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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Sex toys, sex dolls, sex robots: Our under-researched bed-fellows[☆]

N. Döring^{1,*}, S. Pöschl¹

Ilmenau University of Technology, Institute of Media and Communication Science IfMK, Ehrenbergstrasse 29 (EAZ 2217), 98693 Ilmenau, Germany

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Summary In the 21st century, sexual products such as sex toys, sex dolls and sex robots are openly marketed on the Internet. The online retailer Amazon alone provides literally thousands of sexual wellness products. The Internet has done with sexual products what it has already achieved with pornography: it has expanded and diversified the market, made sexual products more accessible and affordable, and thus normalized their use. Research, though, is lagging behind: in comparison to the large body of pornography studies, research on sexual products, their users, uses and outcomes is scarce. The present paper therefore reviews both the state of technological development and the state of research regarding sex toys, sex dolls and sex robots marketed on the Internet. For each of these three groups of sexual product, we first present the range of products available and then provide data on their users and use. Finally, outcomes of sexual product use are discussed based on theoretical assumptions, available data and selected user experiences. Operating within a Positive Sexuality Framework (Williams et al., 2015) and a Positive Technology Framework (Riva et al., 2012), both rooted in the Positive Psychology Approach (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), the paper argues that sexual products have the potential to improve sexual well-being in various populations. Health professionals working in the field of sexuality need to be well-informed about the ever-evolving market of more and more technologically advanced sexual products. It is their call to foster both, the health-related use of existing sexual products and health-related development of future sexual products.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: nicola.doering@tu-ilmenau.de (N. Döring), sandra.poeschl@tu-ilmenau.de (S. Pöschl).

¹ <http://www.tu-ilmenau.de/mkmp>.

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Introduction

In the 21st century, sexual products such as sex toys, sex dolls and sex robots are openly marketed on the Internet. The online retailer Amazon alone provides literally thousands of sexual wellness products. The Internet has done with sexual products what it has already achieved with pornography: it has expanded and diversified the market, made sexual products more affordable and accessible (Daneback et al., 2011; Döring et al., 2017) and thus normalized their use. Research, though, is lagging behind: in comparison to the large body of pornography studies (including review papers and meta-analyses), research on sexual products, their users and uses and their outcomes is scarce.

The present paper therefore reviews both the state of technological development and the state of research regarding sexual products marketed on the Internet. Three main research questions (RQ) are going to be answered:

- RQ1: what types of sexual product (sex toys, sex dolls and sex robots) are available today?
- RQ2: who buys them and how do they use them?
- RQ3: what are the outcomes of sexual product use?

Operating within a Positive Sexuality Framework (Williams et al., 2015) and a Positive Technology Framework (Riva et al., 2012), both rooted in the Positive Psychology Approach (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), the paper looks at negative and positive outcomes of sexual products. Implications for health professionals working in the field of sexuality are discussed in the conclusion.

Methodology

The study is based on literature research, subject-matter description and self-reports from users.

Reporting the state of research on sexual products

To identify scientific studies of sexual products, we searched the literature databases ACM Digital Library, IEEE Xplore, Google Scholar, PsychInfo and PubMed with the keywords "sex(ual) product", "sex toy", "love/sex doll", "love/sex robot" and "sexbot". This search resulted in 18 publications from the last 10 years. Not a single review paper or meta-analysis was found.

Presenting the range of sexual products

In order to demonstrate the range of sexual products marketed on the Internet, we searched the online retailer Amazon and online sex shops (e.g., Adam & Eve, Adultshop, Ann Summers, Eis.de) as well as online sales-portals for sex dolls (e.g., Dolls Club, RealDoll, RS Dolls, Sinthetics) and sex-robot vendors (e.g., Realbotix, TrueCompanion, Sex Bot Company).

Providing data on users, uses and outcomes of sexual products

We present data from our own survey on sex toys and sex dolls with a German national online sample of adults aged 18–69 years ($N=2000$), who gave informed consent. Data collection was conducted in November 2016. In addition, we use online product reviews written by users that describe uses and outcomes with plausible authenticity (King et al., 2014). Concerning research ethics, we only included publicly available product reviews, and fully anonymized them.

Sex toys

Sex toys can be defined as sexual enhancement products with the intent of improving the nature and quality of sexual experiences (Rosenberger et al., 2012). In contrast to pornography, sex toys are material objects. Some sex toys look like human body parts (e.g., vibrator/dildo in the form of male human genitals, masturbator in the form of female human genitals, a foot or a mouth), while others have non-human forms (e.g., vibrator/dildo in the form of an animal's genitals, a dolphin or a banana). Sex toys are directly used on the body during sexual activities.

Range of sex toys

Many sex toys emulate genitals and are supposed to be used on the genital and anal area (e.g., vibrator/dildo, masturbator, penis ring, anal beads). Other groups of sex toys are marketed as erotic lingerie/costumes (e.g., sexy police/nurse uniforms) or BDSM equipment (e.g., handcuffs, whip). The spectrum of sex toys keeps widening, including technologically advanced sex toys (Bardzell and Bardzell, 2011): so-called teledildonic technology that lets the partner operate the sex toy from a distance (e.g., Nora vibrator and Max Fleshlight by Lovense) are available, as well as vibrators with an integrated video camera (e.g., Svakom Siime Eye). Advanced sex toys can also be connected to and synced with media such as an MP3 player (e.g., music-driven vibrator by OhMiBod) or a virtual-reality pornography system (e.g., Onyx2 Fleshlight by Kiiri).

Users and uses of sex toys

Our national online survey revealed that a majority of the German Internet population – 65% of women and 63% of men (no data on trans*people available) – has already used a sex toy. Sex toy use was about equally popular in solo sex (48%) and in partnered sex (54%). These findings are in line with previous studies in the US (Herbenick et al., 2010; Reece et al., 2010).

Positive and negative outcomes of sex toy use

In the literature, some negative outcomes of sex toy use are discussed: e.g., negative impact on self-image because of the partner's sex toy use (Watson et al., 2016), and risks of transmitting infections via shared sex toys (Anderson et al.,

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