating the immensely complex human experience. However, they are still often the types of reductive race and gender classifications normalized for use in average U.S. intake paperwork.

In other words, to echo decades of findings by critical race and technology scholars like Lisa Nakamura, Safiya Umoja Noble, Ruha Benjamin, and in the fashion of D'Ignazio and Klein's (2020) *Data Feminism,* I do so to demonstrate the absurdity of flattened, yet normalized, U.S. racial categories, by using them to test if TikTok does shadow ban (algorithmically censor) Black/Brown/Asian creators in comparison to White creators, based upon my TikToks. By doing so, I found that out of the 428 total TikTok videos, the presenting race breakdown of content creators was: 260 White folks (60%), 106 Black folks (25%), 45 Brown folks (10%), 15 Asian folks (3%) and three did not show humans. Additionally, of all total videos, the content creator gender presenting breakdown was: 346 feminine content creators (81%), 55 masculine content creators (13%), 24 ambiguous content creators (6%) and, again, three did not include humans.

Then, to illustrate the social resonance of racial and gender biases built into the TikTok algorithm and society, next I tabulated racial and gendered demographics of the 101 viral videos. Of those roughly 100 videos: 68 content creators appeared to be White (67%), 14 appeared to be Black (14%), 14 appeared to be Brown (14%), three appeared to be Asian (3%), and three had no race (3%). Lastly, the gender of the content creators within these 101 viral videos appeared to be: 74 feminine folks (73%), 18 masculine folks (18%), six ambiguous folks (6%), and three did not include beings that could be gendered because there were not humans in them.

Therefore, findings indicated that TikTok's algorithm shared less of Black/Brown/Asian folk's content, and, substantially less of their content went viral compared to White creators.

Therefore, on one hand, my discourse findings may not be universalizable because they likely speak from lived experiences resonating with a primarily White feminine presenting person. On the other hand, the salient categories discussed throughout this chapter were generated by the entire pool of creators and represented the topics that were most prevalently discussed overall.

Speaking of those categories, having now completed my primary critical feminist rhetorical analysis of 75 Lora DiCarlo biomimetic sextech advertisements, and secondary discourse analysis of 428 TikToks, engendering late-stage present-COVID-19 norms, my findings are clear. From coding the 75 total adverts, I found that the most prominent themes were: [cis]women ownership, empowerment, COVID-19, sex education, the orgasm gap, health / wellness, gamification, biomimetics as humanlike, anatomical correctness, and human biology as machinelike. Furthermore, in result of my coding these 428 total TikTok videos, I identified 10 concurrently viral present-COVID-19 discourses, that temporally and spatially contextualized the primary Lora DiCarlo adverts: objectification, sexual violences, orgasms / pleasure, shift, self-realizations, toxic masculinity, sex education, COVID-19, pornography, and sex technologies.

Non-coincidentally, when the predominant topics and values that Lora DiCarlo communicated within their biomimetic sex tech email advertisements are put into conversation with the salient discourses discussed by content creators of the most prominent and viral present-COVID-19 TikTok videos I analyzed, they both spoke much the same language, concerns, and ideals. Explicitly, as a brand, Lora DiCarlo marketably answered profitable questions of sexual miseducation, stress, isolation, and violences (among other salient themes addressed), while incorporating pun-filled humor. In other words, this biomimetic sex device brand knows their customer's desires intimately, and selected rhetorics that utilized millennial and Gen Z trends.

These present-COVID-19 findings sociohistorically build upon what I found in my critical feminist histography that illustrated the trajectory of a mechanization of humans (in chapters two through four) and set a rationalized mind, culminating into the sexually violent neoliberal late-stage capitalist U.S. landscape. Said more directly, the results from this chapter, firstly, indicated a present-COVID-19 humanization of objects, in which anthropomorphized biomimetic sex tech devices are being rhetorically framed and sold as a supplement, and/or substitution, for traditional human-human sociosexual experiences. Secondly, results from my critical discourse analysis revealed that (predominantly White) feminine millennial and Gen Z feminine folks have made many present-COVID-19 TikTok spurred self-realizations surrounding identity. Specifically, increasing self-care, potentialities of being neurodivergent, and critiquing cisheteronormativity.

As such, when combined, findings from these two analyses indicated that a noticeable socio-sexual shift in relations has and/or is occurring within the neoliberal late-stage present-COVID-19 sociosexually violent U.S. landscape. Moreover, it is important to note that, by my calculations, the "play" to "likes" ratios (estimated approval rating) of each of the 10 viral videos discussed above is markedly higher than average. As stated in my secondary data section, I discovered this by tabulating a control group of present-COVID-19 top mega viral TikToks dated from March 11th, 2020, until February 23rd, 2021, to deduce if my findings were significant. My results of doing so supported my claim that these videos resonated with (albeit predominantly White) feminine millennial and Gen Z users, beyond simply just my algorithmic preferences.

Thinking back to the poem at the start of this chapter, sexual satisfaction has been inequitably divided along strict binary lines. Now, as a result, these sociopolitical and historical

constructions have been taken to their marketable extremes. With that said, if (predominantly White) millennial and Gen Z vulva-havers normalize buying and supplementing human sexual partners with sophisticated biomimetic sex devices and other humanized objects, there will likely be long-term sociosexual consequences.

As media ecologists have warned for quite some time now, introduction of any one medium has consequences on the entire environment. On one hand, perhaps coming generations of devalued feminine folks would demand more from their partners. But, on another, biomimetic sex devices that may optimize feminine folk's orgasms cannot dismantle the host of interlocking dehumanizations built into the U.S. imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy - alone.

In the next chapter, I conclude this project by further contextualizing my findings from both analyses conducted within this chapter, inside the entire critically mediated histography traced out across chapters two through four. First, I revisit sociohistorically tragic elements of the U.S. context. Then, I end with a recap of my findings, contributions, and future sparked research.

CHAPTER SIX. CONCLUSIONS

Rhetorician Kenneth Burke (1966) attested that humans are the tool using and abusing beings. Media ecologists claim we take what is given to us and extend it to its furthest possible limits. To begin, I found that the U.S. has been in the business of misinformation since its origination. Postman and Weingartner (1969) spoke to this "business as usual" when remarking:

> One way of looking at the history of the human group is that it has been a continuing struggle against the veneration of 'crap'. Our intellectual history is a chronicle of the anguish and suffering of men [sic] who tried to help their contemporaries see that some part of their fondest beliefs were misconceptions, faulty assumptions, superstitions and even outright lies (p. 16).

This dissertation has been my own attempt at unveiling some dehumanizing U.S. conceptions. By combining insights from critical feminisms and media ecology, in chapter two, I overviewed the trajectory of rhetorics from "civilized" colonial progress (Lake, 1991), Weber's (1968) incrementally introduced industrial capitalist rhetorics of abstract and quantifiable *rationality* and efficiency, that eventually resulted in what Ritzer (1993) called *McDonaldization*.

In chapters two through four, I traced out a non-exhaustive list of sexual ecologies that set the stage for the neoliberal late-stage capitalist present-COVID-19 U.S. context, in order to ground the analyses of my chosen artifacts. To illustrate the ways in which the three stories that I presented (in chapters two through four) each told cultural, sexual, and technological tales that intertwined, I now conclude by connecting them. Over hundreds of years' time, strategic White cishet male decisionmakers created and normalized a universalization of White maleness as the default of U.S. citizenship and legitimacy, naturalizing these ideological ways of orientation, thinking, and being in every sphere of life.

Institutionally, they did so by building systems of power (Sharma, 2019) comprised of allegedly Objective humans *as* media (Miroshnichenko, 2014), by only socializing, hiring, and legitimizing a majority White cishet males into positions of sociopolitical authority, that remains to this day. Beyond the English phonetic language (one of U.S. colonizer's weapons of choice), colonial patriarchy is also ideologically featured in most, if not all, other mediums. As Kendi (2016) recovered in his work, *Stamped from the Beginning,* religious, scientific, and political establishments were each used to legitimize the dehumanization of Black folks.

Ideologies are filtering mediums expressed in both overt and covert ways. Thus, an imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchal sense of worldly resources, governs our understandings of time and space. This naturalization made invisible Western logics, thoughts, and practices as taken for granted norms. These norms have been exemplified in ownership, demographic representation, legitimacy, validity, and academic citational canon.

As industrialized capitalism grew global and became neoliberalism, technological extensions like TV emerged, fueled by advertising that reiterated foundational U.S. inequities. Regarding sexuality specifically, Puritanical tropes that were created, rationalized, and enforced by colonizers were used to justify the domination of Indigenous and African communities. These doctrines were also used to condemn sex work in the U.S. context.

In chapter three, I detailed how, over the course of hundreds of years of White supremacy, sexual norms have been contested. But colonial and rational appeals to binaries of sex, gender, and cisheteronormativity were codified with White citizenship and civility. Normalities of love, companionship, and sex have changed dramatically with the introduction of birth control and increasing commodification of all spheres of American life.

As mentioned in chapter one, Valerie V. Peterson (2010) has written about how the introduction of the birth control pill altered dynamics of human experience enabling those who might become pregnant to then get jobs for the first time and prioritize responsibilities outside the home (Peterson, 2010. For example, during the first 20 years of my mom's life, she was not even allowed to open her own bank account. To be clear, in pointing this out, I am not arguing correlation is causation. However, I am connecting otherwise divergently observed phenomena. Specifically, that in the mid-1960s the biotechnology of "the pill" became legal for use as a contraceptive. Then, shortly thereafter, ciswomen were granted ability to open their own bank accounts, and the feminization of labor was catalyzed by the transnational and global capitalist class (who, as discussed in chapter two, were, at the time, still in their infancy), seeking cheap labor. In other words, the driving factor for granting these economic privileges was profit, not equity. For these reasons, I wholly agree with Kolysh (2021) that we cannot solve issues created by imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy with the same ideological and rhetorical means historically used to solidify rampant racist sociosexual and economic oppressions.

Part and parcel, the universalization of White cishet maleness and binary reductions of data practices have been ignored, due to naturalized colonial rhetorics of progress and industrialized rhetorics of rationality, validity, and citational politics that have implicitly reproduced existing inequities of each prior era. Regardless of intention, this concurrently framed all human bodies as being seen, understood, and treated as if they were machines. Among many other dehumanizing consequences, this contributed to the devaluation of vulvic anatomy, and the majority of U.S. population not being represented in diagnostic criteria.

Despite this flattening of the past, there have always been non-White and non-men figures in fields like communication, media ecology, futurism, and beyond. As Western nations

moved from the electric into the digital and increasingly algorithmic ages, old data (which was assumed to be fact), was harvested, and then used to predict future actions. And, founding non-men scholars like Herzog, Gaudet, Anderson, Goldsen, and Nystrom have been overshadowed and/or uncited, while predominantly rich and middle class White cishet became canon. As a result, a vast majority of academic literature missed humans, and thus, misses the mark. Overall, I refer to the culmination of these various processes as the mechanization of humans.

That is, foundational forms of patriarchy, colonial genocide of Indigenous folks, and the creation of Whiteness as demarcation of U.S. citizenship solidified and naturalized based on anti-Blackness. Then, rich and middle class White cishet male decided systems of power, setting in motion a default definition of humanness that was White cishet and male, while all others were resultingly dehumanized at varying levels, increasing, interlocking, and compounding dependent upon marginality (race, ability, gender, ethnicity, sex, class, among many others). On an embodied level, those who fell outside of rich and middle class White cisheteronormative male definitions of humanness are dehumanizingly judged for existing while dirty, shameful, emotional, impure.

Systematically, the mechanization of humans occurred with the White Flight, redlining, and industrially induced environmental injustices in neighborhoods deemed expendable. Some corporate murders are settled in courts, churning rationalized dehumanization for profit. Other dehumanizations are evidenced by *requirement politics* of the sociosexually violent U.S. landscape, in which the vast majority of White cishet male sex offenders are not criminalized (RAINN, n.d.; World Health Organization, n.d.). In other words, the same U.S. legal system that rationally mediates racially dehumanizing corporate settlements for profit, also sociolegally

rationalized sparse criminalization of sexual violences of, especially, historically, and intentionally targeted marginalized groups of people.

Representationally, these dehumanizations also take the form of (predominantly White) femininity popularized in porn, advertising, and mainstream medias, dehumanizes, infantilizes, abuses, desensitizes, and decapitates femme bodies. As Nystrom detailed, regarding media, much like food, we are what we eat. And, as the late bell hooks extensively documented, these representational sexisms intersect and compound with colonial racisms of Black feminine folks. And recently, Tarana Burke of "me too" reminded, that the highest rates of harassment and sexual violences in the U.S. are the ones least talked about in mainstream news media outlets. Yet, Audre Lorde asserted that subjective erotic expressions hold immense humanizing power.

Perhaps one reason as to why sexual violence is endemic in the U.S. is because fear tactic ridden and medically inaccurate abstinence-only sex education remains the most formally funded type of program, as opposed to comprehensive sex education that teaches about the binary busting complexities of sex, gender, sex preferences, consent, pleasure, and protection. In the meantime, sex toy brands have exploited this absence and stigma of medically accurate, holistic, and pleasure-centered sex education with loophole rhetorics of health and novelty.

Regardless of historical intentions, the devaluation of vulvic anatomy and pleasure, and an absence of comprehensive sex education, contributes to the dehumanizingly endemic, and overwhelmingly not criminalized, acts of violence, occurring both nationally and worldwide. This also explains how in the sociosexually violent U.S. context, educational institutions can have requirements for reporting sexual violences, but parties are often reluctant to uphold them, dismissing away accusers' experiences of sexual injustice as uncredible and illegitimate. And it

contextualizes an orgasm gap that most pervades cisheterosexual sociosexual relations. Again, as Bowen (2022) argued in "Requirement Politics," "anything becomes normal in repetition" (p. 8).

In chapter three, I elucidated how, interpersonally, racist taboos, stigmas of touch, and fear of judgement led to physical isolation, long before the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in what Field (1995) referred to as *touch hunger*. As Web 1.0 developed into Web 2.0, once stigmatized long distance relationships became socially upgraded with connective promises of the Internet. But when the Internet age arrived, alongside services of digital connection, came simultaneously amplified dehumanizing biases of Eurocentric colonial entitlements based upon anti-Blackness, and all preceding iterations of capitalism. This further divided folks by races, King James English assimilations, ethnicities, genders, sexes, orientations, classes, abilities, etc. built in as technological features, upheld by humans *as* media, comprising systematic extensions.

Then, in chapter four, I extended the discussion of the emergence of high-speed Internet, detailing how with these advancements came teledildonics, social medias, applications, and porn tube sites. But highlighted that these extensions also amplified all forms of intimate injustices of biased humans, socialized into binaries, and otherwise monogamous norms about sex and intimacy. Eventually, artificially intelligent humanoid chatbots beat the Turing Test, surpassing originally constructed goalposts of White cishet male determined human intelligence, yet ADHD and autistic folks remain stigmatized in most research and everyday discourse for simply living while neurodivergent in a late-stage present-COVID-19 neoliberal capitalist U.S. structure. For instance, since the pandemic began, algorithmic digital platforms (like TikTok, Twitter, and Facebook) have provided spaces for neurodivergent folks to continue building communities, strengthening solidarity and emboldening discourses about taken for granted issues like the double empathy problem (Zamzow, 2021), the ongoing normality of Nazi originated ableist

language classifications (Sheffer, 2018), and the young White cishet male diagnostic criteria (Bowen, 2021b; Hillier, Gallop, Mendes, Tellez, Buckingham, Nizami & OToole, 2019; Sell, Giarelli, Blum, Hanlon & Levy, 2012; Ratto, Kenworthy, Yerys, Bascom, Wieckowski, White, Wallace, Pugliese, Schultz, Ollendick, Scarpa, Seese, Register-Brown, Martin & Anthony, 2017; Van 't Hof, Tisseur, Berckelear-Onnes, Van Nieuwenhuyzen, Daniels, Deen, Hoek, & Ester, 2020). Neurodivergent folks uniquely perceived dissection of lived breakdowns, that are taken for granted by neurotypical folks, illustrate flaws in a universalization of relations.

In chapter three, I introduced how interpersonal scholars shifted from initially devaluing long-distance relationships to acknowledging their challenges, opportunities, and validity ushered in by the digital age. Then, in chapter four, I expanded upon that by noting that, in recent years, platformatization, Googlization, and datafication were assembled on top of all historically inequitable, and pervasively biased, sociosexually violent U.S. spheres. The research done in this dissertation offers the specific contributions linking the fact that around the same moment, neoliberalism began co-opting and appropriating hollow rhetorics of queerness for profit. And contextualizes never married femmes allegedly living the longest most content lives.

Meanwhile, limited White data sets fed algorithmically mediated legal decisions, healthcare, education, and innovative science-approved biomimetic sexual technologies, run purely on seed money and no shortage of old-fashioned (read: dehumanizing) colonial, industrial, and neoliberal rhetorics. Technologically, these insufficiently universalizable philosophies continued to birth products marketed with updated versions of the same old colonial capitalist rhetorical ancestry. In the late-stage present-COVID-19 increasingly algorithmic U.S. networked public, especially middle and upper class White feminine citizens with purchasing power remain hot, objectifiable, commodities in ways that materially manifest differently from

the ongoing dehumanizations experienced by Black and Brown folks since the nation's origin, that are, most recently, being evidenced through algorithmic digital redlining and shadow bans.

A wealth of evidence of this can be found in both streamed content, that often reproduces predominantly White cisheteronormativity and capitalist gamification. Also, in addictive pornography, that features the faking of femme orgasms and a sexualization of abuse both from, and for, White male gaze. From screen to shining screen, commodity fetishism has become undivorceable from humanity. Well-intentioned, yet un-cash-able, future technological promises offer buyers services as well as disservices in the same sociosexually violent U.S. context where historically, "one White cishet man's systemic beauty has been another person's breakdown" (Bowen, 2022, p. 18).

Despite long held misconceptions that vulva-havers were biologically less interested in or able to climax, sexualities researchers have reported that there are no biological differences between the likelihood of orgasm (Frederick et al., 2017), that sexual avoidance may serve as a protective mechanism (Brewer et al., 2016), that *orgasm coercion* is a means of "exerting power and control over one's partner" (Chadwick & van Anders, 2022, p. 17), that "sexual minority women and gender/ sex/ual minorities were significantly more likely to have ever experienced" (Chadwick & van Anders, 2022, p. 12), that femme folks commonly fake orgasms (Kaighobadi et al., 2012), and that the cisheteronormative orgasm gap pervades (Mintz, 2017). Scholars of LGBTQIA+ relations have found that play enabled intimate sociosexual possibilities. Some sexologists recommend sexual presentness, while *McMindfulness* is being commodified. But relational negotiations remain hard work that do require a level of reflexivity and emotional maturity, often inhibited, and further bastardized, by the perceived threat of emasculation.

Linguistically, with advancement "sex toys" were updated to "sex devices" indicating an escalation in sophistication and an associated promise of an optimized mimicry of human skin, body parts, temperature, and sexual techniques. But that promise cannot be one-size-fits-all. Especially not in the sexually violent U.S. context that has repeated a pattern of implicit biases. Businesspeople reiterate fashionable rhetorics that distract from human systems of inequity. For example, [cis]woman-owners have borrowed feminist empowerment rhetorics for profit.

On a legislative level, a Republican "war on women [sic]" continues to chip away at Roe v. Wade via TRAPP laws and Devos's 2020 Title IX amendment, requiring both accusers and the accused of rape to be cross examined. Feminine bodily autonomy is seen as an issue when framed within the lens of *requirement politics*, so legislation is into place by the White cishet male majority still in decision making positions, who serve *as* mediums of U.S. traditionalism.

The pattern remains, that "anything becomes normal in repetition" (Bowen, 2022, p. 8). And yet some wonder how isolation and sexual miseducation remains. Recently, one brand on Kickstarter referred to this as human sexual "syncing issues." Pre-COVID-19, other pun savvy news reporters called it the "sex apocalypse." Sexologists call for pleasure activism and a shift away from performance-based sex to folks socialized into a nation that has deliberately normalized productivity and the mind-body split. And many laypeople are only just learning to accept singular they, neo-pronouns, and lifestyles of non-binary, queer, and transgender folks. Scholar-activists in the U.S. context have only begun establishing recovery works on clitoral anatomy and pleasure in relation to sociosexual phenomena and other engendered normalities. Luckily, with each new most educated, yet most in debt, generation these topics become norm.

Another contribution of this dissertation is that it engages with implications of the COVID era. As discussed in chapter four, as COVID-19 hit, profitable disinformation stacked on

top of hundreds of years of U.S. propaganda, that continued spreading foundational colonial disinformation. Those who have occupied the most dehumanized and disenfranchised groups before COVID-19 were hit the hardest and deadliest with its arrival. As record levels of unemployment hit the nation, sex tech sales skyrocketed, and many folks started an Only Fans. According to Kolysh (2021) the ground human inequities of imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy cannot be resolved through the same means which birthed this nation. For these reasons, and the many repetitive cultural, identity, and technological others traced herein, these White cishet male *as* media created problems cannot be solved with technologies alone.

Each chapter of cultural, identity, and technological considerations I provided throughout this project fleshed out a fuller perspective as to why this may have happened. Meanwhile, for respective reasons of safety, health, and well-being, parents with children under five, the immunocompromised, and the elderly (who had enough socioeconomic privileges to do so) may have maintained a level of strict physical isolation (supplemented with digital and virtual communications) never possible before the Internet age. And, whether someone happened to be neurotypical or not, the prolonged periods of solitary (or shared) confinement since March 2020 have not come without various hefty and holistic prices to pay, like touch hunger, loneliness, stressors, lethargy, increased sociosexual violences, and indoor air pollution, among others.

Irrationally, despite raging COVID variants, many institutions have returned to business as usual. This can be understood through a political economic lens, which reveals neoliberalism as a form of capitalism that runs the government like a business, prioritizing profit over people. Since nothing occurs in a vacuum, this rational bleeds into our sociosexual relations writ large. For instance, in a present-COVID-19 relational landscape mediated by applications, alongside sexual health and HIV status there are now potential additional conversations to be had about the

risks of contracting this sickening, disabling, and deadly virus. Furthermore, considering the absence of comprehensive sex education, these conversations have already been challenging enough without additional stressors and/or possible backlash and resentment about incompatible mask wearing habits, vaccination status, and/or social distance practices. And to make matters more complicated, as I have discussed, most coping mechanisms known for dealing with these prolonged, interlocking, and compounding traumas, and all preexisting sociohistorical and political inequities inflamed by the pandemic, have been commodified.

Then, for whatever reasons (prolonged pandemic isolation, Trump threatening to make TikTok illegal, etc.), the TikTok user base exploded. Ever since, the app has become a hot bed for everyday discourses and researchers alike. For scholars, the app gained legitimacy from an expanded user base, sparking curiosity of its potential affordances as a networked public. For me, TikTok and other popular present-COVID-19 apps, like the all-audio app Clubhouse, is necessary to study because users challenge traditional forms of legitimacy and credibility. But, over the course of my two critical analyses of 75 Lora DiCarlo biomimetic sextech advertisements marketed to vulva-havers and their contextualization in 428 present-COVID-19 TikToks, the findings of this dissertation demonstrate that the TikTok app is not all good news.

On the bright side, when I combined my histography and critical analyses, another contribution of the present study is that it appeared that a socio-sexual shift in relations has and/or is continuing to occur over the course of this pandemic for millennials and Gen Z (who both have, and have not, been severely isolated) that happened to be exposed to the TikTok discourses I identified. Despite the algorithmic racisms my findings point to, due to the overwhelmingly White viral videos and overall collection of content creators fed by my algorithm that made up the total 428 TikToks I coded, the 10 key discourses represented by each

viral video that I analyzed, all received estimated approval ratings higher than the control list of most liked mega viral TikTok I tabulated for good measure. In other words, much like Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) did in her work *Algorithms of Oppression,* when she gathered evidence of algorithmic racisms and sexisms of the Google search engine, herein I exposed that only 25% of all 428 TikTok videos I analyzed, and 14% of the viral TikToks were by content creators visibly Black, compared to the 60% of all 428 TikToks, and 67% of viral videos by those visibly White. Again, despite these reductive categories being insufficient at classifying anyone, using them revealed TikTok biases that a combo of designer(s), algorithmic Black Box, and users inclined.

For these reasons, despite algorithmic racism, I argue TikTok is spurring present-COVID-19 solidarity and lifelong unknown identity revelations during these unprecedented and ongoing crises. The pandemic has also ushered in new informal digital opportunities for sex educators. And, with 93% of the U.S. population now connected, it is truly a remarkable time to be alive.

On another more troubling and critical angle, while rhetorically coding the 75 Lora DiCarlo's biomimetic sex tech advertisements, I found rhetorical traces of colonial "progress," industrialized rationality, efficiency, and innovation. Linguistically, these ideas were seamlessly interwoven with rhetorics that claimed orgasms are feminist empowerment, and that the brand was a one-stop-shop for obtaining health, wellness, and sex educational resources. Historically speaking, Lora DiCarlo's brand rhetoric makes sense when considered within the trajectories discussed in chapters two through four, as well as feminist advertising findings in chapter one.

As discussed in chapter four, D'Emilio and Freedman (2012) documented how lingering settlement Reproductive Matrix (1600-1800) rhetorics from the 17th century which initially bore sexually repressive norms and laws, then adapted into Divided Passions of (1780-1900), an

eventual shift Toward a New Sexual Order (1880-1930), and finally the Rise and Fall of Sexual

Liberalism (1920 – Present). As such, just to be in business, sex shops have had to strategically

side-step Puritanical constraints with loophole rhetorics of health, wellness, art, and novelties.

Nonetheless, in chapter five I specified elements of Lora DiCarlo's rhetorics that are new-er:

their relentless appropriation and claims of selling feminist empowerment and sex education,

millennial and Gen Z speaking trends, anatomical correctness, eroticism, mechanistic rhetorics,

and their consistent anthropomorphizing of biomimetic devices as a "bestie" or "best friend."

However, as detailed in chapter one, Ferguson (1990) documented that capitalist

commodified liberal feminist rhetorics of female anatomy and confidence do not correlate to

empowerment within a system with a pervasive lack of feminine decisionmakers and control

(Ferguson, 1990). These findings also echo other feminist scholars who have warned how

neoliberally trained and oriented advertisers who have examined how commodity feminism

profits from ideological contradictions (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Daily, 2019; Goldman et al., 1991).

Visually, the racial representation of models in Lora DiCarlo's advertisements were

overwhelming White, cast in light making them racially indistinguishable, and/or White-washed.

And, approximately 128 times (45%) within the total 287 depictions of models in the advert

spaces that I analyzed, the models were included in the advertisements as only hands or, less

frequently, other parts of a body, just to hold, or be next to, their products. This disassembling of

(mostly White femme) bodies in this brand's advertising further supported my argument, that

there has been a mechanization of humans, now reversing into the humanization of objects.

Limitations

I entered these scholarly, feminist, and popular literary conversations knowing that the

project I proposed would require an enormous undertaking of time and efforts, that to fully

overview would span many dissertations beyond my own. My chosen combination of (especially, Black, Brown, Asian, Indigenous, neurodivergent [ADHD/ASD], and queer) feminist and media ecological insights illuminated how, "forms of violence are hidden in our discursive practices and need to be brought to light…violence is being done to women by a hierarchically based, symbolic construction of reality in which they are devalued" (Gorsevski, 1998, p. 3). I did struggle because of historical arguments about prioritizing men as a default subject, yet eventually decided upon a reclaimatory usage of the term "non-men."

In digital spaces during the pandemic, I have seen a shift in usage of the term by laypeople to describe experiences shared, albeit experienced differently, beyond just feminine presenting folks who are often avowed as women (so, cis or trans non-binary, gender fluid, two spirit, and other often erased folks with vulvas) that this project equally refers to. Likewise, my usage of "feminine folks" more often than "women" throughout has been purposeful. Same as not using any human word that includes an "x" because, over the course of the pandemic, I have seen numerous critiques of the inclusion of "x" as being more performative than useful. I know these verbiages change, but I feel most comfortable with the most updated descriptors I have seen discussed in everyday discourse by groups effected. Lastly, I have observed critiques of the label "differently abled" as being trans-exclusionary radical feminist. Therefore, I included the descriptor "disabled folks" in header, since that was what many disabled folks requested instead.

This dissertation project can, and should, be put into conversation with others done by recent and fellow rising feminist scholars, contributing to literature on topics like matchmaking, power and romance in an algorithmic culture (Shepherd, 2012), stereotypical feminine presenting virtual assistants (Piper, 2016), the rhetorical capacities and selling of gendered and personified AI objects within a rapidly developing surveillance capitalism (Woods, 2017), the

personal and political intricacies of suburban feminine fashion (Carr, 2016), and the cultural anxieties and fantasies which inform and complicate cultural meanings and sense-making regarding sci-fi represented, and future promised, realistic humanoid fembots (Fabian, 2018).

Contributions to Media Ecology, Media & Communication, and Disability Studies

This dissertation project contributes to a wide variety of interdisciplinary conversations and literature. Most overtly, to the fields of media ecology, communication, and gender, sexuality, and intimacy studies by conducting a histography, connecting a wide variety of specialized disciplines with a critical feminist sensibility. It also adds to the recent wave of disability scholarship and online discourses about late in life diagnosis of neurodivergences. One example of this was the highlight and brief discussion about Lora DiCarlo's inclusion of an article regarding ADHD diagnostic criteria resource in The Orgasm Gap section of chapter five, as well as recontextualizations by, and of, neurodivergent folks in the present-COVID-19 TikToks. Secondly, through the connection of disability studies literature within the larger histography to demonstrate why and how neurodivergent folks have been pervasively dehumanized as robots.

My main contribution throughout this manuscript has been my argument and ample evidence, as shown through U.S. cultural, sociosexual, and technological histographies that there was a mechanization of humans that has occurred since the origin of the United States that is now flipping and reversing into a humanization of objects. Among the host of other histographic materials, I argued this by extending Miroshnichenko's (2014) concepts of humans *as* media, Dowd's (2016) suggestion of critical media ecology, and Sharma's (2019) landmark claim that systems of power are machinelike, and thus, mediums, using a critical feminist sensibility.

In terms of my project's contribution to theory-building, I also presented my critical feminist and media ecological framework. And I operationalized this innovative framework by using a combination of critical feminist rhetoric and discourse analyses as methods to explore some of the boundaries and barriers of the TikTok platform algorithm. In hindsight, with a sizeable survey of 428 TikToks purposefully classified into insufficient racial categories (White, Black, Brown Asian) and those same TikTok videos simultaneously coded into purposefully insufficient gender categories (feminine, ambiguous, masculine) explored in combination with manually harvested metadata (especially plays / likes, generating an estimated approval rating for each discourses top viral TikTok), some basic mathematics, and a little ingenuity, I pushed and dug deeper into how it worked, revealing built in racisms. My study's resulting research findings contribute to digital critical feminist scholarship an arduous and new method of inquiry.

Most importantly, to media ecology I contribute a thoroughly substantiated reminder that (thanks to outdated mind-body dualism, colonialism, and all preceding models of U.S. capitalism) logic has been misconstrued with only White cishet men, as emotions have been misattributed with only the feminine. This masculine intellect has been aggrandized, while the creative feminine was bastardized, devalued, and objectified in each proceeding structural iteration. In conclusion, throughout this project, I connected historical trends, contemporary sexual ecologies, and alternative sense-makings for advancing research into embodied sexualities forward. Contrary to sociohistorical erasure, yet in accordance with media ecological canon, to echo Sharma and Singh's (2022) anticipated text *ReUnderstanding Media: Feminist Extensions of Marshall McLuhan*, I propose that media ecology is made for critical feminist revelations.

Future Sparks: Toward a Liberatory Embodied New Research Paradigm

In consideration of time and length, many technological considerations and possibilities lay beyond the scope of this project. These included, but are not limited to, ways in which the introduction of machines influenced our society, cars, gender play and line blurring potentialities of drag, the anthropomorphizing of animatronics by franchise corporations like Chucky Cheese, maximization drugs (Adderall, etc.), biohacking, the beauty industry, plastic surgery, the appropriation (and otherwise abusive cultish following) and commodification of Tantric sex, AI companions, sex robots, and virtual reality (VR) pornography, and more. As such, I as a part of my future research directions and agenda I would like to pursue an expansion into these topics.

Secondly, since researching and offering startling new findings about the universalization of the White cishet male medical body, and the ways in which it has constrained diagnostic criteria, there is a special place in my heart for critical feminine historians who study topics like medicine, diagnosis, and any other human-made technologies whose origins can and should be revealed. Media ecologists advocate for creating consciousness raising counter environments. Therefore, as a large component of my long-term research agenda which will build onto this project, I look forward to utilizing this liberatory embodied new research paradigm by co-writing with critical feminist medical and technology historians about beauty, health, and reproductive technologies, innovation rhetoric, and profitable malpractice in the years to come.

Additionally, I envision this project generating fruitful outreach and applications of this study for K-12 sex education programs, educational association conferences, presentations, consulting, and other means of practical and long-overdue outreach to begin necessary efforts of rehumanizing those who embody historically targeted and intentionally marginalized groups.

Due to the sorry state of formal sexual education in this nation, these efforts should expand into institutions comprised of older generations who were also not comprehensively sex educated.

I am curious to explore what the world might look like today if White cishet men, and those who have pandered to their archetypes, were not the only ones allowed to control systems of power, thus, inclining manifestations of missing humans and missing data practices. What kind of economies might we have? How much of the planet might still be alive? Since 2019, my colleagues and I have sparked positive, novel, and proactive things in the field of media ecology, such as building new curricula and conference thematics centered around a rehumanizing form of legitimacy and values, bold transparency, and a prioritization of people over profit. I intend to continue provoking these initiatives and supporting scholars and practitioners who do the same.

Lastly, in the process of turning this project into a book, I anticipate an extensive expansion upon the analysis artifact limitations of both the Lora DiCarlo biomimetic sex tech advertisements and present-COVID-19 TikTok video discourses I could not cover for sake of space. I foresee the transition of this dissertation into a full book would entail more research about the current realities and future promises of humanoid intelligent AI sex robots being marketed as companions that transhumanist theorists have argued will replace human companionship. I am especially curious about the coincidental trajectory of a marketing of biomimetic sex devices to mainly vulva-havers, while sex robots seem simultaneously marketed primarily to penis-havers.

Some future implications of these parallel emergences of humanized objects could include the increasing humanization of objects, through these uncanny humanoid intelligent AI sexbots currently being marketed as companions. Considering the sex apocalypse is reported as well underway, the introduction and normalization of full body humanized objects for owners to

have sexual relations with instead of human partners, if pushed to the extreme, could amplify isolation and cishet penis-havers ubiquitous sexual access to replications of mainly cisfemale bodies at the expense of a prolonged allowance to learn how to sociosexually be within human-human relations. Nationally, an endemic absence of formal comprehensive sexual education and criminalization of sex violences and trafficking remain. Misogynistic dating coaches and incel vitriol in digital spaces continue to be normal. Sexbots are likely a relational blessing and curse.

On one hand, if my histographies indicate a timely and timeless historical pattern, they would more than likely be built with biases as features that implicitly and explicitly reinforce imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy. And, in their commonality, they may enable the vast majority of cishet men committing violences to continue not unlearning their taken for granted internalized discriminatory ways of thinking and being, in ways that would be required of them if they were ever to begin to embracing pleasure-based sex. The bots may amplify users' violent desires and behaviors when in relations with others who they treat as less than human.

On the other, they could provide a questionably sentient outlet for the predominantly penis-having folks they are marketed to who have been pervasively socialized into lifetimes of violent sociosexual norms to enact their fantasies on, in place of harming especially historically, intentionally, targeted marginalized people groups (HITMPGs). Or perhaps if these profitably allegedly robot companions were bought and interacted with by certain customers, they could spark their enlightenment into realizing that the sexual experiences that they inhumanely provide are not at all what companies had been promising them to be. Maybe the uncanny, and missing human, factors of these AI sexbots could catalyze changes in human relations for the better. At best, perhaps they could inspire masculine folks to embrace human messiness and vulnerabilities.

As it stands, depending on buyers' humanlike desires, these bot companions still fall into the un-cash-able technological future promises category, regarding AI and bodily customizations regarding both interiors (programmable personality, interactivity) and exteriors (race, hair, age, body type, etc.). Realistically, these humanoid intelligent AI sexbots also remain at a price point ($10,000+) inaccessible to own for -- however many -- Americans who may be interested in them. Therefore, until they are more readily available to the public, their influence remains marginal. But preemptive conversations are crucial, prior to their norm, to raise awareness of likely harms. Ideally, these findings will spark critical conversations about sexuality, as well as institutional policy restructuring, to rehumanize, reregulate, deprivatize, and decorporatize the U.S. context.

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