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Toy stories: On the disciplinary regime of vibration

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Abstract: Sex toys promote a new consumptive ethos whose significance may be adequately outlined by attending to the institutional implications of this product category's consumption. By drawing on Foucault's theory of sexuality and the technologies of the self that materialize with the aid of discursive formations about sexuality, as well as on relevant sociological and ethnographic insights, I undertake a qualitative content analysis on a corpus of 100 sex toys' product reviews from popular magazines and web sites in order to identify how the discourse about sex toys is articulated in terms of three dominant categories of sexual scripts (Simon and Gagnon 2007, *Sexual scripts*. In Richard Parker & Peter Aggleton (eds.), *Culture, society, and sexuality: A reader*, 29–38. London: Routledge), namely, cultural scenarios, interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts. By opening up the discussion to a broader cultural terrain, I outline how the consumption experience of sex toys, as articulated in the reviews' discursive formations, facilitates the emergence of new consumer trends, particularly with reference to orgasm-on-the-go and no-touch-orgasm, while redefining existing ones.

Keywords: Foucault, sexuality, discourse analysis, qualitative content analysis, consumer culture

1 Introduction: 48 AD

Welcome to year 48 AD, that is *Ano Dildo*. In line with the endemic proclivity of the human imaginary to identify particularly valuable moments (evaluation points, according to Labov 1972 narratological model; cf. Ruiz Collantes and Oliva 2015) in the deployment of meta-narratives as originary, and in the context of the legitimate trend of unearthing suppressed historicities as subaltern to “contingently universalist” discourses (e.g., theological) that was inaugurated with the advent of post-modernity, what appears on the surface as a cheap pun, rooted in the originary temporal point of the release of the seminal cult movie

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Barbarella (1968), in fact underlies a quite plausible argument for theorizing a subaltern historicity that has been deploying in a global cultural milieu, albeit not yet recognized as such. This suppressed historicity is incumbent broadly speaking on post-modern sexuality (Bauman 1999) as discourse and as possibilities of be-coming, not just a Second Coming, but of multiple and ubiquitous ones. This suppressed historicity may be fathomed genealogically (Saukko 2003) by attending, in the same vein as Nietzsche and Foucault (Rabinow 1984) have pursued indefatigably, to how orgasmic pleasure has assumed a telic dimension in the discursive articulations of sex toys' magazine reviews. "In its postmodern rendition, sexual activity is focused narrowly on its orgasmic effect; for all practical intents and purposes, postmodern sex is about orgasm" (Bauman 1999: 24). In this context, Dildano, the hero who saved *Barbarella* in the homonymous film, is not simply a movie character, but a prophetic anagram of an originary point that set in motion a historical period that is yet to be accounted for. Charting the entrails of Dildano's machinery is the overarching task of this paper.

Sex toys as cultural artefacts favor and actively promote a wholly new consumptive ethos whose significance may be adequately charted by attending more broadly to the institutional implications that inhere in the consumption of this product category, as well as the consumptive ethos that is shaped in the discourse about sexuality whereby the promotion of sex toys is invested.

In order to chart this consumptive ethos, I am drawing on Foucault's theory of sexuality and the technologies of the self that are enabled by the discursive formations about sexuality, as well as on relevant sociological and ethnographic insights. The theoretical exploratory informs the qualitative content analysis of 100 sex toys' product reviews from popular magazines (e.g., *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*) and web sites (e.g., buzzfeed.com) which are coded alongside the three categories of sex scripts suggested by Simon and Gagnon (2007), namely, cultural scenarios, interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts. Moreover, by opening up the discussion to broader cultural issues, I outline how the experience of sex toys consumption, as articulated in the concerned discursive formations, facilitates the emergence of new consumer trends, particularly with reference to orgasm-on-the-go and no-touch-orgasm, while buttressing existing ones.

2 Sex toys as cultural artefacts

Sex toys are products that aim at enhancing the stimulation of erogenous zones and have been around ever since antiquity. Sex toys are available

predominantly in two forms, dildos and vibrators. The difference between these two (often conflated in common parlance) is that whereas dildos do not feature stimulating devices and are intended for vaginal penetration, vibrators are intended for clitoral stimulation only. Occasionally sex toys feature a stimulating device on the instrument, in which instance the toy is appropriate for both vaginal penetration and clitoral stimulation. Although initially targeted at members of the female gender, they progressively evolved into either unisex product propositions or into bespoke offerings for members of both genders.

Demand for sex toys by thrill-seeking members of both genders has been soaring over the past five years as manufacturers have been racing to accommodate ever more nuanced pleasure avenues under their spine-chilling, toe-curling product offerings. A nationally representative study on vibrator use in the US reported that half of the adult female population has used a vibrator at least once in their lives, while those who attend religious services more frequently (at least once per month) are less likely to be vibrator users (Herbenick et al. 2009). “As nearly 2/3 of women used vibrators in partnered sexual activities and masturbation, women described vibrators as contributing to intense orgasms and high levels of sexual satisfaction whether alone or with partners” (Fahs and Swank 2013: 668). The three main erogenous zones they aim at stimulating are the clitoris (female), the vulva (female), the G spot (female, male). Sex toys, at least nominally, abide by the Freudian pleasure principle insofar as they aim at maximizing libidinal pleasure.

As innovation in the sex toys industry has been mounting, cultural consumer researchers have been progressively confronted not only with charting novel functional attributes and product aesthetics (Attwood 2005), but, even more importantly, with what types of new meanings are infused in product innovation (Smith 2007) in this burgeoning industry. Subsequently, we are summoned to explore how these meanings are entangled in praxiological webs that feature consumptive occasions, benefits, places, and significant others.

Despite, as noted in the extant literature, the scarcity of research concerning the benefits stemming from the employment of vibrators and dildos, the self-affirmative emotional effects of female masturbation and the positive functional effects in terms of lubrication, orgasm, absence of sexual pain, and overall sexual functioning (Fahs and Swank 2013; Black 2014) have been repeatedly noted. However, the meaning of sex toys by far transcends their functional dimension, inasmuch as the cultural implications of the discourse of sexuality exceed sex as biological need and brute act, as noted repeatedly by Foucault (1978, 1988a, 1988b). “The sexual, like the photographic image, is

often viewed as being just what it appears to be: a fact derived from life, the purest instance of naturalism. However, this is a deception: it is really a complex text that must be coded; a text selectively assembled to affirm, deny, and persuade; a text embroidered with metonymic ‘micro-dots’ of meaning and history” (Simon 1996: 28).

But even viewed from a strictly functional point of view, as brute fact and indulgent activity, sex has shifted orientation between modernity and post-modernity. According to Bauman (1999: 21), “the late modern or postmodern rendition of eroticism appears unprecedented, a genuine breakthrough and novelty. It enters alliance with neither sexual reproduction nor love, claiming independence from both neighbours and flatly refusing all responsibility for the impact it may make on their fate; it proudly and boldly proclaims itself to be its only, and sufficient, reason and purpose.” Subsequently, this paper neither adheres to certain feminist readings that identify sexuality with female sexuality (or male, in the same terms), nor subscribes to the subsumption of the cultural telos of the discourse of sexuality under the attainment of orgasm. Sex toys as cultural artefacts are intimately involved in webs of meaning and sign systems that cut across both everyday cultural practices, institutional forms (Maines 1999) and regimes of value (Appadurai 1986). “Toys are tools for producing orgasm and ‘symbolic goods,’ they are signifiers of cultural values” (Smith 2007: 169). Concomitantly, the multilayered function and value of sex toys is approached in this analysis within a broader cultural analytic framework that is intent on charting the trend-setting and normative dimensions of the discourse about sex toys, rather than constrain their mission within the restrictive province of politicized readings, either of feminist or of any other persuasion.

3 The discursive articulation of sex toys: Emancipatory tools or disciplinary media?

This study draws on sex toys’ product reviews published in major popular magazine titles (*Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*) and web-sites (e.g., *buzzfeed.com*). The review narratives render sexuality manageable by furnishing a set of what Simon (1996) and Simon and Gagnon (2007) have called sexual scripts as the staging of desire. In this respect, sexual scripts are akin to Goffman’s (1986) frame theory and Van Dijk’s (2009) social scripts. Sexual scripts are distinguished into three categories, namely, cultural scenarios, interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts. Since these categories will inform the classification of the

sex toys' product reviews that will be exposed later on, it is prudent to outline them at this stage in our analytic.

From an institutional point of view, the discourse of and on sexuality as “structuring element of social activity” (Giddens 1992: 28) furnishes both the occasions where sex toys may be used, as well as the ground of legitimacy for consuming sex toys (e.g., enhanced performance at work thanks to obtaining orgasms with the aid of a vibrator). “All institutions and institutionalized arrangements can be seen as systems of signs and symbols through which the requirements and the practice of specific roles are given. Cultural scenarios are the instructional guides that exist at the level of collective life” (Simon and Gagnon 2007: 27). An example of a cultural scenario relevant to the study at hand is the consumptive occasion of a dinner at a restaurant where a sex toy may be used. The dinner at a restaurant has its own syntax that imposes a disciplined behavior onto the subjects that partake of this occasion. The involved artefacts (e.g., cutlery, chairs, candle) are used according to the cultural mandates of a script bequeathed to the participating subjects through various forms of acculturation in different agencies, such as the family, peer-group, cinema, etc. The sex toy script as cultural scenario essentially embeds the toy in the syntax of the cultural practice, thus redefining the boundaries of the practice's disciplinary status, as well as the acceptable scope of the artefact's uses.

Interpersonal scripts concern a “process that transforms the social actor from being exclusively an actor to being a partial scriptwriter or adapter shaping the materials of relevant cultural scenarios into scripts for behaviour in particular contexts” (Simon and Gagnon 2007: 29). Finally, intrapsychic scripting is the process whereby “individual desires are linked to social meanings” (Simon and Gagnon 2007: 30). Desire, in this context, is used quite broadly to accommodate a wide roster of emotional and rational benefits.

Sex scripts essentially open up social spaces that may be called pleasure domains, as constellations of occasions, places, benefits. Of particular importance, as will be shown in greater detail in Section 5, is the understanding with the aid of a segmentation analysis of how the suggested occasions for consuming sex toys, the places where they may be consumed, the benefits that stem from their consumption, and the significant others who participate concurrently in various capacities in their consumption are discursively mediated through narrative possibilities. Pleasure domains essentially constitute clusters of occasions, spaces, timings for immersing oneself in a libidinal economy (cf. Rossolatos 2015), which proliferate in tandem with the propagation of a uniform consumption ethos.

Since the end of the sixteenth century, the “putting into discourse of sex,” far from undergoing a process of restriction, on the contrary has been subjected to a mechanism of increasing incitement; that the techniques of power exercised over sex have not obeyed a principle of rigorous selection, but rather one of dissemination and implantation of polymorphous sexualities. (Foucault 1978: 16)

However, it is questionable whether such a proliferation of pleasure domains in the context of an overarching libidinal economy abides by the pleasure principle or by a new form of panopticism. Viewed from the latter angle, subjects are compelled to multiply occasions and spaces for obtaining orgasms, in the same manner that, as shown by Foucault (Rabinow 1984), penalization for not abiding by a given ethotic blueprint in pre-modern times was coupled with publicly conspicuous bodily torture. This compulsive docility of the body is enforced by an “ensemble of minute technical inventions that make it possible to increase the useful size of multiplicities” (Rabinow 1984: 209), in the form of an ever more fine-grained, niche-catering roster of sex toys, coupled with a semiotic regime of cultural scripts as discursive configurations. In the following sections I turn to the empirical scrutiny of the discursive articulation of this emergent regime.

4 Methodology

A qualitative research design was adopted for the empirical prong of this study. The sample of $N=100$ product reviews was sourced from two top-ranking, in circulation terms, female magazine titles that are reputed for hosting reviews and cover stories about sex toys, namely, *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour*, and from high-traffic web-sites that host product reviews (buzzfeed.com), targeted reviews about sex toys (bestvibratorsreviews.com) and reviews about products relating to eroticism and sexuality (lovehoney.co.uk). All reviews date to the period 2013–2015, as a primary research objective was to discern not only dominant, but also emergent consumer cultural trends that necessitate the sourcing of as recently available information as possible.

Pursuant to saving the web pages in a designated location in my hard drive, a netnographic approach (Kozinets 2010) was followed in terms of copying each product review onto a word document, while cleaning the text from any peripheral information (e.g., customer reviews and comments, links to online content) prior to transferring the word documents to the employed qualitative content analytic software (atlas.ti). The word files were then saved as primary documents in the CAQDAS software atlas.ti under a single hermeneutic unit (cf.

Friese 2012; Rossolatos 2014b) and an iterative coding procedure was followed. Initially the data were coded according to an a priori code-list (Miles and Huberman 1994) that was produced based on the sex scripts typology offered by Simon and Gagnon (2007), as laid out in Section 2 (cultural scenario, interpersonal script, intrapsychic script). Since the codes were not mutually exclusive and each product review sentence may have featured more than one script, the texts were coded accordingly. Prior to coding the data, the reviews were read several times in order to obtain a primary feel for the data, as well as to gauge whether they were fit for coding with the available list in terms of pertinence. Memos featuring interpretive insights were regularly produced and annotated to the respective codes in an ongoing fashion (Figure 1).

As soon as the initial coding procedure was complete, consolidated reports were produced with the aid of atlas.ti. The consolidated reports feature information that contains only the codes and the text fragments to which they have been assigned, and hence allow for a vertical and focused reading of each sex script. Upon inspecting the reports in quest for more nuanced themes, a second coding round took place whereby the initial codes were further split into sub-codes, as per Table 1. Cultural scenarios were further split into occasions (e.g., a dinner, a night-out), places (e.g., home, restaurant, bathroom), and product attributes (e.g., light, wearable, easy to carry). The interpersonal scripts were further split to encompass the incidence in the discursive articulation of specific

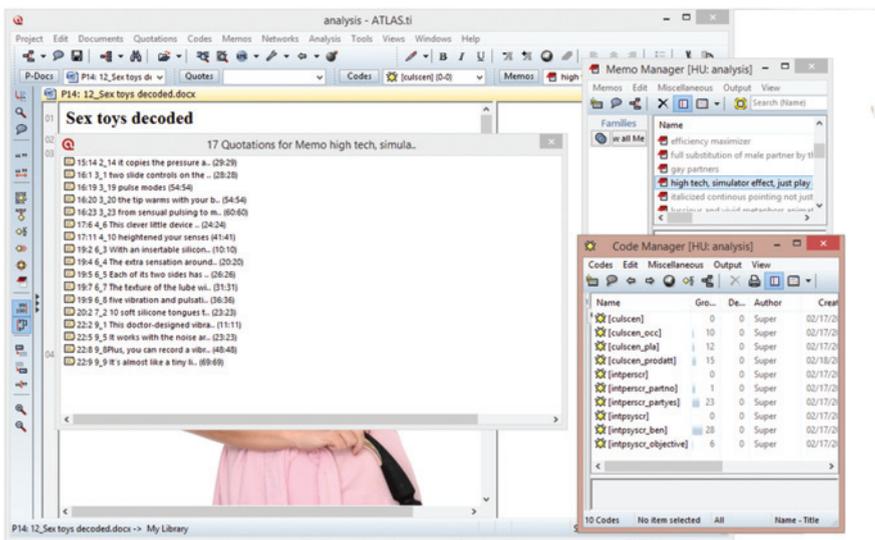


Figure 1: Example of memos and codes used in this study (screenshot from atlas.ti workspace).

Table 1: Code scheme of sex scripts.

Code	Sub-codes
cultural scenario [culscen]	occasion (e.g., dinner) [culscen_occ] place (e.g., restaurant) [culscen_pla] attribute (e.g., easy to handle, light) [culscen_prodatt]
Interpersonal scripts [intperscr]	incidence of specific other (e.g., sexual partner) [intperscr_partyes] Incidence of generic other (e.g., imagination of sexual partner in the absence of another's physical presence) [intperscr_partno]
intrapsychic scripting [intpsyscr]	benefit derived from the use of the sex toy (e.g., pleasure, exhilaration) [intpsyscr_ben] objective for using sex toy [intpsyscr_objective]

significant others (e.g., boyfriend, girlfriend) or the incidence of generic others (e.g., evocation of a sexy movie star). Finally, the intrapsychic scripts were split into benefits stemming from the use of the sex toy (e.g., maximum pleasure, simultaneous stimulation of clitoris and G-spot) and objectives for using the toy (e.g., involving a sexual partner).

After completing the second coding round and having decided that no further coding was required, the final consolidated reports were produced, based on which the discourse analytic procedure of charting the articulation of sex toys discourse was enacted. The merits of adopting a dual content/discourse analytic path in interpretive cultural research have been repeatedly highlighted in terms of the former yielding a tangible analytical grounding for the identification of discursive moves and strategies (Fairclough 1995).

5 Main findings

5.1 The formal structure of sex toys' discourse: Mouthwatering onomatology and metaphors to vibrate by

The consumption of sex toys as articulated in popular female magazine titles is part and parcel of a wider nexus of social practices as sign systems (Barthes 1970). Charting crucial facets of its underlying grammar, thus, paves the way to understanding how this nexus is articulated, and hence, how its experience will be ultimately fleshed out by the end consumers: "The 'discovery' of social relationships and cultural forms is thus paralleled by the

personal narrative of exploration and survival” (Atkinson 1990: 110). At the same time, the way the consumption of sex toys is narratively mediated in these articulations is suggestive of a form of life that is undergirded by a set of values. Hence, the preliminary formal analysis of the expressive articulation of the consumption of sex toys is amenable, at a second stage, to charting the axiological nexus that animates the lifeworld wherein their consumption is embedded.

From the point of view of onomatology (that is, product naming), we notice that despite the uber-technical descriptions and the path to enlightenment being assimilated to orgasm-by-the-book, vibrators are often assigned brand names that invest them with an aura of exoticism and mystique: magic wand, Eva; but also orgasm is occasionally invested with mythical proportions: “the mythical act of female ejaculation” (Comet Key II Wand), despite the demystification posture that permeates sex toys discourse. Furthermore, the discourse at hand is a metaphorical haven, laden with luscious and ultra-vivid metaphors that make up a homological canvass of analogical similarities with a colorful palette of cultural practices:

“Opening the Lelo Pebble feels like unwrapping a luxury box of chocolates. This really is the Rolex of vibrators!” (Lelo Pebble).

“It’s like the Swiss army knife of double-ended vibrators” (Picobong Transformer).

Additionally, the majority of prescribed and actively promoted cultural scenarios in the selected corpus not only prioritize solo over sex with partners, but occasionally employ vivid metaphors of inverted theological orientation for highlighting the benefits that may be reaped from employing the sex toys on offer:

“the vibrating bunny ears are positioned in just the right place to send you straight to orgasmic heaven” (Cupids Club Mini Rabbit Vibrator).

“It combines external vibrations for clitoral stimulation with a gently rotating shaft which massages the G-spot for blended orgasm heaven” (Lelo Tara).

5.2 The technologization/medicalization of the orgasmic

In line with the mid-period Foucauldian theory of sexuality as a set of discourses for taking care of oneself (Foucault 1985, 1986), sex toys are occasionally tinged with the sterilized expressive inventory of medical discourse: “Avoid materials that may give you an allergic reaction (e.g., latex), and wash your toy with antibacterial soap and hot water before and after use and let it dry completely” (Cosmopolitan: How do I figure out what sex toy to buy?).

But what surfaces in this discourse most resolutely is the ultimate disciplining of the orgasmic through the absolute technological mediation of the singularity of the libido as one's most private animus. What was described in Section 2 as pleasure domains, that is as unique configurations of benefits, occasions and places within the broader terrain of possibilities of attaining an orgasm, within this discourse is pushed to the utmost extremes of micro-fulfillment. The following examples are quite striking attestations of how sexual pleasure has become technologically enabled in the same manner as one handles a computer software or any kitchen electrical appliance. What used to be offered in the nineteenth-century novel via a narrative that was inciteful to imaginative play, embellished with kinky metaphors, has now materialized into perfectly realizable possibilities. And what's more: the settings can always be saved and the same multivariate configuration that spawned a specifically configured orgasm may be replicated ad infinitum. In the post-human orgasmic calculus there is no room for error:

"it copies the pressure and pattern of your squeezing, repeating it as long as you like" (Minna Ola).

"Each of its two sides has its own motor, so you can position your clitoris in the middle and customize the sensation by adjusting the different settings" (yours + mine).

"the rabbit has two slide controls on the base, one for thrusting and one for the vibrating bunny ears, with each having three levels of intensity" (Thruster Deluxe).

"Not only is the Lelo one of the quietest vibrators on the market, it has the most incredible settings that go from sensual pulsing to mind blowing continuous vibrations which will guarantee earth shattering g-spot stimulation" (Lelo Isla).

5.3 New occasions, new places: Orgasm-on-the-go

Interestingly, the majority of sex toys reviews analyzed in this study featured neither locative verbs nor expressions of location, apparently with view to highlighting the versatile nature of these products in terms of use places/occasions, but also in order to avoid deterring the readers' imagination as they accommodate the offered narratives to their own, personal lifeworlds. Wherever the sex scripts undergirding cultural scenaria mentioned explicitly places, as per the code-scheme (Table 1), and apart from scarce references to in-home consumption, emphasis was laid on consumption in public places, on the suitability of toys for ubiquitous consumption and for consumption-on-the-go. However, obtaining pleasure from sex toys in public places is still communicated as an inconspicuous activity, albeit in public.

Places

“Want to get off any time any place? Then you shouldn’t even think about leaving the house without Cupids Club Mini Rabbit Vibrator” (Cupids Club Mini Rabbit Vibrator).

“The Mia vibe is an excellent travel companion” (Mia Vibe).

“And don’t worry, there’s still a plug-and-play option if you neglected to charge it but need an orgasm like now” (Magic Wand Rechargeable).

Occasions

“One way to spice up dinner in a busy restaurant” (Supersex Remote Control Vibrator Love Egg)

5.4 Sex at a distance

What initially appeared in the cult sci-fi erotic film *Barbarella* (1968) as a counter-factual scenario featuring Jane Fonda (Barbarella) engaging in no-touch intercourse with her rescuer Dildano, now constitutes a real consumptive script (Rossolatos 2014a). The orgasmic potential of female partners may be controlled at a distance by their partners via remote controls.

“You wear this whilst he controls the vibrations without anyone having a clue. One way to spice up dinner in a busy restaurant” (Supersex Remote Control Vibrator Love Egg)

“It’s a wearable vibrator that hits your clitoris and your G-spot at the same time. Plus, it comes with an app that you or a partner can control from literally anywhere with Wi-Fi” (We Vibe 4 Plus)

5.5 Solo or partnered sex?

The sex toys discourse is highly Cartesian: I masturbate therefore I am, where masturbation is promoted mostly as a solitary activity, without the involvement of significant others. Despite the fact that almost 30% of the reviews included in this corpus did mention the presence of others (mostly in the context of heterosexual activities, with only one explicit reference to gay sex), the bulk of product use descriptions exalted the merits of solitary orgasmic attainment. Moreover, in quite a few instances the discourse went so far as to highlight the competitive advantage of the machinic (sex toys) by engaging in direct comparisons with the ability of male sexual partners to perform at such post-human levels against salient performance indicators as speed, duration, depth, and any possible combination thereof:

“you might just find your man edging out of the door the moment he clocks eyes on the Big O” (the Big O!)

“Plus, you can record a vibration pattern that was particularly amazing and play it again later. Real genitals just can’t be trusted to be that consistent” (OhMiBod Blue Motion)

5.6 Unisex toys for heterogeneous couples

Redefining the boundaries of hetero- and homo-eroticism is an integral aspect of this discourse that “exculpates” the male use of vibrators in the context of “pleasure-sharing” with female partners. And we are not talking about mere insinuations, such as “why don’t you try this on and see if you can find your G-spot?,” but of overt promises of mutually enhanced orgasmic pleasure for both genders. This is a striking attestation of the malleability of socially construed sexual identities and the spatiotemporally contingent straight-jacketing of the drives:

“a hands-free vibrator for you during sex, plus it gives him a little jolt too” (Vibrating cock ring).

“gives you extra pleasure for an increased chance of mutual climax. Everybody wins!” (Bionic Bullet Rabbit Vibrating Cock Ring).

6 Discussion of findings

The overarching research question that was posed in Section 3 concerned whether sex toys are emancipatory tools or disciplinary media (in the Foucauldian sense). Based on the main findings from the qualitative content analysis (Section 5), I am rather inclined to answer this question in a mixed mode as both emancipatory tools and disciplinary media, depending on which referential plane is adopted for framing the answer.

From the point of view of a working female, of AB S/E class with scarce spare time “in her hands,” surely the auto-erotic solutions on offer constitute emancipatory tools, as they enhance independence from any other party that may be involved in attaining the desired objective, as well as maximize efficiency by virtue of being equipped with an entire “dashboard” whereby the desired objective may be technologically manipulated by playing around with salient variables. On the other hand, from a critical discourse analytic point of view (Fairclough 1995), the new generation of sex toys may come across as disciplinary media, resting on the oft-made assumption that eroticism is subjugated to the same efficiency maximization rationale as a commodity production plant, as well as to a body policing ideology that seeks to discipline the drives according to a set of actions embedded in technological manuals. I think

there is merit in pursuing a discussion alongside Foucauldian lines for the sake of unearthing latent cultural and institutional facets of the sex toys' discourse.

By adopting a discourse analytic rationale (Barker and Galasinaski 2001; Sitz 2008), the argumentative thrust of the following discussion, along with its ramifications, prioritize the scrutiny of contextual aspects of sex toys' discourse and particularly how, from a post-modern sexuality point of view, once clearly demarcated praxiological and moral divisions become blurred (as a complementary facet of postmodernity's juxtaposition of opposites, according to Firat and Venkatesh 1995; also see Holt 1997). Discourse analysis is geared towards systematically elucidating how subjects become discursively constituted (either in conversational interaction or in publicly circulating texts), by attending both to the direct context of discourse and its linguistic features, as well as to the indirect context, that is underpinning institutional realities (Fairclough 1992a,b).

6.1 Post-human eroticism

Within the broader context of post-modern sexuality that is delineated by and prescribed in sex toys' discourse, we are confronted with a pattern of reversal of the theological model that assumes sex as material ground for imposing a set of moral sanctions, in favor of an absolute exculpation of sex, that is liberation from any moral scaffolding, save for an abstract schema of hyper-libidiniziation. This schema assumes canonicity by virtue of being discursively articulated as a compulsion to attain as many orgasms as possible. However, sex toys' discourse that "professes to demystify sex in the name of its liberation, is subtly coercive in its classification of techniques of sexual behavior" (Hutton 1988: 130).

This logic has also been identified by Baudrillard with obscenity (see Rossolatos 2016), not of the erotic act per se, but of the pornographic extreme close-up's attempt to contain the libido in minute iconic inscriptions, and hence to foreground and codify any imaginary angle that might singularize what has been prescribed in publicly available artefacts. Likewise, in the case of sex toys, ever more detailed prescriptions as disciplinary practices (Rabinow 1984) are offered in their discursive articulations, scripted in quasi-popular, quasi-medical/technical terms with regard to variables such as speed, noise levels, rotation, saving settings, and all sorts of operational guidelines based on multiple occasions and places of use, as shown in Section 5.2.

In this manner, sex toys are subsumed under a productive, calculative rationale that is geared towards the maximization of orgasmic efficiency, which, at the end of the day, has little in common with the erotic as a playful, random and time-

consuming activity. Free-floating eroticism is therefore eminently suitable for the task of tending to the kind of identity which, like all other postmodern cultural products, is calculated for ‘maximal impact and instant obsolescence’ (Bauman 1999). Thus, sexual discourse of sex toys ultimately de-eroticizes sexuality, while reducing it to a telic, productive activity. The erotic as the imaginary of the sex toy becomes the double of a working day inasmuch as the attainment of the perfect orgasm is presented as being akin to a video game’s cockpit flight simulator. ‘Taking off’ is a matter of following the ‘manual’. The perfect orgasm is thus fully prescribed and demystified. This demystification, at a discursive level, as a correlate of the orgasmic exiting the secret province of the boudoir, also confers a fatal blow on the theologically invested mystery of procreation.

6.2 The invisible disciplining of inconspicuous public sex

The oxymoronic predicament of ‘ultra-constraining liberation’ as above described, one might say, is evinced most strikingly in the discourse about toy-enabled masturbation in public places (Section 5.3). The more consumers are incited to engage in public masturbation with the aid of toys, the more prescriptions are offered for maintaining the inconspicuousness of the act (e.g., noise reduction: “all you need to remember to do is to disguise your screams of satisfaction!” Cosmosutra). Quite remarkably, sex toys’ discourse does not reprimand the event of conspicuous consumption, while classifying it under “turn-on” factors: “so make sure you have the place to yourself – or not ... whatever turns you on!” (Thruster Deluxe). Sex toys, thus, ultimately function not so much for maximimic pleasure as to enforce a regime of secrecy by inscribing the moral mandate for keeping secrets in the flesh. Masturbation is catapulted to a disciplinary practice par excellence, another instance of “administrative power” (Giddens 1992: 31) that is “exercised through its invisibility” (Rabinow 1984: 199). In this manner, the post-modern dislocation of the erotic from both inter-subjective relations and from its reproductive function, as noted by Bauman (1999), constitutes a continuation of sexuality as a fundamental facet of modernity’s regime of truth (Giddens 1992: 21).

The more outlets for obtaining orgasms are opened up by the abundant roster of sex toys on offer, the more the demand for inconspicuousness is stressed. “Things may acquire value by having a high degree of public visibility or by being kept secret. An absence of something may be as crucial as its presence” (Tilley 2007: 260). In this manner, the augmentation of spatiality afforded by the pleasure domains is not correlated with an increase in sociality, but of isolation. This ultra-solipsistic terrain constitutes a most fertile soil for

nurturing the “penal” consumptive pattern of vibrating on the go, a trend that is discursively articulated as a form of obtaining borderless sexual satisfaction.

This reading of the cultural function of sex toys resonates with Foucault’s genealogical analysis of the discourse of sexuality from praxiologically oriented towards caring for oneself (*souci pour soi*; Foucault 1985), as practiced in Ancient Greece, for example, to the appropriation of sexuality as narrative substratum for edifying a theological discourse that posits the body as the locus for culpability in the face of transgression from its moral mandates (cf. Foucault 1978: 159, and; Foucault 1988a: 22).

The difference between Foucault’s choice of discursive corpora and the discourse of sex toys that surfaces in a postmodern mediascape is that the latter is not evinced as an explicitly formulated system of bodily inscribed sanctions that is incumbent on sexuality as source of transgression of moral maxims (the Christian approach), but on positing an utterly liberated sexuality (uber-public but still inconspicuous) as the bodily inscription of an ethotic pattern that favors borderlessness. This sort of borderlessness is not equivalent to the liberation of sex from spatiality, but to the ultimate mastery of sexuality as the discursive configuration of sex by a technological apparatus whose aim is to predict and control the emergence of sexual desire at its inception anywhere, anytime. Subsequently, what is ultimately achieved is the smooth reintegration of sexual desire into a production system, coupled with its dislocation from the unproductive play of the boudoir.

We are confronted with a hyper-orgasmic predicament, where the libido may and should be satisfied anytime, anywhere. The erotic act has exited the boudoir and has become public property (although, not yet, public spectacle), that is a property of the public space where it is now acceptable to consume sex toys.

Attaining satisfaction with the aid of a sex toy on the go entails both freeing up time for more productive allocation to work-related matters, as well as greater independency from others in attaining consummation. This argument becomes more palatable once viewed through Foucault’s most pertinent distinction between the deployment of sexuality and the deployment of alliance that was introduced in the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* (1978).

I am speaking of the deployment of sexuality: like the deployment of alliance, it connects up with the circuit of sexual partners, but in a completely different way ... The deployment of alliance is built around a system of rules defining the permitted and the forbidden, the licit and the illicit, whereas the deployment of sexuality operates according to mobile, polymorphous, and contingent techniques of power. The deployment of alliance has as one of its chief objectives to reproduce the interplay of relations and maintain the law that

governs them; the deployment of sexuality, on the other hand, engenders a continual extension of areas and forms of control. For the first, what is pertinent is the link between partners and definite statutes; the second is concerned with the sensations of the body, the quality of pleasures, and the nature of impressions, however tenuous or imperceptible these may be ... The deployment of sexuality has its reason for being, not in reproducing itself, but in proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating, and penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way, and in controlling populations in an increasingly comprehensive way. (Foucault 1978: 106–107)

Based on the above distinction, the deritualization and demystification of sex in sex toys' discourse constitutes an attenuation of the alliance dimension. This attenuation results in dislocating sex from a space of sociality to an anti-social activity. The more fine-grained pleasure domains are accommodated by the unique specifications of discrete sex toy offerings, the more the deployment of sexuality is confined into a space of non-sociality, as non-dependence on another for attaining orgasm. It doesn't matter so much whether a consumer will actually try one or more of these offerings. What is more important is the transformation of the availability of such a variegated product roster into a cultural expectancy, and hence into background knowledge of the possibility of materialization of ubiquitously inconspicuous solitary public sex. "A most prominent mark of the postmodern erotic revolution is cutting the ties connecting eroticism on one side to sex (in its essential reproductive function) and on the other to love" (Bauman 1999: 26).

We are confronted with an intertwining of primary narcissism and ultimate desublimation, the full-presencing of consumptive potential on the wreckage of a representational logic, where the place of libido's fulfillment becomes overconflated with the social space that engenders narratively libido, an unprecedented overlap between cultural space/physical place and milieu of desire's fulfillment that radically subverts the time-hallowed role of the boudoir as non-public space for the enactment of sexuality.

6.3 Get on the scene, like a sex machine

"The thin C-shaped toy has two different vibrators: one that rests against the clitoris on the outside and another that stimulates the G-spot" (We Vibe).

"It's almost like a tiny little vulva, but with vibrations and horns. Human anatomy kinda can't compete with that" (Screamin' Demon).

Within the contours of this new regime of signs, sex toys constitute an instance of hyper-mediation of the libidinal (see Section 5.2), as enablers of attainment of consummation anytime, anywhere. Whereas, as attested by

Foucault, the theological paradigm that has been managing the discourse of sexuality until now as the groundwork whereupon moral sanctions should be imposed, dwelt on correlating certain sexual acts as signs with particular moral mandates as their signifieds, the new regime of signs only seeks the maximization of pleasure, regardless of any interference by the notion of responsibility to and for another. Whereas the theological subsumption of sexuality involved inter-subjective relations at its very core, the new regime of signs promotes responsibility only to oneself and one's own pleasure. This new regime is part and parcel of what Bauman described as postmodern eroticism:

Postmodern eroticism is free-floating; it can enter chemical reaction with virtually any other substance, feed and draw juices from any other human emotion or activity. It has become an unattached signifier capable of being wedded semiotically to virtually unlimited numbers of signifieds, but also a signified ready to be represented by any of the available signifiers. (Bauman 1999: 26)

As argued by Foucault (1978), the ultimate aim of theological morality's work on the libidinal was the attainment of "knowledge of oneself," as expressed through the frivolously vague Socratic maxim "know thyself." Of course, in either case, "selfhood" resonates the irreducibly contingent tenets of a moral order which assume canonicity through indoctrination tactics, as meticulously deconstructed ever since Foucault's master (that is Nietzsche). The invitation to know oneself is an insidious interrogation of the extent to which questionable percepts have been effectively internalized. This "policing process signifies the production of linguistic and institutional forms through which human beings define their relationships" (Hutton 1988: 127). This knowledge involves an inter-subjective dimension which, ultimately, folds back into the "ipsus."

The same ipseity conditional is encountered in the new regime of signs that is instituted in the discursive formations of sex toys, with the sole and critical difference that instead of epistemic, the finality of these artefacts' use rests with unbound pleasure. The question that emerges at this juncture concerns whether this newly instituted pleasure-seeking mandate is irreducible to any ideologeme (e.g., theological moralizing second-order discourse) or it is still reducible, albeit to another, different set of moral maxims, such as the frantic proliferation of orgasms or the boundless prolongation of masturbation (as prescribed, for example, in the Comet Key II Wand vibrator's narrative). Again, this brand promise of hyper-sexualization as the outcome of the erotic's hyper-mediation may be read as a correlate of the broader disciplining regime that is propagated by the sex toys' discourse.

7 Conclusions

The increasing penetration and popularity of sex toys is bound to attract greater scholarly attention, insofar as the implications of their discursive articulations spread throughout a variegated roster of embedded mores, deeply-seated cultural practices and axiological frameworks. Sex toys' discourse was found to actively promote a new consumptive ethos that, on the one hand, radically disrupts inter-subjective relations, while, on the other hand, challenges deeply rooted institutional realities, such as perhaps sedimented religious tenets.

By drawing on Foucault's theory of sexuality and key sociological thinkers and ethnographers who have offered deep insights on post-modern sexuality and its implications for a wider cultural terrain, the way crucial facets of self-hood are re-articulated through sex toys discourse emerged to the limelight. Most notably, sex toys discourse was found to promote a form of post-human eroticism, the utter technological mediation/manipulation and solitary confinement of sex, and to redefine the boundaries of sexual identities. Moreover, emergent consumptive trends with significant ramifications for adjacent cultural practices, such as orgasm-on-the-go and sex-at-a-distance/no-touch-sex were shown to be most potent in effecting a reorientation in consumer axiology. The implications of this re-orientation were addressed both at the level of consumptive ethotic patterns, as well as at the level of significant cultural institutions, such as work. In the case of the former, the seeming capacity of sex toys to accommodate ubiquitously and omnitemporally sexual desire was shown to be coupled with a disciplinary regime of secrecy and unattainable hyper-stimulation that functions ideationally, rather than materially. In the case of cultural institutions, it was argued that sex toys ultimately subjugate pleasure to the finality of a production rationale, by positing efficiency as key requirement in the attainment of orgasms, as well as by reducing sexuality to a flight simulation game.

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