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From Bodily Functions to Bodily Fun: Approaching Pleasure as a Process when Designing with Sexual Experiences

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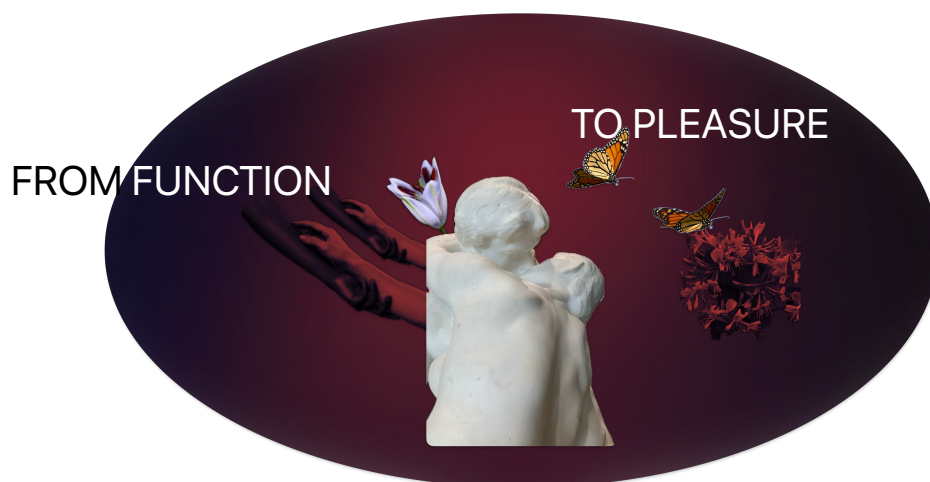a.bozzon@tudelft.nl

Figure 1: This image visualises our conceptual exploration of pleasure as a process. The collage was created as a sense-making tool to reflect on the ideas emerging from our theoretical framing, participant insights, and design provocations. It illustrates a shift away from goal-oriented, functional perspectives on sexuality toward a more open-ended, sensory, and self-directed understanding of intimate experience.

Abstract

This paper presents a conceptual exploration of designing sexual pleasure as an evolving whole-body experience. It addresses the historically narrow focus of research and technology on functional outcomes such as reproduction and orgasm. This limited perspective overlooks diverse desires, emotional connection, and sensory engagement, reinforcing restrictive norms that shape how individuals conceptualise and experience sexuality. To inform our design inquiry, we conducted a qualitative survey (N=143) to generate how individuals understand and experience sexual pleasure. Reflexive thematic analysis of the responses reveals the influence of culture and technology on sexuality, alongside several experiential dimensions: emotional and embodied connection, play and sensory immersion, and vulnerability. These insights, together with a theoretical foundation, guide a design exploration communicated through two provocations. These provocations serve as reflections of an alternative design orientation; one that challenges normative assumptions, views pleasure as an ongoing process, supports bodily exploration, and facilitates richer, more inclusive sexual experiences.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing → Empirical studies in interaction design**; **Empirical studies in HCI**; **Interaction design**

theory, concepts and paradigms; *Empirical studies in interaction design*; Empirical studies in HCI; **Empirical studies in HCI**.

Keywords

sexuality, sexual pleasure, touch, pleasure as a process, interaction design, feminist HCI, sexual technologies, SexTech

1 Introduction

Historically, research, design, and technology in sexuality have focused on functional aspects (i.e. reproduction, dysfunction), medicalising sexual experiences [33, 65, 66]. This narrow focus on performance and measurable "success" (i.e. orgasm) overlooks sexuality as a holistic and exploratory process. Concentrating on these performative goals can be problematic because natural sexual arousal processes (e.g. erection, lubrication, desire and orgasm) cannot be forced to occur or prevented at will. Attempts to consciously manage these responses often result in psychological challenges and performance anxiety [73].

Pioneering efforts by Masters and Johnson, widely recognised in sex therapy [1, 22, 23, 51, 73, 74], critiqued this function-centric view. Their concept of Sensate Focus reframed sexuality around pleasure rather than strictly performance-based goals [43, 44]. Pleasure itself, however, may be approached in different ways. For instance, a goal-oriented view of pleasure still positions orgasm as the defining peak of satisfaction, whereas a process-oriented stance focuses on the richness of sensations, emotional resonance, and full-bodied engagement throughout intimate encounters. Sensate Focus, which involves structured, non-goal-oriented touch exercises, belongs to this latter, process-oriented perspective. By encouraging individuals or partners to notice and savour nuanced sensory experiences rather than chasing orgasm, Sensate Focus has demonstrated benefits in reducing performance pressure, fostering intimacy, and supporting more fulfilling experiences overall [3, 76]. This approach has broad potential to help those experiencing performance anxiety [3], post-childbirth sexual health issues [58], body self-consciousness [76], cancer-related concerns [27], and discrepancies in desire within relationships [71]. While serious functional sexual problems require professional therapy, the approach of pleasure as a process when designing with sexual experiences proposed in this paper is not intended to replace expert care. Instead, it can complement existing support in both therapeutic settings and everyday life by providing additional strategies that support sexual experiences.

Despite these therapeutic advances, the more holistic rethinking of sexuality—from *function* to a *pleasure as a process* understanding—has not yet substantially reshaped the design of sexual technologies, either within or outside of HCI [47]. While vibrators and similar products can indeed provide physical stimulation [6, 25], many continue to target orgasm as the primary endpoint, underutilising the potential of technology to expand and deepen pleasurable experiences. Reductionist designs risk confining sexuality to narrowly defined, measurable outcomes (most typically orgasm) neglecting broader emotional, sensory, and relational dimensions. By contrast, a process-oriented approach to pleasure can accommodate a wider array of individual preferences and identities, including those historically marginalised by normative assumptions about how bodies "should" function or what sexual engagement "should" look like [33].

In this paper, we explore the potential of a process-oriented view of pleasure in designing sexual technologies; not by offering new technologies per se, but by contributing a conceptual rethinking of how pleasure might be approached in design. To that end, we conducted a qualitative survey (N=143) focused on pleasure-oriented sexual experiences, seeking diverse perspectives, desires, and challenges. This provides us with little glimpses into real-world lived experiences of a wide array of individuals. The survey draws on the Sensate Focus model and complementary pleasure-forward frameworks [36, 43, 44, 48, 66]. Drawing on themes generated from this data, we then created two provocations to stimulate conversation around pleasure-centric design. Both provocations are shaped by a feminist lens that acknowledges the varied realities of sexuality, inviting the HCI community to consider the many ways people define and pursue pleasure.

We contribute a conceptual shift toward viewing pleasure a process in sexual technology design. By combining theoretical and empirical insights, and examplary provocations, we illustrate how interactive technologies might facilitate a more holistic sense of sexuality; one that embraces pleasure as ongoing sensory, emotional and bodily engagement.

2 Related Work

This Related Work section sets out the sex-therapeutic and theoretical foundations informing our process-oriented approach to sexual pleasure, along with an overview of existing sexual technologies in the field.

2.1 Sex Therapy: Sensate Focus

Sensate Focus, developed by Masters and Johnson [43, 44], is a foundational therapy [1, 22, 23, 51, 73, 74] in sex therapy for reducing performance pressure and supporting a holistic understanding of sexual intimacy [3]. It shifts the focus from goal-driven outcomes, such as orgasm, to the sensory and emotional experiences of physical connection [3, 76].

The method is built on three core principles: (1) centering attention on one's own sensory experiences rather than on a partner's responses, (2) avoiding goal-oriented behaviour to reduce anxiety, and (3) using mindfulness to redirect attention to tactile sensations when distractions arise [42]. These principles aim to redefine sexual interactions as natural physiological processes enriched by emotional and sensory exploration. For a detailed description of Sensate Focus sessions, readers can refer to Weiner et al. [74].

Sensate Focus was among the first approaches to incorporate mindfulness into sex therapy, focusing on bodily sensations as a way to manage performance anxiety and support natural sexual

responses [42]. Its adaptability has extended its use to diverse populations, including individuals with dis/abilities [7], sexual trauma [75], or non-heteronormative identities [41].

Digital interventions inspired by Sensate Focus include Blanken et al. [9]'s internet-based therapy for heterosexual male sexual dysfunction and Hucker and McCabe [34]'s cognitive behavioural therapy platform for female sexual difficulties. Both successfully incorporate mindfulness and Sensate Focus principles, showing the flexibility of these ideas in non-traditional therapeutic settings.

The exploration we offer in this paper is not one of therapeutic interventions, but rather a conceptual and design-oriented extension of the principles Sensate Focus promotes. We draw on its process-oriented view of pleasure to consider how design might support emotional attunement, bodily presence, and open-ended exploration; especially outside the clinical context. In doing so, we aim to foreground pleasure not as an outcome to be achieved, but as a way of being with oneself and others.

2.2 A Theoretical Foundation of Feminist and Crip Perspectives for Sexual Technologies

Sex-positive feminism critiques genital-centric, and penetrative notions of pleasure that perpetuate unequal power dynamics and limit the broader understanding of sexuality [2, 52]. It intersects with autonomy feminism and queer theory by focusing on self-determination and agency, advocating for control over one's body and life free from societal constructs. It additionally challenges fixed identities based on gender or sexual orientation, celebrating diverse sexual expressions [2].

Crip theory complements sex-positive feminism by challenging ableist norms that equate pleasure with heterosexuality and conventional bodily functions [37, 45]. It resists attempts to *"cure, fix, or eliminate disability"* [29, 49], advocating instead for the recognition and celebration of diverse bodies and sexualities. This underscores the need for inclusive designs that accommodate varied sexual identities and experiences, countering normative assumptions that often marginalise individuals based on dis/ability or non-heteronormative identities.

Judith Butler's perspective further enriches this by positing that the materiality of bodies is inherently linked to societal norms, asserting that bodies cannot exist outside cultural constructs [15]. This perspective aligns with the understanding that sexual experiences are deeply embedded in and influenced by cultural narratives and societal expectations.

Sexual scripting theory provides additional insight into how cultural norms shape individual experiences in romantic and sexual relationships [60, 61]. According to Seabrook et al. [57], sexual scripts are cultural guidelines that dictate appropriate behaviours and roles in sexual interactions. For instance, the heterosexual script in Western culture outlines specific courtship behaviours, commitment levels, and sexual goals for men and women. It expects men to actively pursue sexual relationships and prioritise sex over emotions, while women are expected to remain passive, set sexual boundaries, and use their appearance to attract men [40, 57]. These scripts can limit individuals' agency and reinforce gendered expectations [57].

Collectively, sex-positive feminism, queer and crip theory offer a theoretical foundation for approaching pleasure as process when designing sexual technologies. These perspectives embrace diversity, agency, and the multifaceted nature of sexual pleasure. They critically engage with normative assumptions and advocate for inclusive representations of sexuality. In doing so, they inform a design orientation that supports a broader range of sexual experiences; moving away from a restrictive focus on bodily functions and toward a holistic, exploratory, and embodied understanding of sexual pleasure.

2.3 Sexual Technologies in HCI

Sexuality has increasingly been recognised as an important area of study within HCI [5, 6, 10, 13]. Researchers describe the importance of viewing the human body not just as a cognitive and functional entity but as a medium for rich, subjective experiences, including sexuality [25, 53].

Within the domain of HCI, this perspective has been explored across diverse areas such as pornography [38, 46, 78], sex robots [54, 69], care technologies for sexual health [47, 55, 56], and educational games [72, 77]. Within this broad landscape, attention has also been directed towards sex toys [6]. Devices such as vibrators [33, 79] are primarily designed to stimulate the body and elicit sexual pleasure through genital stimulation [25]. However, these offerings often reinforce sexual normativity [33] and predominantly focus on reaching functional goals like orgasms, thereby limiting their potential to support diverse and inclusive sexual experiences.

Recent literature has called for a broader understanding of pleasure. Campo Woytuk et al. [17] highlight the challenges in designing technologies for the vagina, advocating for a reframing of traditional penetration narratives. Drawing on feminist and posthuman theories, they introduce the concept of "circlusion", which repositions the vagina as an active participant rather than a passive recipient in technological interactions. Offerman et al. [47] introduce a more-than-genital perspective on sexuality, suggesting that designers engage the entire body rather than focusing narrowly on intercourse or orgasm. Further contributing to this discourse, Hua et al. [32] explore how somaesthetic interaction design can enhance women's sexual pleasure by challenging androcentric discourses and addressing the desexualisation of women with dis/abilities. This work underscores the potential of somaesthetic principles to facilitate more inclusive and empowering sexual technologies. Additionally, Hua et al. [32] and To et al. [67] are pioneering the integration of pleasure activism within HCI, which *"includes work and life in the realms of satisfaction, joy, and erotic aliveness that bring about social and political change"* [14].

Our work situates itself within this evolving discourse. Drawing on sex therapy literature and lived experiences captured in a qualitative survey, we explore what it could mean to treat pleasure not as an endpoint but as an unfolding process. In doing so, we aim to inform and inspire design orientations that honour the complexity and diversity of human sexuality.

3 Methodology

We explore how a process-oriented, pleasure-centric approach might reframe the design of sexual technologies. To ground this

conceptual exploration in lived experiences, we conducted a qualitative survey aimed at surfacing a wide range of experiences of arousal and sexual pleasure. Here, we prioritised rich, subjective accounts that reflect the complexity and diversity of human sexuality. These narratives serve as generative material for reflection and design; to inform and inspire new ways of thinking about pleasure in interaction design.

3.1 Study Design

To develop a bottom-up understanding of participants' intimate experiences, we adopted a qualitative survey approach grounded in the interpretive "Big Q" paradigm [12, 39, 64]. This paradigm prioritises the richness and subjectivity of data over notions of reliability and generalisability associated with "confused q" research rooted in a positivist-empiricist quantitative framework. Following the methodology established by Braun and Clarke et al. [12, 48, 64, 68], a qualitative survey was chosen for its suitability in handling sensitive topics by providing participants with privacy and anonymity [12]. We anticipated that enabling participants to reflect on arousal and sexual pleasure in their own environment, without the presence of an interviewer, would generate more genuine and detailed insights (also indicated by Braun and Clarke [12]).

3.2 Materials

Our survey was based on the Experiences of Orgasm and Sexual Pleasure Survey developed by Rogers, Braun, and Clarke [48], which incorporated critical perspectives to avoid reinforcing normative assumptions about (hetero)sexuality. To align more closely with our research focus, we adapted the survey to focus on sexual arousal and pleasure rather than orgasmic function. This shift was informed by Masters and Johnson's [43, 44] Sensate Focus.

As an example of this reframing, we replaced the original question *"How do you feel if you orgasm during sexual activity with a partner?"* with: *"Can you describe a moment where your sexual experience became more intense? What changed or happened?"* This adaptation invites participants to reflect on their embodied experiences and the circumstances that deepen pleasure, rather than evaluating their sexual experience based on the presence or absence of orgasm.

The final survey comprised 11 open-ended questions in English, grouped into four thematic areas, which can be found in the additional materials. To refine the survey, we sought peer feedback and piloted it with three participants, adjusting the wording and scope for clarity and sensitivity. Demographic information was collected after the main questions, following Braun and Clarke [12]'s recommendations, with demographic questions being optional to maintain participant comfort.

3.3 Participants and Procedure

Participants were required to be over 18 years old and provide informed consent. Participation was anonymous, as no personally identifiable information was collected.

Following the recruitment strategy of Terry and Braun [64], participants were recruited via social media, online communities, and QR code posters placed in public bathrooms and other public spaces in and around Rotterdam, the second-largest city in the

Netherlands. We chose a localised strategy because cultural contexts significantly influence the conception and experience of sexuality [70]. Within this cultural context, we actively sought to reach a diverse and varied sample.

To capture a wide range of experiences, we invited participants to disclose their demographic background, including gender identity, age, sexual orientation, relationship status, and religion/spiritual beliefs (see Table 1). Because we wanted to adopt a trauma-informed lens [20] to our data collection process, we explicitly stated to participants to share only what they felt comfortable with, allowing them to skip any question without providing a reason. Responses from individuals who did not provide any open-ended answers were excluded from the analysis, resulting in a final sample of N=143.

The survey was conducted online using Qualtrics[1], ensuring anonymous access and maximising reach. Participation was voluntary, with no financial incentives provided. Informed consent was obtained before participants could access the survey. The survey remained open for three weeks, during which responses were automatically saved, allowing participants to return and complete the survey if they chose to do so.

Demographic Category	Distribution (N=143)
Gender Identity	Female (54), Male (20), Non-binary (3), Other (0), Prefer not to say (1)
Age	18–32 (64), 33–47 (7), 48–62 (6), 63+ (1)
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual (41), Bisexual (22), Pansexual (8), Asexual (4), Homosexual (2), Other (2), Prefer not to say (0)
Relationship Status	Monogamous (39), Single (29), Open relationship (8), Polyamorous (2), Prefer not to say (1)
Religion/Spiritual Beliefs	Not at all (64), Slightly (11), Moderately (2), Significantly (1)

Table 1: Participants' demographic information (N=143). Participants were not required to disclose all demographic details, as we prioritised their comfort given the sensitive nature of this research.

3.4 Analysis

We followed Braun and Clarke [11]'s six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis: (1) familiarising ourselves with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) identifying initial themes, (4) reviewing these themes, (5) naming and defining them, and finally (6) reporting the findings. Throughout this process, we combined a constructionist perspective, focusing on underlying patterns, with a realist perspective that takes participants' accounts at face value. In other words, we assume what participants report reflects their genuine experiences, treating their subjective experiences seriously, which aligns with our positionality (see section §3.6).

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[1]https://www.qualtrics.com

Data familiarisation involved reading and re-reading all open-ended responses, allowing the first author to gain an in-depth understanding of the content and context. Initial codes were generated in ATLAS.ti[2]. These codes were then grouped to form potential themes, capturing central patterns. Themes were iteratively reviewed and refined by the first and second authors to ensure coherence and internal consistency.

During the analysis, we recognised that references to negative sexual experiences might implicitly reflect trauma. Thus, we coded these segments with heightened sensitivity, drawing on a trauma-informed perspective [20] to interpret participant accounts respectfully and ensure the narrative remained grounded in their personal perspectives.

The first author led the interpretation and naming of the final themes, which were then discussed and agreed upon with the other authors. Illustrative quotes were selected to represent typical or particularly vivid instances of each theme. These quotations were lightly edited for clarity and anonymity, preserving the underlying meaning and tone.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Throughout the preparation of materials and procedure, we prioritised participant comfort over comprehensive data collection, recognising that research on sensitive and intimate topics requires careful consideration to ensure that participants' well-being precedes research objectives. Consequently, participants were only asked to answer questions they felt comfortable with, and completing all demographic or open-ended questions was not mandated. To respect and value participants' time, we included those who responded to at least one open-ended question. To safeguard privacy, no personally identifiable information was collected, ensuring data could not be directly linked to individuals. Each participant was assigned a randomised number, which they were encouraged to record, allowing them to retract their data later if they chose to do so. The appropriate ethical review board approved the study under TU Delft ID 4739.

3.6 Positionality Statement

As interaction designers and researchers, we question how sexual pleasure is conceptualised and engaged with in design. Our exploration is grounded in feminist commitments to plurality and embodied knowledge. Our work is informed by previous collaborations with (medical) sex therapists, which have shaped our understanding of sexual pleasure and the complexities surrounding it. One author's personal experiences with a non-normative sexual trajectory due to trauma have further deepened our appreciation of the nuanced and dynamic nature of reclaiming sexual pleasure.

We do not treat participant data generated with the survey as evidence in the traditional empirical sense, but as rich, subjective accounts that can provoke reflection and reorientation. These voices are central to our inquiry; not only as material for the provocations, but as prompts to imagine new ways of designing with, rather than for, intimate experiences. This approach reflects our commitment

to engaging with the complexity of human sexuality and reimagining pleasure as an ongoing sensory, emotional and bodily lived experience.

4 Results

Our analysis led to 4 themes mapped in Figure 2. The first theme (§4.1) explores how sexual experiences are shaped by society via media, technology, and design. It also outlines how individuals actively shape their environments to align with their sexual desires, creating a dynamic interplay between external influences and personal agency. Themes two (§4.2), three (§4.3), and four (§4.4) shift focus to the human experience itself, diving into the emotional, physical, and relational dimensions of sexual pleasure.
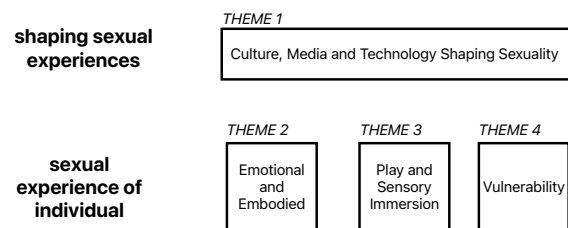
Figure 2: Mapping of the themes.

4.1 Culture, Media and Technology Shaping Sexuality

Personal experiences of intimacy and arousal are embedded within and influenced by cultural contexts (Figure 3). Participants' narratives reveal how design shapes their perceptions and experiences of sexuality and intimacy.
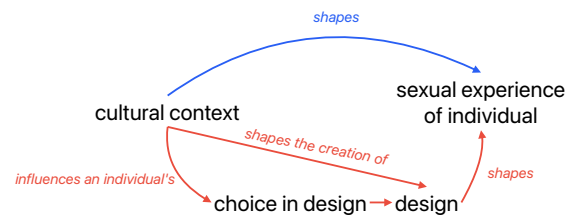
Figure 3: Cultural context shapes individuals' sexual experiences (blue arrow, §4.4.1) and influences both the creation of design artefacts (top red arrow) and the design artefacts individuals choose to engage with (bottom red arrow, §4.1.1). These engagements, in turn, further shape sexual experience, illustrating the complex and intertwined relationship between culture, design, and sexuality.

This influence is bidirectional. Participants actively modify their environments to align with their desires, illustrating that intimacy is both shaped by cultural contexts and an expression of individual agency (Figure 4).

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[2]https://atlasti.com

Figure 4: Individuals use design artefacts to tailor their sexual experiences.

4.1.1 The Influence of Media and Design on Sexuality. Intimacy and arousal occur within cultural contexts, where media and design act as forces shaping perceptions and practices of sexuality. Participants' accounts illustrate how media representations and technological designs not only influence what they desire but also guide how they engage with their own sexuality.
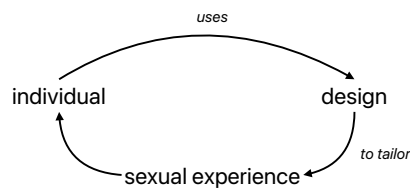
Media content offers cultural scripts that help individuals understand and navigate sexual experiences. Romantic depictions in books, films, and series foster a sense of connection and validation, as one participant noted, *"Watching a romantic or sexual film/series/book that I identify with"* (P76), which evoked feelings of belonging and acceptance. However, these scripts can also reinforce restrictive, heteronormative ideals. One participant felt *"stuck in the pornographic norm"*—hierarchical portrayals in mainstream pornography limited their sexual expression. Rejecting these norms opened *"a whole world of possibilities"* (P57), enabling a more authentic and fulfilling approach to intimacy.

Certain features in pornography informed personal fantasies, prompting participants to incorporate these elements into their real-life encounters. For instance, one participant (P134) enjoyed "hard porn". They then described how they created *"videos of my partner having sex with a friend [...] The look of the thrusting and very important that I see my partner enjoying it."* (P134). Another participant (P50) was drawn to latex imagery and began experimenting with latex themselves. In these ways, media and design not only reflect desires but actively shape them.

Notably, the survey itself triggered arousal for some participants. One stated, *"This questionnaire triggered me sexually in ways I did not comprehend before starting to fill it out"* (P29), while another messaged the first author that reflecting on their experiences gave them new insights into their sexuality.

Contemporary cultural symbols, such as aubergine or peach emojis, can trigger sexual thoughts (P27), just like hearing pings of message services used for sexting[3] (P50). As cultural landscapes shift, definitions of sex evolve accordingly. One participant noted, *"I think the concept of sex [...]is not only personal but also the definition at the time."* (P62). This ongoing evolution highlights how media, design, and cultural contexts continually interact to redefine the meaning and experience of sexuality.

4.1.2 Using Design Artefacts to create Personal Sexual Experiences. Participants actively altered their surroundings to better align with their desires. By curating physical settings, integrating technology,

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[3]Sexting refers to sending sexually explicit messages, images, or videos through digital channels.

and experimenting with media, they exercised agency to create experiences that resonated with their own sexual identities.

Sensory customisation played a big role. Carefully chosen music, lighting, and scents transformed spaces. One participant described *"Music on, candlelight, good smell in the room... Warm atmosphere"* (P60), illustrating how environmental elements became extensions of their inner world. Technology was similarly harnessed: *"Since a few years, I climax faster and even more intensely thanks to those devices on my clit that vibrate intensely, paired with penetration. It distributes sensitivity so I don't become overly sensitive"* (P134). Media, when shared deliberately, enhanced intimacy and excitement: *"Watching porn together... makes sex 10x more exciting"* (P47). Participants also used clothing, lingerie, and accessories to foster confidence. This connected individuals more deeply to their sexual selves. For example;*,"Placing mirrors... is visually exciting and adds a layer of intimacy"* (P75). Some embraced wearing harnesses, lingerie, or other attire (e.g., P4) to create expressions of desire that suited them.

In reshaping their worlds by choosing media, modifying environments, and adopting technologies, participants demonstrated that intimacy emerges through dynamic interplay. Cultural influences and designs set the stage, but individuals continually revise and rewrite that script, asserting their agency to create sexual experiences that feel personally meaningful.

4.2 Emotional and Embodied

Emotional connection and embodied presence form the core of fulfilling sexual experiences. Participants highlighted love, self-confidence, and physical awareness as central to intimacy, with mutual desire deepening emotional bonds and arousal.

4.2.1 I Love You (Let Me Make You Feel Good). Participants often engage in sex to connect with their partners and express affection. Motivations included *"for purposes of love"* (P29) and *"to feel connected to the other person"* (P31). One participant described a transformative experience, shifting from viewing sex as a collection of encounters to *"an exchange of energy and deep pleasure mixed with happiness"* after meeting their *"sexual soulmate"* (P57). For many, making their partner feel good was equally important. As one participant shared, *"I want to express it by making him feel good and receiving from him the same"* (P10). Others highlighted how sex enhances relationships, making them *"more spicy"* (P24) and providing opportunities *"to have fun and build a part of a relationship that cannot be accessed by other means"* (P41). These interactions intertwine love, care, and mutual pleasure, deepening emotional bonds.

4.2.2 Mindset: Bodily Presence. Participants frequently describe the need to surrender to physical sensations and overcome cognitive distractions. As one noted, *"I don't really get aroused if I'm not relaxed and am too much in my head"* (P37). Many participants report that distractions detract from their experiences, such as *"If I get distracted by a sound [...] I get super turned off"* (P18). In contrast, an empty mind, boredom, or curiosity sometimes heightened arousal (P106, P130). Activities enhancing body awareness (dancing, swimming, mindfulness) lead to sexual arousal and confidence. One participant described *"Dancing together and both letting go of*

limits/boundaries. [...] dancing from within, not with the mind" (P10), while another practiced *"mindfulness before and during"* sex (P46). Cooking, music, and familiar scents also fostered a more embodied, seductive state (P15).

4.2.3 Physical Wellness, Confidence and Self-care. Participants report that a state of bodily satisfaction (comprised of cleanliness, physical health, and a sense of power) enhances their receptivity to sexual arousal. Rituals like showering and grooming deepen comfort and connection to one's body: *"If I feel comfortable and pretty and clean, I like to have sex with someone"* (P110) and *"I feel pretty and good in my body and my head"* (P90). Physical health boosts self-assurance and sexual confidence. Participants describe how activities like exercise make them feel *"healthy, empowered"* (P41). Moments of feeling powerful, such as *"fierce, confident, and flirty"* (P94) and *"powerful and in charge"* (P57), link arousal to strength and empowerment.

4.3 Play and Sensory Immersion

This theme explores how play and sensory immersion deepen arousal and connection. Participants described teasing, flirtation, and thrill as central to their experiences, adding excitement and building anticipation. Participants also highlighted the raw nature of sexual experiences.

4.3.1 Play, Flirt and Thrill. Playfulness, flirtation, and thrill are central to participants' sexual experiences, enriching arousal through physical and emotional dynamics. Teasing and playful behaviours, such as *"slightly painful sensations like pinches or bites"* (P8), create deeper engagement, with one participant describing how *"teasing will make me sink into a much deeper experience"* (P36). Playfulness extends beyond physical touch to include laughter and shared humor: *"Laughing together during… is fucking hot!"* (P36). It often incorporates a competitive edge, such as *"postponing, teasing, wrestling for control"* (P31). Flirtatious moments, like *"a playful look, when someone looks at you like they can't resist"* (P66) or *"flirting with a stranger on the metro"* (P30), create sexual tension and spark chemistry: *"when there's sexual chemistry and electricity between us"* (P94). Anticipation and delayed gratification further intensify experiences. Participants shared how gradually building tension through flirty exchanges or spending time together heightened desire: *"the whole day together, unable to express our excitement... built up the tension gradually"* (P3). Together, these playful and thrilling elements highlight the dynamic interplay of spontaneity, anticipation, and connection in enhancing arousal and intimacy.

4.3.2 "To Fulfill Carnal Lust and Desire". Participants sometimes described sexual experiences as moments when their "animal brain" took over, shifting from deliberate intention to intuitive action. These interactions were driven by raw physicality, illustrated by statements like *"frustration, grasping, primitive instinct"* (P81) and *"Because I'm horny!!!!!!!!"* (P143). Motivations such as *"to fulfill carnal lust and desire"* (P78) highlight the visceral nature of these experiences. Additionally, hormonal cycles influence sexuality for participants who menstruate, especially during ovulation. One participant noted, *"when I'm ovulating and desire is pulsating within me"* (P49).

4.4 Vulnerability

This theme explores how vulnerability arises in sexual experiences, shaped by diverse identities, contexts, and relationships. **This section references non-consensual experiences, sexual abuse, and trauma, which may be distressing for some readers. If you prefer not to engage with these topics, you may skip to section §4.4.2, where the focus shifts to other aspects of the research.** Participants reported negative experiences, including societal pressures and abuse, as well as positive ones rooted in trust and emotional intimacy. Meanings of sex ranged widely, from expressions of love to pleasure-seeking to experimentation. This variety underscores that vulnerability is profoundly personal and contextually defined.

4.4.1 Negative Sexual Experiences. Participants encountered various challenges and adverse situations in their sexual lives. Many reported societal and internalised pressures to engage in sexual activities (represented in Figure 3, where cultural context shapes individual sexual experiences), leading to feelings of obligation or dissatisfaction. Examples include pursuing sex to fulfill social expectations, such as *"I feel like part of my masculine identity is tied to my sexual activity in both quantity and quality"* (P70), or to satisfy partners, like *"sometimes because it is 'easier' to have sex than to not have sex with someone"* (P123). These experiences often resulted in emotional discomfort and a struggle to maintain personal boundaries amidst perceived social demands. Additionally, several participants recounted instances of sexual abuse and trauma, detailing enduring impacts on their self-esteem, body confidence, and ability to experience sexual pleasure.

4.4.2 Safe Surrender. Creating environments of trust and safety allows participants to open up emotionally and physically. Establishing such spaces begins with consent and clear communication, which build mutual trust and ease inhibitions. Emotional connections, like *"having a deep and meaningful conversation"* (P9) and feeling *"truly seen and respected"* (P33), form the foundation of intimacy. Participants described the importance of feeling *"completely at ease"* (P80) and engaging in affirming dialogues: *"They kept asking me if I was okay and enjoying it. [...] It made me feel they genuinely liked me and cared for me"* (P78). Private or familiar settings encouraged self-expression without fear of judgment.

4.4.3 Sex Means Different Things for Different People. Sex means many different things to many different people. For some, sex is a physical outlet, expressed through statements like *"to satisfy my own desires"* (P14) and *"to satisfy my penis"* (P109). Others engage in sex to *"feel close to someone special"* (P19) or *"to express love"* (P31), highlighting human connection as a motivator.

Participants noted that the perception of sex can evolve over time and within different relational contexts. For example, one participant transitioned from anonymous encounters to more intentional, meaningful sexual relationships: *"I initially had one-night stands [...] as a tool to show myself and others that you can get laid as much as you want as a fat woman [...] From my mid-twenties, I became more intentional, engaging in sexual encounters to co-regulate and co-explore shared desires, with both romantic and purely sexual*

partners" (P4). Another distinguished between single life and long-term relationships, noting shifts in the purpose and nature of sex accordingly (P55).

Sexual identity and orientation further influence these experiences. Heterosexual participants may view sex in binary, penetrative terms, such as *"when the male penis enters the female vagina"* (P142), while others adopt a broader, inclusive perspective. A pansexual participant describes sex as *"a sensual merging, a melting of bodies into a pulsating oneness... an exploration of the other and the self"* (P49). Queer and non-binary individuals can redefine sex to align with their identities. As one notes, *"growing up in a cis-het world I thought sex meant penetration, but as I started making more queer experiences my definition has broadened, now I'd define it as any consensual sexual act that involves your genitals"* (P43).

Monogamous perspectives include *"an exclusive connection with a partner"* (P104) and *"When we made another appointment to have sex, once every 2 months these days."* (P134). Conversely, participants identifying as asexual shared that physical sex is less relevant or nonexistent in their lives, with one stating, *"I'm asexual so I guess never? [...] I don't have sex"* (P53).

From pleasure-driven acts to expressions of love and quests *"for fun"* (P121), these accounts reflect the diverse roles sex plays. As one participant aptly states, *"Sex is whatever feels like sex"* (P88).

5 Provocations: Designing with Pleasure as an Ongoing, Embodied Exploration

Building on the experiential glimpses we generated with the qualitative survey, our exploration is rooted in a broader philosophical inquiry into how sexual pleasure can be supported differently through design. Drawing on sex therapeutical (§2.1), feminist (§2.2) and soma-aesthetic [31] perspectives, we explore what it means to treat sexual pleasure as a process rather than a goal. Additionally, we combine this with a trauma-informed perspective [20], recognising that some individuals may carry past traumatic experiences into their sexual lives. By prioritising a safe environment where individuals are ultimately in charge of the experience, we aim to create a design space that support a wide range of personal needs.

Inspired by Park et al. [49], we created two provocations: Aural Caress and Interactive Undies. These are not presented as finished products, but as material expressions of our proposed alternative orientation. Drawing from traditions in speculative and critical design, we understand provocations as designed artefacts that do not aim to present "solutions," but instead invite reflection, unsettle assumptions, and spark dialogue around societal values and norms [16, 24, 63]. While our provocations depict specific technologies, closer to what one might call a "product", their purpose is not to resolve a problem. Instead, they act as communicative tools that give form to the theoretical and experiential insights we are exploring. Their role is to question how sexuality is commonly framed and to open conversations about what it could mean to design with, rather than for, intimate experience. These provocations help imagine how technology might support pleasure as an ongoing sensory, emotional, and bodily process, rather than focusing on functional outcomes or fixed goals.

5.1 Design Process and Rationale

Our process began by bringing together insights from participants' narratives (§4) and our guiding theories. The qualitative survey revealed how participants experience pleasure in emotional, embodied, and often fluid ways. Disruptions like distraction or self-consciousness diminished arousal, while rituals of bodily care and sensory engagement (such as dancing, lighting, or self-touch) created space for presence and enjoyment. These accounts guided us toward design directions that foreground agency and personal expression.

In parallel, feminist and crip theories highlighted how normativity, ableism, and narrow cultural sexual scripts shape both desires and the technologies that mediate them. Soma-aesthetic principles underscored the value of full-body attunement and heightened sensitivity to subtle internal and external cues. Bringing a trauma-informed viewpoint into dialogue with these theories also helped us remain mindful that experiences of vulnerability or fear can arise in intimate contexts, shaping how individuals engage with design. This combined theoretical and empirical understanding helped us shift from designing for functional outcomes to supporting ongoing sensory, emotional, and bodily engagement.

With these perspectives in mind, the first author led a collaborative, iterative process with a small interdisciplinary team, drawing on interaction and audio design expertise. We generated and refined concepts through sketching, collage-making (please refer to the teaser figure), and reflective critique, using the experiential glimpses generated with the survey data and our theoretical grounding as materials for inspiration throughout.

5.2 Aural Caress

Aural Caress (Figure 5) is an immersive auditory environment created to facilitate gentle, non-performative engagement with the body. Inspired by Stage 1 of Sensate Focus [43, 73], it offers listeners guided verbal cues and binaural beats to support a relaxed, mindful state. By intentionally excluding genital touch and encouraging slow, exploratory contact with other areas of the body, the experience aims to reduce performance pressure and invite a holistic form of sensual discovery; either solo or with a partner. This approach responds to survey participants' reflections that stress and mental distraction often hinder deeper connection with self or partner (Theme 2, §4.2). An early prototype is included in the additional materials. We created it to explore the potential of pleasure as an ongoing, embodied exploration.

5.2.1 Grounded in Theoretical Foundation. Soma-aesthetic principles, such as guided body scans, form the foundation of this design and are a common element in soma design practices [35, 62]. As Ståhl et al. [62] explain, *"By combining soma, the body, with aesthetics, our sensory appreciations, the attention is drawn to our bodily movements as part of our ways of being and thinking."*

The design is also inspired by Sensate Focus, which focuses on sensation without the pressure of specific outcomes like orgasm [43, 73]. By encouraging individuals to concentrate on sensory experiences, Sensate Focus helps alleviate performance anxiety and facilitates a more intimate and fulfilling sexual experience. Similarly, Aural Caress promotes mindfulness and sensory attunement, where listeners are invited and guided to engage in deliberate and
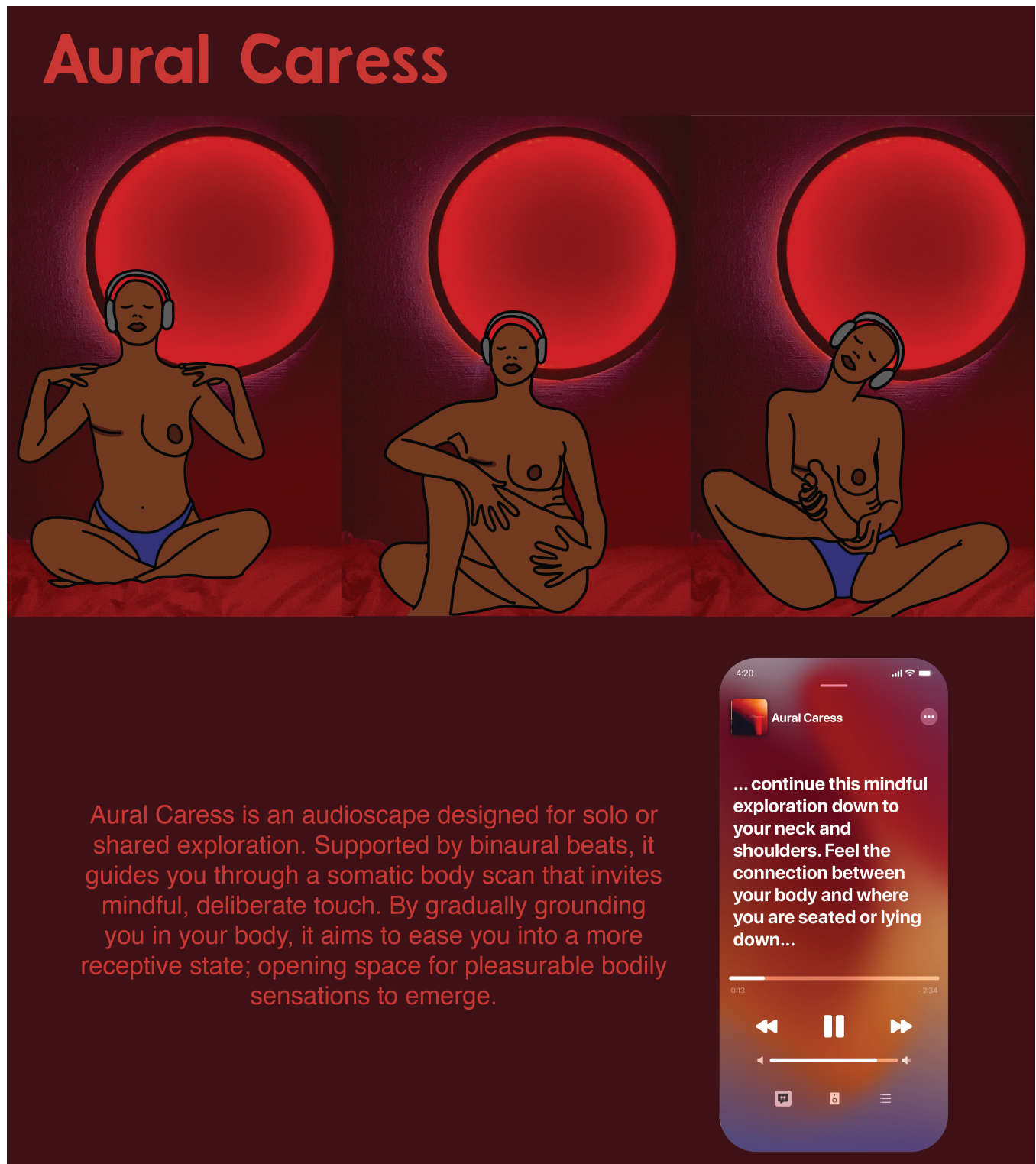
Figure 5: Aural Caress facilitates an intimate moment of bodily reconnection through guided, deliberate touch. The image shows an individual engaging in mindful bodily exploration, following auditory cues delivered through headphones.

exploratory full-body touch without focusing on their genitals, aligning with stage 1 of Sensate Focus [74]

5.2.2 Informed by Participant Experiences. Aural Caress addresses the experiential and emotional dimensions shared by participants, drawing from their reflections on emotional connection, embodied presence, and self-care practices (Theme 2, §4.2). Many participants described the challenge of overcoming cognitive distractions to fully engage with bodily sensations, as one noted: *"I don't really get aroused if I'm not relaxed and am too much in my head"* (p37). In response, Aural Caress creates a curated auditory environment designed to facilitate relaxation and intentional focus. Using guided auditory cues and binaural beats, it encourages individuals to reconnect with their bodies through deliberate, exploratory engagement.

Participants also described how rituals like dancing or mindfulness enhanced bodily presence and confidence, ultimately enriching their sexual satisfaction. One participant explained that practicing *"mindfulness before and during"* helped them achieve a deeper connection with both their partner and themselves (p46) (Theme 2, §4.2). Aural Caress builds on these practices by offering an immersive auditory experience that guides individuals into a mindful, embodied state, facilitating a deeper connection to their physical and emotional selves.

Theme 3 (§4.3) unpacks that sensory immersion can be an important element to experience pleasure. By centring sound as the sensory anchor, the design removes the primacy of visual cues and instead facilitates a more internal and affective engagement with the body.

Additionally, participants highlighted self-care and feeling empowered as critical to their sexual experiences. Rituals like showering exemplified this: *"If I feel comfortable and pretty and clean, I like to have sex with someone"* (p110) (Theme 2, §4.2). Aural Caress extends these insights by creating a ritualistic space for guided, exploratory, and non-performative touch. It does this by promoting bodily confidence via sensory attunement and a renewed connection to the body.

5.2.3 Aural Caress as Provocation. Developed in collaboration with the second author and audio producer, Aural Caress integrates binaural beats (slightly different frequencies played in each ear) to support a relaxed and attentive state, gently guiding individuals into bodily awareness [28]. These auditory effects are layered with guided cues inspired by body scan techniques to facilitate mindfulness. Similarly, Höök et al. [35] highlights the role of aesthetics in soma design, where sensory elements enhance the experiential quality of bodily engagement.

Aural Caress means to question how sexual technologies might shift from a focus on bodily performance toward spaces of exploration and embodied presence. By excluding genital touch and centring slow, full-body engagement, it draws attention to pleasure as an unfolding process. In doing so, it exemplifies how design might support a more open orientation to sexual experience.

We acknowledge the limitations of the current prototype. The audio was developed with limited post-production resources and would benefit from professional refinement. However, we include a low-fidelity version in the supplementary materials to share our design direction transparently and to invite critique, dialogue, and further iteration.

5.3 Interactive Undies

Interactive Undies (Figure 6) adopts a design-toolkit approach, offering individuals a range of interactive e-textiles [21] (capable of heating and cooling [30], vibrating [26], or changing colour [8]) alongside non-interactive fabrics, sewing materials, and adhesives. In doing so, Interactive Undies invites individuals to piece together garments adapted to their own anatomy and comfort levels. This approach diverges from traditional, prescriptive sexual technologies by focusing on exploration, agency, and the active shaping of sexual experiences. Additionally, it aims to challenge normative assumptions around sexuality and able-bodiedness, facilitating more inclusive expressions of pleasure and identity.
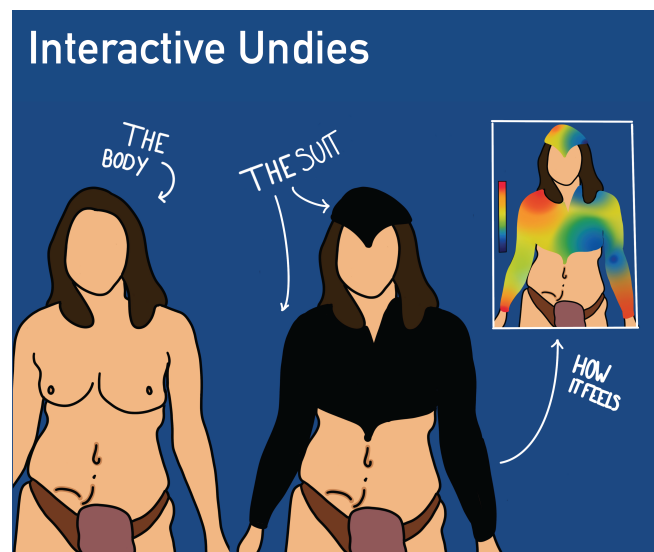

Figure 6: This figure illustrates a possible outcome of Interactive Undies. The person depicted has created a self-designed black suit with a cap, deliberately highlighting their scars and ostomy as meaningful, accepted parts of their body. The chosen fabrics include temperature-changing properties, and both the garment and interaction mode were self-determined by the wearer.

5.3.1 Grounded in Theoretical Foundation. Rather than conforming to externally imposed standards, this design invites individuals to explore and express their sexuality through garments tailored to their personal preferences and experiences. The toolkit draws on theory by celebrating sexual diversity and rejecting fixed gender and sexual identities [2], and aims to challenge ableist norms that equate pleasure with heterosexuality and conventional bodily function [37, 45]. By disrupting dominant representations of sexuality and ability, the toolkit aims to support individuals in defining pleasure on their own terms and challenges societal norms that marginalise non-normative bodies and identities.

5.3.2 Informed by Participant Experiences. Interactive Undies draws on findings about how cultural influences, media, and design shape sexual identities and experiences. Participants noted technology's dual role in providing validation while reinforcing restrictive norms,

with some finding liberation in rejecting the *"pornographic norm"* (p57) (Theme 1, §4.1). Interactive Undies addresses this by offering an ambiguous, customisable design that empowers individuals to move beyond prescriptive narratives, by enabling them to create aesthetics and experiences that reflect their preferences.

Participants also shared how they personalised their environments with sensory elements like music, lighting, and toys to enhance intimacy (e.g., p60, p134) (Theme 1, §4.1). The design builds on this by introducing novel sensory elements, such as interactive fabrics with temperature, vibration, and textural variations. These elements empower individuals to create new personal and immersive experiences that align with their unique preferences and desires.

Finally, participants' diverse understandings of sexuality, especially within queer and non-binary contexts, underscore the need for inclusivity and adaptability in design (Theme 4, §4.4). Interactive Undies directly responds to this by enabling individuals to personalise the aesthetics and experiences, facilitating agency and self-expression.

5.3.3 Interactive Undies as Provocation. This design serves as a material expression of our inquiry into how sexual technologies might move beyond function-driven goals toward open-ended, exploratory engagement. Rather than offering a prescribed interaction or outcome, the toolkit encourages individuals to shape their own experience; inviting bodily curiosity and self-expression. Interactive Undies challenges the normative assumptions often embedded in mainstream sexual technologies such as standardising bodies, a genital-centric focus, and one-size-fits-all definitions of pleasure. It opens up space for more personal, playful, and adaptive interactions. Rooted in feminist, queer, and crip theory, the provocation foregrounds agency and diversity. We aim not to present a final product, but ask instead: what might sexual technology look like if it treated pleasure as a process; something to be explored, shaped, and defined by the individual?

Like Aural Caress, Interactive Undies is offered as a provocation; an invitation to reimagine how technologies might support more inclusive, self-directed, and sensory-rich experiences of sexual pleasure.

5.4 Reflection on the Provocations

These provocations embody our exploration beyond normative assumptions in sexual technologies. By centering pleasure as a process rather than a goal, Aural Caress and Interactive Undies illustrate how sexuality could be reimagined. That said, they are inherently partial and exploratory. Their purpose is not to offer a "perfect solution" or presume universal functionality. Instead, they question how sexuality is often framed in design. We invite the HCI community to engage with, challenge, and extend these ideas. We see future work as an opportunity to bring diverse voices further into the design process, especially those underrepresented or marginalised in discussions of sexuality.

By creating space for play, experimentation, and vulnerability, we aim to inspire more inclusive explorations of sexual pleasure within interaction design. By engaging with these provocations, we encourage the reader to interrogate not just whether these specific provocations succeed in delivering pleasure, but whether

the conceptual shift they embody-away from functionality and toward pleasure as an evolving, whole-body experience—might be extended to other forms of sexual technology. In so doing, we seek to contribute to an ongoing re-imagination of what sexuality could entail when interwoven with open-ended exploration, mindfulness, and a recognition of the diverse ways in which individuals experience pleasure. Both Aural Caress and Interactive Undies are limited in their current prototypes and remain untested outside initial feedback sessions within the design team.

6 Discussion

This paper sought to reframe how sexual pleasure is approached in the design of sexual technologies. Rather than centering on functional outcomes such as reproduction or orgasm, we explored what it might mean to design from a *pleasure-as-process* perspective; one that embraces sexuality as embodied, emotional, whole body exploration. Our contribution is a rethinking of how sexual pleasure might be conceptualised differently in design.

Grounded in sex therapeutical, feminist, crip, and soma-aesthetic theory, and informed by qualitative insights into sexual experiences, this work offers an exploration of our proposed alternative design orientation. The provocations we present serve as communicative examples of this perspective. In this section, we situate our findings within the broader HCI discourse, highlighting how this reframing could unsettle normative assumptions around sexual technologies, centres bodily exploration, and invites deeper reflection on the role of design in shaping intimate experiences.

6.1 Addressing Value-Laden Undercurrents in Designs for Sexuality

Our findings in Theme 1 (§4.1) highlight that media and design do more than reflect societal norms around sexuality, they actively shape them. Sexual technologies often embed assumptions about what bodies are "normal," which can marginalise those who deviate from these ideals.

Recognising these value-laden undercurrents, we adopt a process-oriented stance that views sexual pleasure as evolving, situated, and multifaceted rather than a fixed goal or necessary outcome. This perspective is informed by scholars who challenge normative assumptions about sexuality and the body. They critique genital-centric and penetrative models of pleasure for reinforcing narrow, hierarchical views of sexuality [2, 52], and reject ableist standards that equate pleasure with normative bodily functions. Instead they affirm legitimacy of diverse bodies and ways of experiencing pleasure [37, 45, 49]. These perspectives frame sexuality as shaped by cultural narratives and social norms, echoing Judith Butler's view of the body as socially inscribed [15]. Within this framing, design becomes a site for reimagining how pleasure is defined and supported.

Sexual scripting theory reinforces this perspective by showing how social norms are internalised and reproduced through intimate practices [57, 60, 61]. Technologies that focus narrowly on genital stimulation, for instance, risk reinforcing reductive sexual scripts. Our approach explores a more holistic understanding of sexuality; one that includes sensory, emotional and whole-body experiences. Existing HCI research has critiqued how standardised sex-tech

offerings can commodify pleasure and perpetuate heteronormative or ableist norms [33], our work builds on this by exploring how design can support sexuality more holistically. While we recognise that design alone cannot dismantle structural inequalities, it can create space for questioning and subverting normative scripts.

Importantly, we acknowledge that not all sexual experiences benefit from technological intervention. In some contexts, low-tech or no-tech may better serve individuals' needs. By adopting a process-oriented approach, we remain open to the possibility that removing technology altogether could be just as transformative as introducing it. As designers we recognise that personal biases inevitably shape our decisions. This awareness encourages humility regarding the scope of our designs. Our goal is neither to champion technology nor to dismiss it entirely, but to illuminate how it might facilitate richer, more inclusive sexual experiences, particularly for those who benefit from a broader understanding of it.

6.2 Navigating Complexity and Vulnerability via Feminist and Trauma-Informed Computing

Vulnerability (theme 4, §4.4) revealed the dual nature of sexual experiences, shaped by trust, emotional intimacy, and societal pressures. Participants reported negative experiences, including trauma and internalised expectations, as well as positive experiences rooted in safe and trusting environments. We therefore argue that adopting a trauma-informed computing [20] lens is important to prevent unintentional harm inflicted by designs in sensitive domains such as sexuality. This approach acknowledges the potential presence of trauma, calling for continuous refinement of how technologies are designed, developed, deployed, and supported. By recognising the ways design can contribute to or amplify trauma and committing to proactive strategies to prevent technology-induced harm and retraumatisation [20], we can create safer, more considerate technologies.

Our findings revealed a diverse range of sexual identities and perspectives (§4.4.3). For some, sex was a physical outlet; for others, it expressed love or self-discovery. These shifting contexts, from casual encounters to relationships, reflect varied practices and identities, including queer definitions of sex. This diversity highlights the need for designs that transcend conventional, heteronormative perspectives, which often equate sexual pleasure with genital-centric, penetrative acts. Feminist scholars critique this reductive view for reinforcing power imbalances and neglecting the complex, multifaceted nature of sexuality [2, 52]. As Hua et al. [33] observe, many sex toys continue to reflect traditional gendered assumptions, such as prioritising phallic penetration, thereby marginalising non-binary, queer, and dis/abled individuals. These critiques resonate with the experiences of the participants, illustrating how sexual technologies often reproduce dominant norms rather than supporting diverse understandings of sexuality. To address this, designers could reimagine sexual experiences beyond traditional heteronormativity. This requires not only rethinking technological functionality but also embracing a symbolic and aesthetic shift that supports a wider range of bodily engagement and pleasure practices [33]. An example of this shift is circlusion, a conceptual reframing of the vagina within sexual technologies. Rather than positioning

the vagina as a passive site of penetration, circlusion reimagines it as an active participant in sexual interaction [17]. This perspective challenges dominant phallocentric scripts and creates space for designs that centre bodily agency. By challenging cultural scripts like the Western heterosexual script, which enforces restrictive gendered expectations [57], designers can create technologies that facilitate inclusivity, self-expression, and individual agency.

To support this diversity, proces-oriented pleasure-centric designs could move beyond externally defined notions of pleasure. Instead, they could focus on exploratory, multisensory bodily engagement that empowers individuals to define their intimate experiences on their own terms.

6.3 Reimagining Sensory Engagement in Sexual Technologies

Current offerings for sexual pleasure are predominantly focused on visual stimuli, such as pornography [38, 46, 78]. When alternatives to visual stimuli exist, they often act as barriers rather than facilitators of bodily connection. For example, vibrators are designed in ways that minimise direct bodily engagement, placing a technological device between individuals and their own bodies (or their partners' bodies).

The reliance on vision as the primary sensory input reflects broader critiques in feminist technoscience, where Puig De La Bellacasa [50] highlights how visuality often overshadows other modes of perception in technology and design. Such a focus on sight and external aesthetics risks distancing individuals from the embodied and emotional dimensions of sexuality. Similarly, Campo Woytuk et al. [17, 19] critique technologies that act as "gatekeepers" to the body, further extending the gap between self and body. Reclaiming sensory modes like touch is proposed as a pathway to restore embodied subjectivity, facilitating direct material engagement and bridging this disconnect [4, 18, 50].

Aural Caress reimagines sensory engagement through auditory stimuli that encourage deliberate, exploratory touch across the body. it aims to facilitate embodied subjectivity and close the gap between self and body. The Interactive Undies complements this by prioritising tactile and sensory exploration, enabling individuals to create interactive fabrics tailored to their preferences and discover new sources of bodily pleasure beyond genital stimulation.

Both provocations deliberately counter the dominance of visual stimuli in sexual technologies, shifting focus to embodied, multisensory exploration. Together, these provocations explore how deliberate, exploratory touch could reshape sexual technologies. By centering sensory engagement and embodied exploration, they move beyond the barriers created by traditional designs, offering alternative pathways to cultivate bodily presence and enrich sexual experiences. This shift toward multisensory engagement invites further consideration of how design can support bodily awareness and presence; principles central to soma-aesthetic design.

6.4 Soma-Aesthetic Design Principles for Sexuality

Theme 2 (§4.2) highlights the centrality of emotional connection, bodily presence, and self-confidence in fulfilling sexual experiences.

Participants described how love, mutual desire, and self-care practices enhanced their sexual experiences. This aligns with soma-aesthetic design principles, which approach the body as a medium for rich, subjective experiences [31]. Soma design, as outlined by Höök et al. [35], advocates for designing technologies that facilitate bodily awareness and subjective engagement. These principles underline the process of listening to the body, a notion closely aligned with participants' descriptions of achieving presence through mindfulness and self-care practices. By focusing on bodily sensations and emotional attunement, soma design offers the potential to shift the focus away from traditional goal-oriented sexual outcomes, such as orgasm, and towards facilitating meaningful and exploratory interactions with the body. This highlights the potential of soma design to reinterpret sexual engagement as a whole body and emotional practice.

Our provocation Aural Caress explores this by creating an immersive auditory environment that sets out to promote mindfulness and sensory engagement. Drawing inspiration from soma design practices such as guided body scans [35, 59], as well as Sensate Focus (a therapeutic technique from sex therapy centered on deliberate full-body touch [43]) Aural Caress encourages intentional, non-genital touch to help individuals reconnect with their bodies. This provocation explores how soma-aesthetic principles could cultivate bodily presence, supporting individuals in exploring their sexuality with openness and curiosity.

The potential of soma-aesthetic design to support sexuality is underscored by Hua et al. [32], who extend these principles to address androcentric discourse and the desexualisation of women with dis/abilities. Their work illustrates how somaesthetic interaction design creates space for exploratory and inclusive engagement with the body. Our provocations build on this foundation.

6.5 Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Methodologically, the qualitative survey, while effective in capturing a broad range of perspectives, provides a diverse but relatively surface-level understanding of participants' experiences. Unlike in-depth interviews, the survey lacked opportunity to go deeper into responses. The cross-sectional nature of the survey captures experiences at a single point in time, leaving the evolution of sexual experiences and perceptions unexplored. Future research could incorporate longitudinal methods or follow-up interviews to explore how these experiences develop over time, providing a deeper understanding of the dynamics of sexual pleasure.

This research is situated in a specific cultural context of Rotterdam, the second-largest city in the Netherlands. Future studies in different or cross-cultural settings could explore how cultural differences shape sexual experiences and their implications for design.

7 Conclusion

This paper explored an alternative framing of sexual pleasure in interaction design; one that treats pleasure as a process rather than a goal. Moving beyond traditional function-based aims like reproduction or orgasm, we foregrounded sexual experiences as ongoing sensory, emotional and whole body engagement. Grounded in sex therapeutical, feminist, crip, and soma-aesthetic theories, and informed by qualitative survey insights, we developed Aural Caress and Interactive Undies as provocations to communicate this reorientation. By reinterpreting sexuality as a holistic and multifaceted experience, this work aims to offer new directions for inclusive, pleasure-oriented design in HCI.

Acknowledgments

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