

Escaping into sexual play:

A consumer experience perspective

Samuel, Piha – Leila, Hurmerinta – Elina, Järvinen – Juulia, Räikkönen –
Birgitta, Sandberg (the pre version of the paper published in Leisure Sciences online
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Abstract

Sexual play may offer an escape from everyday stress. As the consumer culture has extended into our bedrooms, escapism through sexual play can be regarded as an affective consumer experience. This study analyses how experiential value is created through escapism in sexual play enabled by the use of sex toys. The study follows a mixed-methods strategy, combining results from a consumer survey (n = 517) with expert interviews (n = 26). A principal outcome is an advanced conceptual framework where playfulness operates as a dynamic motor for consumers' sexual boundary transgressions. Loosening these sexual boundaries may have its downsides. The larger is the realm of regular sexual life, the harder it is to escape it to gain experiential value. The balance between sexual play and everyday life ensures that the dynamic motor of playfulness operates steadily, upkeeping the elasticity of boundaries. The practical implications are discussed.

Keywords

Sexual play; Experiential value; Transgression; Escapism; Playfulness

Introduction

Leisure offers the possibility of escaping the boundaries, responsibilities and stressors of everyday life (Berdychevsky, Gibson, & Bell, 2013; Cova, Carù, & Cayla, 2018). This escape is enabled not only by spatial, temporal and sensory transitions from daily responsibilities at home to an extraordinary life on holiday, but also by mental transitions taking place in an individual's mind (Cova et al., 2018; Selänniemi, 2003). This sort of mental transition – or escapism – can be associated with play, as escapism is often conceptualised as an important aspect of playfulness (e.g. Mathwick & Rigdon, 2004; Mathwick, Malhotra, & Rigdon, 2001). Through play, individuals are able to take a vacation without having to travel any physical or temporal distance.

Sex can be described as adults' play (Nathanson, 1992). Thus, *sexual play* may be understood as a specific context or 'destination' where individuals are willing to escape to in their leisure time. Sexual play (Harviainen & Frank, 2018; Paasonen, 2018) is considered as an intrinsic form of recreational sex, which is practised for sexual pleasure rather than for procreation (Diamond, 1997). In recent years, there has been an increasing academic interest in sexual activities as leisure (Attwood, 2011; Berdychevsky & Nimrod, 2017; Meaney & Rye, 2007). Many aspects of this topic still remain poorly understood, despite the fact that the increasing commodification of leisure time also extends into our bedrooms, transforming sexual activity into sexuality-related consumption (Gould, 1991, 1992, 1995; Piha, Hurmerinta, Sandberg, & Järvinen, 2018; Räsänen & Wilska, 2007; Veer & Golf-Papez, 2018; Walther & Schouten, 2016).

Although sexuality-related consumption covers multiple aspects, such as commercial sex, consumption related to romancing and flirting, and consuming sexual ideals such as pornography (Gould, 1995), the current study focuses on consumption related to the sexual act itself and especially on the physical products involved, namely, sex toys, which have also been scarcely researched (Heljakka, 2016; Newmahr, 2010). In the current study, the term ‘sex toy’ refers to all products that are used to intensify and diversify human sexual pleasure (Piha, 2018), including a wide variety of, for example, dildos, vibrators, fleshlights, cockrings, personal lubricants and geisha balls. In an increasingly liberal sexual atmosphere – at least in the Western world – the use of sex toys is becoming more acceptable (Piha et al., 2018) and such accessories are commonly incorporated into sexual activity (Herbenick, Reece, Sanders, Dodge, Ghassemi, & Fortenberry, 2009; Reece, Herbenick, Sanders, Dodge, Ghassemi, & Fortenberry, 2009).

Consumer or consumption experience has long been among the most powerful and disrupting concepts in the field of consumer research (Chaney, Lunardo, & Mencarelli, 2018). Thus, considering sexual activity as sexuality-related consumption offers a fruitful opportunity to analyse sexual play from the perspective of consumer experience. Indeed, sexual play can be regarded as a form of affective consumer experience in which value is co-created together with one’s partner, or a toy, or through fantasising (Henricks, 2015; Sutton-Smith, 1997) and where sexual activity is understood as playing (Abramson & Pinkerton, 2002; Nathanson, 1992). In sum, sexual play with sex toys may provide *experiential value* by offering a novel escape and, thus, extraordinary consumer experience (cf. Arnould & Price, 1993).

Value creation through escaping is a contemporary but somewhat under-researched topic (cf. Cova et al., 2018), especially in the context of sexuality-related consumption. The current study

contributes to the existing literature by bringing the concept of consumer experience into the discussion of recreational sex. Thus, the purpose of this study is to analyse how experiential value is created through escapism in sexual play, with a particular focus on the use of sex toys. In what follows, the paper first introduces an initial conceptual framework based on discussions about consumer experiences and sexual play. This initial framework is then complemented by two sources of empirical data – a consumer survey and a set of interviews with experts on sexual health – resulting in the establishment of a more advanced conceptual framework. Finally, the implications of this framework are discussed.

Literature review

Experiential value of sexual play

Experiential consumption offers an arena for a relentless search for intense pleasures and high arousal (Cova et al., 2018; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). It is an escape *from* the mediocrity of everyday life but also an escape *into* experiential contexts that are enclaved and secure (Carù & Cova, 2003; Cova et al., 2018). Consumer experiences can be understood through two continuums that capture their cognitive versus affective and ordinary versus extraordinary nature (Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011). In the current study, sexual play with sex toys is viewed as an affective and extraordinary consumer experience that enables an individual, through involvement, to go through something that is emotionally engaging and appeals to the individual's hedonic and/or eudaimonic motivations, leading to experiential value (Konu, 2016; Mathwick et al., 2001; cf. Arnould & Price, 1993)

The *experiential value*, also referred to as *experienced value* (Komppula, 2005) or *experience value* (Antón, Camarero, & Laguna-García, 2017; Prebensen, 2014; Zhang, Gordon, Buhalis,

& Ding, 2018) is the multidimensional outcome of an affective consumer experience evaluated against the consumer's goals and purposes (Komppula, 2005). Experiential value relates not only to purchasing but also to consumption experiences, highlighting the interaction between a consumer and a product as well as the subjective and situational nature of value (Gallarza & Gil, 2008; Holbrook, 1999).

According to Prebensen (2014), experiential value *becomes* through co-creation, and highly worthy experiences occur by being present in the moment and enjoying the involvement in producing the experience. Value co-creation refers to the idea that value is created and experienced through use in a specific context, with consumers not being viewed merely as passive value receivers but, instead, as active value co-creators (Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, Zhang et al., 2018). These notions can be applied to sexual play and the use of sex toys, even though previous studies have not directly addressed experiential value co-creation in the context of sexuality-related consumption.

Highlighting the distinct nature of experiential value, Prebensen (2014) added the epistemic/novelty value dimension to Sweeney and Soutar's (2001) widely referred to scale consisting of functional, emotional and social value. The epistemic/novelty value means the propensity of experiences to arouse curiosity, provide novelty and satisfy a desire for knowledge (Prebensen, 2014). More recently, Antón et al. (2017) argued that experiential value consists of *escapism* and *fantasy*, highlighting the emotional impressions of getting away or diving into the imagination, and *attainment* and *learning*, referring to the cognitive perception that the experience has proved enriching and instructive.

Through its potential to offer experiential value, the use of sex toys can invoke a sense of novelty and provide the means for enriching everyday life. It can also enable an escape into ‘a liminoid state’ in which latent characteristics such as playfulness, which are often hidden by the self- or social control of everyday life, may be revealed (Selänniemi, 2003; Taheri, Gori, O’Gorman, Hogg, & Farrington, 2016). Previous literature has demonstrated that physical distance from everyday environments encourages sexually liberated behaviour (Carr, 2002; Carr & Poria, 2010; Graburn, 1983). However, sex toys have the potential to connect an individual to a fantasy world of playing, no matter whether he or she is physically at home or on holiday. Thus, the practices of sexual play, possibly accompanied by sex toys, can be considered as involving various *transgressions*.

Initial framework

In sexual play, experiential value related to escapism is likely to emerge at the point where personal and social boundaries are transgressed (cf. Selänniemi, 2003). According to Lauwaert (2009), the practices of play can be understood through the distinction between the core and periphery. At the core, play is facilitated, as the act of playing follows the predetermined ‘rules’ and external scripts set by, for example, the designer of a toy. At the periphery, in turn, playing actualises its essence of boundary testing by breaking the prescribed rules. Indeed, playfulness constitutes a central source of experiential value as it offers not only the enjoyment of absorbing activities but also an escape from the requirements of the day-to-day world (Cova et al., 2018; Holbrook, 1994; Mathwick et al., 2001).

A process similar to that of Lauwaert’s (2009) is introduced by Rubin’s (1998/1984) wheel model on the hierarchy of sex, in which an imaginary line is drawn to separate socially acceptable ‘good’ sex and socially less acceptable ‘bad’ sex. For a long time, the only

appropriate way to engage with sexual activity was within a heterosexual marriage – anything else was perceived as deviant behaviour (Rubin, 1998/1984). However, the tolerance towards so-called sexuality-related deviances has increased as the taboos regarding sexual behaviour have been broken down (Piha et al., 2018). Indeed, positive deviant leisure (Galloway, 2006) and playful deviance (Presdee, 1994; Ravenscroft & Gilchrist, 2009; Redmon, 2003) are motivated by the safe transgression of boundaries, including the seeking of excitement and adventure (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993; Stebbins, 1997).

The initial framework of sexual play as an affective consumer experience was developed to illustrate how sexual activity can be viewed as a mode of play that creates experiential value through different transgressions. For many consumers, sex toys may be an essential part of this value creation, but not necessarily for all, as sexual play is a diverse, multi-faceted and subjective phenomenon (Paasonen, 2018).

Fig. 1 depicts the idea of a transition from a norm (core) towards liberty (periphery), and vice versa. Arguably, a novel, and thus extraordinary sexual experience, takes place when the transition – or escape – from the norm reaches the transgression line. Using the imaginary line of transgression is, of course, an analytical exercise, and where exactly the line is drawn depends on subjective perceptions. On a general level, the line represents an outer border of the territory of sexual activity that the individual is already familiar and comfortable with. Thus, crossing the border means that the individual will experience something, and in the current study, the mediator for gaining these experiences is play. But what exactly does happen at the transgression line?

Insert here **Figure 1.** Transgression wheel

Research strategy

In this study, a three-phase explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design was applied (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006). First, a belief-elicitation study was used to find out factors that make sexual play using sex toys easier. Second, quantitative data from a consumer survey was used to get an overview of the relationship between sex-toy usage and leisure. Third, in the qualitative phase, this relationship was further explored using interviews with experts on sexual health. Applying the notation introduced by Morse (1991) to describe the timing, weighting and mixing decisions of this study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007), the current approach can be described as *qual*→*quan*→*QUAL*, with the uppercase letters indicating the priority given to the final qualitative part.

Pre-studies: Belief elicitation and survey

The belief-elicitation study using a convenience sample of Finnish university students (n = 42) with open-ended questions was carried out in May 2016 to identify factors that facilitate or hinder sex-toy usage. Then, an online survey using a probability sample of Finnish-speaking individuals aged between 18 and 65 years old was conducted through a consumer panel of a Finnish market research company from June–July 2016. The sample was stratified by age and gender according to the Finnish population. Due to poor reachability and based on the recommendation of the market research company, consumers who were over 65 were excluded from the sampling process. From the total of 556 survey respondents, 517 were included in the final analysis. The gender distribution was even. The age group distribution was also relatively even (18–45 years, 55%; 46–65 years, 45%).

The association between leisure and sex-toy usage was measured with a question ‘To what extent would increased leisure time make your sex-toy usage harder or easier?’, which was adopted from the belief-elicitation study. In the main survey, participants were asked to respond to the aforementioned question using a 7-point semantic differential scale ranging from *harder* (1) to *easier* (7). The participants’ sex-toy use frequency was also measured, resulting in the trichotomy of weekly users, yearly users and non-users.

The survey data was analysed descriptively and by using one-sample *t*-tests. The proportion of weekly users was 26%, with 27% being yearly users and 47% being non-users. Increased leisure time was associated with the perceived ease of using sex toys, as the mean for this variable was 4.8 (SD = 1.5), being significantly ($t[516] = 11.4; p < .001$) higher than the average of the scale ($M = 4$). The popularity of using sex toys hints at sex toys not necessarily being regarded as niche products but rather as a specific element of many consumers’ recreational sex life. This conclusion is reinforced by the notion that consumers perceive increased leisure time as a facilitator of sex-toy usage.

Overall, the pre-study established a straightforward relationship between sex-toy usage (a particular form of sexual play) and leisure time, but a deeper investigation to understand the nature of this relationship is required. How is experiential value created in this relationship? The purpose of the following main study is to delve deeper into this question.

Main study: Expert interviews

Design

In order to collect in-depth data about a delicate subject, themed interviews with experts on sexual health (therapists, advisers and clinical sexologists) was selected as a research method. Although the direct voice of the end users of sex toys (i.e. consumers) was not heard through this method, it was still considered the best way to collect trustworthy data. Indeed, these experts confidentially interact with consumers regarding their intimate spheres of life. Thus, the experts can act as an indirect voice even for vulnerable consumers who might otherwise not have participated in this study (cf. Brannen, 1988).

Only those experts who specialised in sexual health and regularly provided clinical treatments were included in the target sample. The experts were recruited via snowball sampling (cf. Chaim, 2008), resulting in 26 interviews from the 40 experts contacted. The interview themes related to the individual's motives for using sex toys and their relationship with sex toys, including the related emotions. The interviews took place from November–December 2017 either by phone (18) or face-to-face (8), and the length of each interview was between 45 and 80 minutes. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The professional experience of the interviewees in sexual health varied between 3 and 30 years, with 20 of them being females and 6 being males. Most of them were private operators located in the largest cities of Finland. This, however, reflects the typical state of the industry, as it is dominated by female experts (Carey, 2011; Diamond, 2011) and is often centralised in urban areas (cf. Kontula, Paalanen, & Valkama, 2014). This may indeed have biased the data as the services are not necessarily reachable by everyone.

The data was analysed in three phases by applying the established Gioia method (cf. Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). First, the initial concepts were identified in the data through the terms used by the informants and then grouped into categories (first-order concepts) by employing QSR NVivo. Second, the relationships between and among these categories were sought, which facilitated assembling them into higher-order themes (second-order concepts). This required several iteration cycles, where the codes were evaluated and synthesised through discussion. The process included peer debriefing, which entailed the field researcher engaging other researchers not involved in the analysis to make their own categorisations based on the first-order concepts and to discuss emerging patterns in the data. Finally, similar themes were grouped into theoretical aggregate dimensions that made up the basis of the emergent framework (Fig. 2).

Insert here **Figure 2.** Data structure

Results

The analysis of the qualitative data revealed three different approaches to sexual play: (1) an individual-oriented approach, (2) a relationship-oriented approach, and (3) an approach emphasising mental and physical unity. The approaches, together with their subsequent elements, are presented in this section.

An individual-oriented approach to sexual play was formed from sensuality, hedonism and freedom (Table 1). *Sensuality and hedonism* were seen in the individual's quest for joy and

play. One does not have to buy sex toys, but sometimes ‘only the thought of the possibility regarding “what if I were to buy one” may be felt as exciting’ (Mary), and entering into a sex shop may make individuals even more excited. Thus, the buying experience, whether imagined or experienced, may stimulate one’s senses. It is about waiting for something naughty to happen, and a sex toy helps one to get in the right mood, either before or during the sexual act. A sex toy is a tool for sensual joy. It can be like ‘a feather duster belonging to a French parlour maid; being teased, being gentle and cherishing one’s senses’ (Samantha). As stated by the expert: ‘Sex is adults’ play, and you need a toy for that’ (Victoria). Indeed, sex toys make the play ‘wonderful, funny, jolly, and great’ (Samantha). Sexual play makes one laugh and feel happy; ‘only the buzzing voice of a dildo – well, its sound is definitely heard by neighbours, who may believe I have a blender on’ (Katherine). Sex toys are one route towards sensual play, experienced alone or with a partner.

Insert here **Table 1**. Data supporting interpretations of the individual-related approach

Freedom was manifested in an individual’s desire to satisfy his or her own needs, irrespective of his or her relationship status. As one expert stated: ‘Loneliness does not reduce one’s sexuality and sexual desire’ (Katherine). Many experts highlighted that ‘Online porn may set extra performance pressures that make people collect sex toys’ (Sophia) to find their own limits. Thus, ‘many people have become attached to their sex toy’ (Victoria) to ‘avoid sexual frustration’ (Katherine). For example, ‘when a male has not found a suitable candidate for a girlfriend, the artificial vagina takes her place’ (Nigella). Today, ‘online porn and sex toys may have displaced the relationship between humans, because in a real relationship, we are always

talking about a compromise’ (Jason). Thus, sex toys can free us from loneliness, from temporal and relational restrictions that we feel exist, and can offer value experienced and influenced only by oneself – and a toy.

The relationship-oriented approach to sexual play consisted of variation, and bonding and communication (Table 2). *Variation* entails the need to distance oneself from the everyday grind. Many times, ‘people perform their everyday lives, and this is followed by performed sex’ (Isabella). It becomes ‘routine, boring’ (Harriet), and they look for a change, something different. They look for an exit route from their present sex life. Sex toys serve this purpose. A couple may create ‘a common fantasy, called Gary, who has moved into their bedroom. Gary is not only a toy, but it has become part of their relationship’ (Philip). Sex toys offer ‘extra spice to a relationship’s sex’ (Violet). ‘Such excitement ... and emancipation. A dance between an emotion of shame and emancipation’ (Mary). In this way, sexual play may create extraordinary value in one’s ordinary life.

Insert here **Table 2.** Data supporting interpretations of the relationship-related approach

Bonding and communication emphasised the role of sexual play in strengthening the relationship. ‘Secrecy and mysticism – they make the experience. It is our shared secrecy, our shared fun’ (George). Couples may have favourite toys that they are not ready to give up: ‘This is our common thing’ (Ellen). Sex toys may also act as a communication bridge between two people who have lost their mutual connection and vicinity, and where their sexual desires and sexual moods do not align: ‘Then you happen to find the sex toys and finally each other’

(Harriet). There is no need to make sexuality in the relationship too serious, but sex toys can be used as a shared communication channel in a relationship. Sex toys may also act as a channel for a more comprehensive improvement in the whole relationship: ‘It makes you relaxed; finally, something good happens’ (Theresa). Sex toys may also be tools of power, as partners can control each other’s sexual liberty through them.

The approach emphasising *mental and physical unity* consists of enabled experience and learning and self-realisation (Table 3). When considering *enabled experience*, sex toys can be used purely for health-related care by supporting one’s physiology. For example, one can advance ‘postnatal recovery by strengthening pelvic floor muscles with geisha balls’ (Katherine, Victoria), and ‘females’ mucous membranes may act better with the help of lubricant’ (Paul, Victoria). Sometimes sex toys have a crucial role in executing one’s sexuality, and without them it can even be impossible. For example, they may be an essential prerequisite for satisfying one’s sexual needs as a sexual enabler due to diseases such as ‘cancer’ (Peggy), or due to health issues such as ‘vagism or vulvodinia’ (Alan), ‘innate disabilities’ (Patricia) or just due to natural ‘aging’ (Nigella, Victoria). Finally, sex toys may support the sex act, for example, by strengthening an individual’s ability to achieve orgasm or by maintaining an erection, and ‘if the erection unfortunately ends during the act, you can continue with a vibrator’ (Alan). Sex toys, in their various forms, offer an opportunity for an equal sexual experience, no matter whether there are physical restrictions present, thus making them enablers for the value experience.

Insert here **Table 3**. Data supporting interpretations of mental and physical unity

Learning and self-realisation show that a lack of knowledge and, thereby, a lack of understanding of the manifestation of sexuality may hinder ‘finding the means to enjoy human sexuality’ (Lily). Sex toys may be the route to get to know one’s partner’s fantasies: ‘He bought dildos, handcuffs and other stuff to show his partner his own fantasies and desires, hoping that they would be sharable’ (Alan). It is not, however, only the partner whose sexual desires need to be known, but first and above all else, one has to learn about oneself: ‘Solo sex is a good way to get to know oneself, to find good, anatomic points and areas, to maximise one’s own pleasure. It is a safe way without being afraid of catching [sexually transmitted] diseases’ (Lily). People with ‘low self-esteem seem to acquire sex toys ... when you are unsure of your sexual ability’ (Alan). ‘A man will use every possible tool to make ‘it’ larger, longer and thicker’ (Katherine), and thereby strengthen his own sexual self-esteem. Knowing oneself and one’s partner and the mutual sources for maximum sexual pleasure is a value as such.

Established framework

To sum up, the *individual-related approach* emphasises sensuality and hedonism as a solution to a consumer’s insensible sexual life, while a consumer, distressed by temporal or relational limitations, thirsts for freedom. The *relationship-oriented approach* encompasses the whole relationship between two humans and considers how sexual play fosters this relationship by offering a variation in daily routines, and is also an arena for communication and strengthening bonds, thereby mitigating incompatibility between partners. Finally, a consumer is *a mental and physiological unity*, where ignorance of one’s own and one’s partner’s sexual self-esteem and preferences pushes a consumer to learn more so that there is a better understanding of sexual preferences and of one’s own self. Sexual play through sex toys abates physiological inability, enabling the implementation of one’s sexuality.

By combining the qualitative data structure with the initial framework (Fig. 1), an advanced conceptual framework is established. As depicted in Fig. 3, the initial framework is basically filled in with six dimensions that arose from the qualitative study, and these six dimensions are categorised into three aggregate dimensions. Furthermore, the advanced framework is complemented with the theoretical concept of playfulness, which has a definitive role as an incentive for an individual to transgress the boundaries (i.e. the dotted circle, Fig. 3).

Insert here **Figure 3.** Circle of value expectations for sexual play

Conclusions

Contribution

The current study indicates that leisure and sexual play – with or without sex toys – are interconnected, providing the rationale through which to analyse how experiential value is created through escapism in sexual play. Being among the first studies applying the consumer experience perspective to understand recreational sex and sexuality-related consumption (e.g. Gould, 1995; Piha et al., 2018; Walther & Schouten, 2016), this study contributes to the consumer experience literature on escapism and playfulness (e.g. Cova et al., 2018; Mathwick et al., 2001). As a concrete outcome, the study has proposed a conceptual framework (Fig. 3).

Particularly, the study suggests that a specific aspect of experiential value, namely, *playfulness* (Mathwick & Rigdon, 2004; Mathwick et al., 2001), acts as a dynamic motor that keeps individuals going and makes them thrive on sexual play. In the terminology of experiential value, playfulness can be considered as constituting epistemic/novelty value (Prebensen, 2014),

escape and fantasy, and attainment and learning (Antón et al., 2017). In general, the fuel for the dynamic motor of playfulness is the innate human characteristic of *curiosity* oriented towards pleasure-seeking hedonism and self-actualisation-seeking eudaimonism. This kind of curiosity is prominent, for example, when facing something that is socially slightly precarious (cf. the lure of a forbidden fruit) such as sex toys. Thus, while any manifestation of playfulness can be considered as intrinsically motivated, curiosity may have an exceptionally decisive role as a driver for sexual experimentation.

Reflecting upon the conceptual framework (Fig. 3), playfulness pushes individuals to transgress their boundaries, transiting them from the core with its individual, relational and social norms towards the outer periphery where all their value expectations can be fulfilled. Metaphorically speaking, playfulness makes the boundaries elastic, so that the core circle is no longer like a solid metal ring but becomes a flexible rubber band. This elasticity makes the escape from everyday life easy, but it also allows consumers to return to their realities once their sexual experimentation has satisfied their thirst for play for a time. Thus, the manifestations of sexual play may be considered as a type of temporary refuge (cf. Cova et al., 2018).

Importantly, however, the rubber bands become brittle if they are overly stretched. In a similar vein, individuals' sexual boundaries will become looser the more they are transgressed. This highlights the insatiable nature of the human mind, which goes well beyond the context of sexual play. For example, the current experiential consumption culture is such that companies are often expected to provide new experiences and reform their offerings (cf. Carù & Cova, 2003); otherwise the consumers may lose their interest. When a consumer tries something new for the first time, the experience might be satisfactory because it is extraordinary. However, the

second – let alone the third, fourth or fifth – time will probably not be that extraordinary. The tolerance level for extraordinary experiences increases, or, as proposed in this study, the transgression line moves further and further from the core of the circle.

Thus, in order to ensure that the dynamic motor keeps operating steadily and reliably, it is important for individuals to only escape from reality once in a while. The ability to return to everyday life is essential. This conclusion connects to the recent developments in consumer research that highlight the importance of ‘the balanced self’ (Grénman, 2019), referring to the individual’s ability to find harmony in his or her life, body and mind, particularly through advanced self-consciousness and self-regulation (Mick & Schwartz, 2012; Piha, 2018).

Implications

The current study showcases practical implications both for social and commercial marketers and consumers. For social marketers, this study is interesting in light of recent sexual trends. As several studies suggest, people from all over the world are having increasingly less partnered sex (Ghaznavi et al., 2019; Ingraham, 2019; Kontula, 2015; Twenge, Sherman, & Wells, 2017). Given the health effects associated with a stable and active sexual life (e.g. Jannini, Fisher, Bitzer, & McMahon, 2009), this development may be regarded as a societal concern. Acknowledging the role of playfulness as a dynamic motor for sexual activity may be warranted when designing, for example, sexual health promotion strategies. Social marketers might consider highlighting not only the health benefits but also the fun and excitement of sex. Naturally, sex toys can be included in such promotional activities.

The study may provide commercial marketers with an interesting tool with which to analyse the consumer market surrounding sex toys and sexual play. For example, if some consumers are trying to escape from day-to-day life with the help of sex toys, marketing them like everyday products in grocery stores might not be a fruitful strategy to persuade such consumers to buy them. This sort of marketing may undermine the excitement – arising from a feeling of sex toys being almost prohibited – of using such accessories (Piha et al., 2018). If the excitement is diminished, the fuel of playfulness will run out and the motor will lose its power.

For consumers, the value expectation circle may be an instrument for self-reflection, as it highlights the elastic nature of people's sexual playground. On the one hand, consumers can use this framework as a self-help tool to recognise that sex toys may provide experiential value in numerous forms, and sexual play may be very differently oriented over the changing phases of life. On the other hand, the framework may inspire individuals themselves to 'balance' their sexual life if they feel frustration stemming from the constant pursuit of new sexual experiences resulting from their loosened transgression lines, that is, their brittle and over-stretched rubber band.

Limitations and future research

The study is not without limitations. Regarding the quantitative study, the absence of over-65-year-old consumers is a considerable limitation, as well as the reliance on rather simple single variables for the connections between leisure and sexual play. In the qualitative study, the reliance on information provided by the experts may entail the risk of a biased and inadequate understanding of end-users' experiences. This limitation is especially relevant because the experts, most of whom are females, private operators and centralised in cities, do not necessarily reach consumers equally. Future studies could try to address this limitation by

directly interviewing the users of sex toys. However, this method would likely be vulnerable to self-selection bias (cf. Robinson, 2013).

Importantly, there are many people for whom sex toys are an enabler for implementing their sexuality due to some sort of inability rather than these toys being something that merely ‘spices up’ one’s sexual life. Although this study points out a dimension (enabled experience) that examines this issue, the main emphasis has been elsewhere. Future studies should focus on the sexuality-related consumption of people whose life is impacted by such disabilities.

Finally, according to Magnuson and Barnett (2013), playfulness can be regarded as a personality characteristic. In future research, analysing consumer experiences in relation to playfulness would further our understanding of the reasons why some individuals might be more prone to engaging in sexual play. Indeed, the remaining great challenge is how the majority of adult consumers can be persuaded to move into the world of play in such a sensitive sphere of life as their sexuality. Supposedly, for many people, sexuality may not be something to escape into but rather something to escape from.

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Table 1. Data supporting interpretations of the individual-related approach

Concept	Representative quotations for the individual-related approach
Sensuality and hedonism	<p>‘Visiting a sex shop ... yes, it’s still associated with giggling.’ (Stimulating buying experience; Mary)</p> <p>‘When I get this one and that one, I’m getting in the mood for sure ... Doing it; naughty but nice.’ (Waiting for something naughty; Theresa)</p> <p>‘For some it (a sex toy) works really well as a stimulator and turns you on.’ (Getting excited in the sex act; Jessica)</p> <p>‘Lubricant is bought for a more sensitive touch. It is also a good reason to touch each other.’ (Cherishing the sense of touch; Ellen)</p> <p>‘Sex must include humour. Anything can happen, one can giggle – this is fun, whether it will work or not.’ (Happy sex; Harriet)</p> <p>‘Both play with their own (toy) even though it’s a moment together.’ (Adult play; Brenda)</p>
Freedom	<p>‘Some like to collect different sex toys and try new ones, find different sensations.’ (Collecting hobby; Mary)</p> <p>‘A toy can be very meaningful and dear, a true treasure: “Here is my lovely whip.” The relationship with the toy is different.’ (Relationship with the toy/substitute for loneliness; Nigella)</p> <p>‘It’s not just the toy but how it provides time and an opportunity for having, for example, solo sex and concentrating on one’s own needs, mindfulness.’ (Independence from time and relationship; Sophia)</p> <p>‘Some find sex toys a good partner.’ (Relationship with the toy/substitute for loneliness; Shirley)</p>

Table 2. Data supporting interpretations of the relationship-related approach

Concept	Representative quotations for the relationship-oriented approach
Variation	<p>‘Sexual habits are somewhat limited. Sex requires more stimulation than the partner can give.’ (A way out of having habitual sex; Ellen)</p> <p>‘It’s their shared fantasy, “Jack”. He might be a doctor, a firefighter, or a plumber. He might also be a neighbour. He just came for a visit.’ (Jump into the fantasy world; Philip)</p> <p>‘Some need more thrills to their act.’ (Spice added to sex; Lily)</p> <p>‘Getting away from the performance and tapping into the pleasure instead ... Some think pleasure is quivering or whimpering, some think it’s grabbing or handcuffing or whipping or using a fan or any other sex toys.’ (Immersing in sex; Jessica)</p>
Bonding and communication	<p>‘Sharing it with our closest one only, our shared thing, which makes it somehow more valuable.’ (Common secret; Nigella)</p> <p>‘At its best, it’s experiencing and adventuring together.’ (Common experience; George)</p> <p>‘In a long relationship, the sexual potency of the man starts to reduce while the desires of his woman won’t, at a similar pace.’ (Mismatch in sexual desire or ability; Nigella)</p> <p>‘When a man goes away on holiday, he gives his wife a vibrator, just in case she has a longing.’ (Tool of power; Peggy)</p> <p>‘It can be the glue in the relationship. It connects the partners together. The partners might unexpectedly learn something new from each other. Through an online store, they can find a new conversational culture, if face-to-face discussion is felt to be too difficult. This could take them to a new level and open the door to something new.’ (Communication tool; Patty)</p> <p>‘There are a great number of couples who are not happy with a mediocre relationship. They want something better. They are ready to buy sex toys. They are not happy with their lives and of the traditional idea of “getting married, being married, period”.’ (Comprehensive improvement in the relationship; Harriet)</p>

Table 3. Data supporting interpretations of mental and physical unity

Concept	Representative quotations for mental and physical unity
Enabled experience	<p>‘In the treatment of vaginal pain. Different types of dildos are needed to get the vagina used to inserting something into it.’ (Healthcare-related use; Patricia)</p> <p>‘An individual might have disabilities, for example, hand weakness.’ (Enabler for executing sexuality; Theresa)</p> <p>‘The woman has difficulties in achieving an orgasm or has never been able to. Then a quality vibrator is essential.’ (Support for the sex act; Theresa)</p>
Learning and self-realisation	<p>‘Refreshing one’s sex life. They wish to revive their fantasies, and also to awaken their partner: “Hey, I have this kind of desire”.’ (Learning journey into the partner’s sexuality; Philip)</p> <p>‘So, this lady got a dildo with which she has taught herself, learnt to know new things about herself, pleasure. The husband is not interested in his wife’s exploration. It’s her own thing, her own erotic journey.’ (Learning journey into one’s own sexuality; Nigella)</p> <p>‘If a man gives a woman an orgasm, he’ll enjoy it almost as much as she does, maybe even more. He’s feeling masculine. Men find it very exciting if a woman is eager to try new things (sex toys).’ (Sexual identity and self-esteem; George)</p>

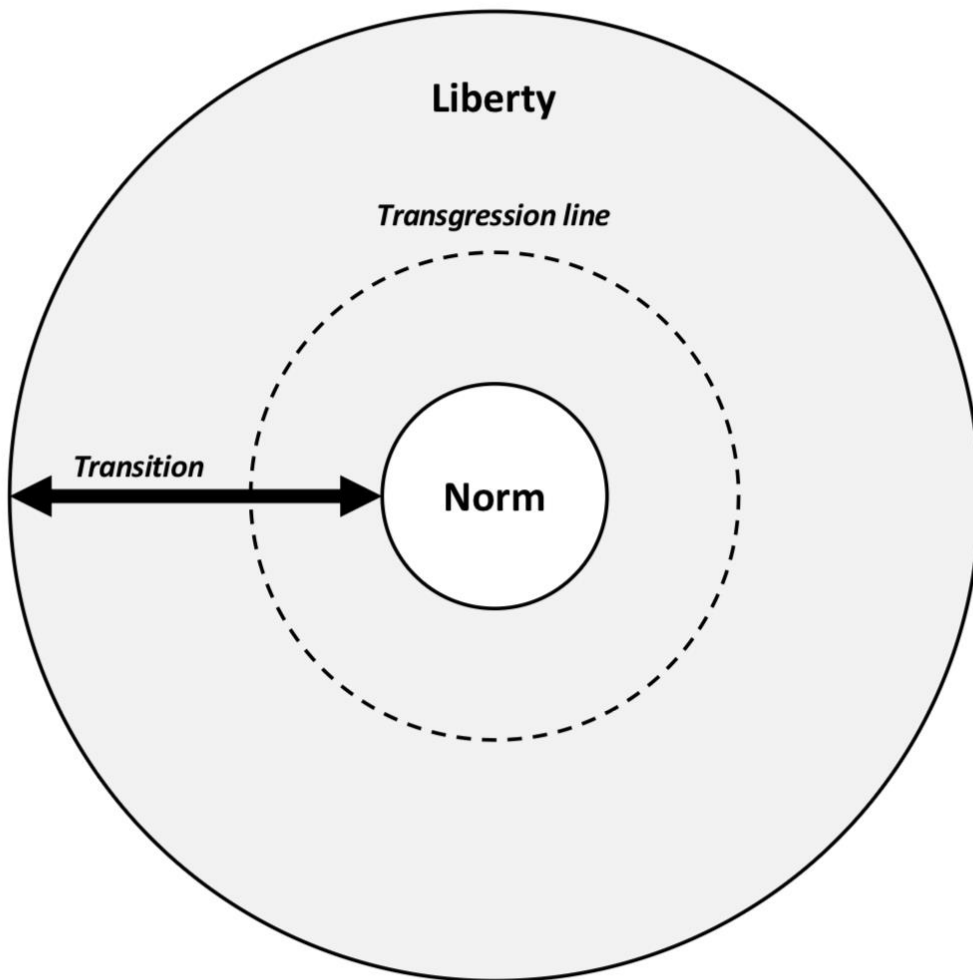


Figure 1. Transgression wheel

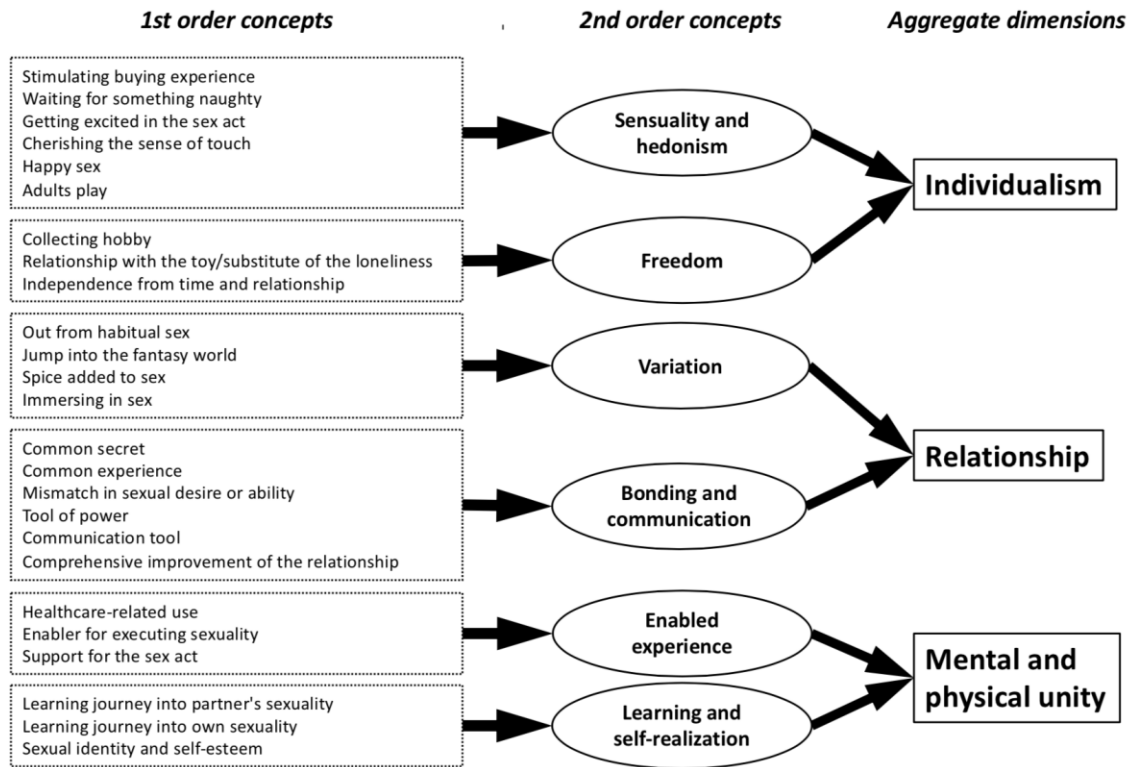


Figure 2. Data structure

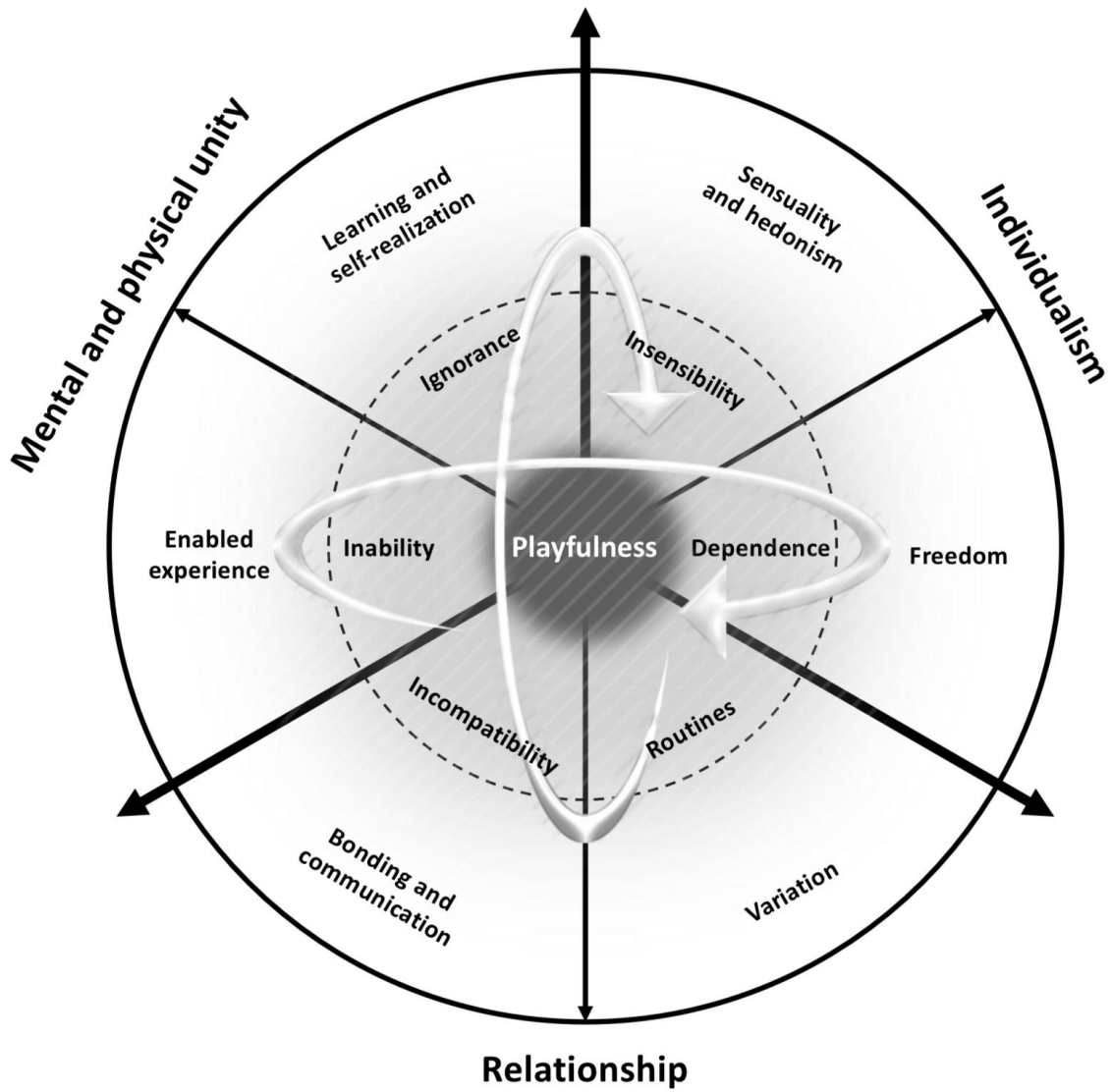


Figure 3. Circle of value expectations for sexual play