

The Butler, the Intruder, his Consumer & her Lover: Understanding Material Culture?s Agency throughout the Consumption Cycle

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Resumo

The present research draws from neomaterialist theories to investigate women?s erotic consumption in Brazil, analyzing the several stages of the consumption cycle, from need detection to disposal. Fieldwork followed the Itinerary Method, with 35 in-depth interviews and participant observation. In addition to providing thick description of two consumption cycle stages, the paper analyzes assemblages of material objects and people that are part of erotic consumption. The dialectical process that transforms consumers through the agency of erotic products also transforms products through repurpose or personification?as butlers, intruders or lovers?, which, in turn, highlights these objects? agentic nature. Erotic products are understood as possessing social life and death. Submission title refers to Peter Greenaway?s 1989 movie ?The Cook, the Thief, his Wife & her Lover.?



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Abstract

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Key-words: gender, sexuality, material culture, Consumer Culture Theory

1 Introduction

Erotic consumption is a research theme that has been ignored by marketing scholars for too long (Gould, 1991). Sexuality is undeniably one important source for contemporary identity building (Bozon, 2004), which influences and is influenced by consumption activities (Belk, 1988). According to the Brazilian Association of Erotic Companies (ABEME, 2017), industry's revenues topped one billion reais in 2010 (around 311 million US dollars), growing 17% in comparison to the previous year. Despite the country's current economic crisis, it is still a blooming industry, having grown 8,5% in 2014, while many other sectors shrunk. In the United States, it is a 15 billion dollar industry (Isto é Dinheiro, 2016). ABEME (2017) claims that 70% of sex shops' clientele in Brazil are women. For this reason, since the early 2000s, business entrepreneurs have opened up women-only erotic boutiques, in order to cater specifically to female consumers, who had shown embarrassment to shop in the presence of men. In these stores, materiality is usually designed to communicate a soft femininity, very different from traditional sex shops (Walther& Schouten, 2016). What used to be a masculine domain during the 1980s and 1990s, has become a safe haven for women, who are now part of a network that includes, inside the store, a specialized sales staff and a vast array of erotic products and material cues, and outside the store, their partners, family and friends.

The specific research objectives guiding the discussion that unfolds in the present paper are: (1) to understand the agentic nature and the social life (Appadurai, 2010) of erotic products along their consumption cycle (Arnould & Thompson, 2005); and (2) to understand how erotic product's agency allows them to become mediators of the interaction between interviewed consumers and other actors in the consumption cycle.

2 Material Culture and the Social Life of Things along the Consumption Cycle

The consumption cycle can be defined as a sequence of stages in the consumer's relationship with a product or service. For Arnould and Thompson (2005), the consumption cycle comprises three steps: the first one would correspond to the moment of purchase, the second to the period in which the product belongs to the consumer and the moments during which it is in use, and the last step to the process of discarding the product by the consumer. Thirty years ago, early cultural studies of consumption, which would later be circumscribed to the CCT school of thought (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), tracked the cycle's stages in search for contextual, symbolic and experiential aspects of consumption, analyzing these phenomena with macro, meso and micro theoretical perspectives.

The sequence of consumption activities that Arnould and Thompson (2005) call consumption cycle is equivalent to what Desjeux (2000) calls consumption itinerary. For the author of the Itinerary Method, the consumption cycle can be subdivided into more steps and



is usually analyzed under the micro-social scale of observation (Alami, Desjeux, & Garabuau-Moussaoui, 2010). The itinerary begins when the consumer reflects on the need or desire for the product and decides to initiate a movement towards its acquisition. The second stage comprises the displacement towards a (physical or virtual) sales channel and the shopping experience itself. The third step refers to product storage in the consumer's home, which may happen before or after usage. The fourth step is product usage itself, including preparation, if necessary. The last step refers to product disposal (Alami et al, 2010).

According to Miller (2010), consumption studies focusing on material culture should examine the consequences that products have for people, moving away from an overemphasis on meanings. To substantiate these studies, this neomaterialist scholar offers a Dialectical Theory of Material Culture (Miller, 2010) in which products are more than mere representations of consumers; objects create subjects and vice versa. More importantly, the theory's main focus lies on the process by which this mutual creation occurs. The creation of things by people and the creation of people by things are two sides of a bidirectional relationship, which is seen as dialectical, that is, mutually constitutive. This very process is what Miller (2010) calls objectification—not to be confused with objectivation (Bozon, 2004), the sexist treatment of women as if they were objects, which appeared during fieldwork as well but is subject to another discussion.

Objectification is, therefore, the dynamic process that simultaneously produces subjects and objects through self-alienation. By self-alienation, Miller (2010) means the moment in which subject sees herself in the objects that she created, gaining a better understanding of who she is, which, invariably, results in transformation. Thus, subject is transformed because of her relationship with the objects she has created or interacted with. "The humanity that existed before roads and traffic jams is not the same as that which exists afterwards", Miller exemplifies (2010, p. 59).

Currently, many CCT studies adopt neomaterialist theories (for just a few examples, see Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Bettany, Kerrane, & Hogg, 2014; Walther & Schouten, 2016), highlighting objects' agency over subjects, and the networks and assemblages formed by material and immaterial actors (Latour, 2005, Parmentier & Fischer, 2015) that participate of consumption activities. Epp and Price (2010) studied the role of material culture in families, extending Kopytoff's (1986) theory of singularization by explaining what occurs between the singularization of a focal object and its recommodification. In order to do that, they tracked a family's possession—a dinner table—through different stages of its cultural biography, focusing on its transformations, in and out of networks. Here, employing a less individual and more micro perspective, I follow erotic products through their consumption cycle. Tracking the consumption cycle is not a step back into CCT's early priorities, because this time, instead of looking for meanings, I seek material culture's agency and subjects' transformations.

3 Methodology

Fieldwork took place in three Brazilian states: Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Minas Gerais. Research design adopts the interpretive paradigm (Goldenberg, 2015) and follows the ethnographic method (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017), comprising 35 in-depth interviews, 25 of which with female consumers and 10 with professionals working in the erotic industry, mainly saleswomen and store owners. For ten months spread over four years, I engaged in participant and nonparticipant observation in sex shops, erotic boutiques, and trade conventions, chosen as *loci* of purchase, in an attempt to avoid interpretation solely based on verbal representations offered by informants.

Informant recruitment method was referral sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). The only requirements for participation were that informants should be women and should have at least once used a product or object they considered erotic or at some point visited a sex shop. By requiring that informants had used an "object they considered erotic," and not specifically



an "erotic product," the intention was to explore "productive aspects of consumption" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 871), also known as prosumption (Tofler, 1980), revealing possible value co-creation through the adaptation (Mariampolski, 2006) to erotic use of objects not originally created by the erotic industry. There were no age, class, or sexual orientation restrictions, which further enriched the exploratory nature of this study, providing a wide panorama of an underexplored research theme and an array of possibilities for future studies, that may focus on narrower strata.

In-depth interviews lasted 90 minutes on average, following a semi-structured script consisting of open-ended questions, which was based on preliminary research and literature review. I wrote two different scripts: one for industry professionals, the other for consumers. The consumer script included two projective (Rook, 2006;) video-elicitation (Sayre, 2006) exercises with the objective of facilitating discussion of topics that might be considered sensitive (Ger & Sandikci, 2006) by informants: sexuality and eroticism. The adoption of both observation and projective techniques intended to tap into practice, which is fundamental to materialist approaches to consumption, making up for possible distortions in consumer verbal representations and generating cultural talk (Moisander, Valtonen, & Hirsto, 2009).

My interaction with interviewed consumers followed the Itinerary Method (Desjeux, 2000), in an effort to understand networks of material and immaterial actors (Latour, 2005, Parmentier & Fischer, 2015) and the assemblages they created and transformed (Delanda, 2006). Although it was not possible to physically follow the consumer during all steps of the itinerary, since some of them, like usage, constitute extremely intimate moments, informants were asked about their complete cycle of erotic consumption and were requested, whenever possible, to show or photograph their erotic products and storage locations.

Data interpretation occurred in four stages, during which I engaged in continuous iteration between data and theoretical concepts (Arsel, 2017): interview transcription, cross-sectional thematic analysis, descriptive analysis, and interpretive analysis (Alami et al., 2010).

4 Findings

4.1 Product usage

All consumption cycle stages play a relevant role in the mutually constitutive relationship between consumer and erotic object. However, in the dialectical process (Miller, 2010) of interaction between subject and object, usage is one of the most important stages, with truly transformative properties for both parties. Consumer transforms product by manipulating it, repurposing it, fractioning it, repackaging it, combining it with others, cleaning it, and discarding it. Product transforms consumer by making her a new woman, indelibly marked by erotic consumption. When used conjugally, similar effect can occur on the relationship or on the partner. Next, I analyze shared use of erotic products by the couple and then individual use by the woman alone. I apologize for the strong language contained henceforth. Following Elliot and Davies' (2006) instruction, emic discourse is reproduced as enunciated, undergoing no censorship whatsoever, which could wrongly represent my research subjects and deliver untrue reports (Corden & Sainsbury, 2007). I use pseudonyms to protect informants' identities.

4.1.1 Conjugal use

Configurations of conjugal use of erotic products reported by interviewed consumers were varied. Some women use them in some relationships, but not in others. Some couples use only light products, like erotic cosmetics, others also adopt vibrators. The inclusion of erotic products in a couple's sensual practices was initiated both by the woman and by the man. When the initiative came from the informant, it caused either positive, neutral or even negative reactions.

Interviewed consumer Jane (42 y.o., marketing professional, divorced, heterosexual)



reflected on the "couple's therapy" property of erotic products as facilitators of problem solving in the sexual arena without the need for explicit talk: "you can approach issues without having to talk about them." Thus objects acquire a mediating role between man and woman. Such mediation can also be done not in the suppression of dialogue but in the inclusion of the verbal code referred to by Caroline (41 y.o., language teacher, married, heterosexual), for whom erotic products provide: "a huge upgrade. (...) In complicity itself. You may even share a secret code. (...) We established the Anthony code: 'Let's ask Anthony to come with us [to a sex escapade at a motel]." Caroline and her husband have a non-vibrating dildo they nicknamed Anthony, used during sexual intercourse for the purpose of double penetration. For this informant, therefore, the creation of a shared verbal code is linked to the adoption of a very intimate practice intermediated by the erotic product, which increases couple's complicity. Intimacy grows not only by sharing a code, but also by creating common memories, in which a product such as the dildo acts as mediator, or even as a character, unveiling its agentic nature.

The phallic materiality of a vibrator can create either positive or negative interference in a couple's relationship. For interviewed consumer Rita (49 y.o., psychoanalyst, married, homosexual), erotic products granted survival to a relationship that would have ended much earlier, were it not for conjugal erotic consumption:

For seven years, I only had sex that included a vibrator. In a specific relationship. That was what sustained a great pleasure for a long time and prevented sexual attraction from dying. (...) Because there was a fantasy of which it was part. I fantasized that a man was having sex with me, and the fantasy of this man had the presence of a cock. So, without the cock, it wouldn't have resisted.

In this case, the product's materiality transforms Rita's female partner, who already naturally possessed "a very strong masculine magnetism," in a male figure. The network of this sexual relationship included, besides two women, the vibrator. Consumers and product became integral parts of a techno-social cyborgean assemblage (Walther & Schouten, 2016).

The agency of a penis-shaped vibrator may be so strong that it can generate fear of substitution among heterosexual men, as reported by several informants, including Francine (35 y.o., economist, married, heterosexual), who expressed difficulty in including her vibrator of phallic format in sexual relations with former boyfriends and also with her current husband. She is not used to making conjugal use of her vibrator, but rather solitary use: "maybe because my partners were always very wary of it." Her husband was not interested when, during a trivial chat, she suggested they "played games" with the erotic products she possessed. Erotic consumption is not a frequent conversation topic for this couple and the husband never even saw the informant's vibrator.

As reported by interviewed consumers, the adoption of vibrators by the couple can be problematic in a patriarchal society like Brazil, with a complex system of gender hierarchies (Parker, 1991). But informants who manage to include vibrators in their sexual relations believe in the restorative power of the couple-vibrator assemblage, like Michelle (38 y.o. lawyer and stay-at-home mom, married, heterosexual), for whom "sex toy plus partner is the ideal combination." Erotic cosmetics are less problematic and are often used by couples with the objective of restoring the quality of a relationship or introducing novelty in a couple's sex life. "To spice up the relationship" seems like the prevailing metaphor for conjugal use of erotic cosmetics among my informants, as exemplified by this quote by consumer Melissa (30 y.o., business owner, single, heterosexual): "To spice up the relationship with erotic products, I think so, yes. (...) And it's really something that provides... A little sugar and spice, a differential from your day-to-day routines, right?" The various testimonials that mentioned the possibility of improving relationships are evidence of a linking value (Cova & Cova, 2002) in erotic products, which are often appreciated for their capacity of strengthening relations



between two people, therefore strengthening the assemblage that they form.

Not all erotic products shared experiences are successful. The main case of frustration with erotic products was narrated by Frida (28 y.o., event planner, single, heterosexual). At Christmas, the informant gifted her boyfriend with a basket of erotic products, containing several items purchased at an expensive store in Ipanema, Rio de Janeiro, in what was her first and only trip to a sex shop. The experience proved to be frustrating in its entirety:

It didn't work. Because we used one gel, then the next. Oh, there were some balls. [Those that dissolve in the vagina?] Yeah, dude, that sucks. For one, they're scented. (...) They left me with no lubrication. It was very strange, it didn't work. Then he used another [gel] afterwards, then we used them all, then it didn't work, and we never used it again.

One of the products was a pink silicone coated vibrating bullet, that ended up with a lesbian friend, who nicknamed it Barbie, in reference to Mattel's famous doll and brand color:

[I showed it to] a lesbian friend. She went crazy: "wow, how cool is this? It's a Barbie." Then she asked "buy one for me when you go to Rio," I said "no, just take it." (...) Then she went crazy, now she walks around with her Barbie, which is pink. And she was super happy. And I was even happier because, to me, it was a joke, I did not use that.

Erotic products' agency can be transformative even when the experience is unsuccessful. Failure may be a token of these material objects' obduracy (Miller, 2010), since they may act against their owners' will. Reflecting about the network formed by couple and erotic object may transform subjects by generating self-knowledge. After the second video-elicitation projective exercise, in which the informant had to watch strangers talking about erotic consumption, Frida reflected: "I'm surprised that they all... (...) They all love it, right? Now I must review my opinion about it. Because, if everyone likes it, and I don't... It didn't work for me, you know? Perhaps I didn't use it right?"

4.1.2 Individual use

In interviews with consumers, there was also no unanimity regarding individual use of erotic products, especially the vibrator. Some informants do not masturbate, others possess a vibrator but masturbate without it, and others stated that they do use the product for masturbation, listing its benefits: to provide "immediate", "guaranteed", "quick" pleasure, without depending on a partner. Such benefits confer "self-knowledge," a "sense of freedom," "independence," "stress relief," and may even be viewed as "therapeutic."

By myself, I use it a lot, because, man, it's very practical, you know? It's guaranteed pleasure. It's 100% guaranteed. (...) The vibrator for me is like: I get home, I take a shower, I do whatever, I have dinner, I go to bed, and "oh, I'm gonna get the vibrator". (...) Very frequently. Way more than once a week. (Diana, 39 y.o., photographer, divorced, bisexual).

Whenever you want to feel pleasure, you just feel it. It's there. You don't have to go out picking up people on the street (Pamela, 51 y.o., manager, married, bisexual).

These and other quotes that describe vibrator's infallibility to provide female orgasms show the agentic character of erotic products over women's sexuality. In the past, the emergence of contraceptive methods controlled by women, such as the pill, offered them "a sense of trust and control they had never experienced" (Bozon, 2004, p. 44). Currently, erotic consumption may trigger a new takeover by women in the field of sexuality. A material object like the vibrator can empower women, transforming them into authors and protagonists of their own orgasms. Self-discovery plays a key role in transferring the authorship of female orgasms from male to female hands. Female sexual climax is thus attained as a result of what she herself does, and no longer of what her partner does.

One of the most significant cases of self-discovery was reported by Bianca (36 y.o., economist, single, heterosexual), who had her first orgasm at age 29 with the use of a Panasonic back massager, repurposed for clitoral masturbation. Bianca was newly separated from a marriage that had lasted five years. Her previous relationship had lasted seven years.



Her girl friends advised her to try and masturbate with an electric massager, when she confided to them that she was not sure if she used to climax during intercourse with her former partners. Coincidentally, the informant possessed a back massager that had been given to her by her mother several years before. When she received the gift, she did not imagine it could have erotic properties, which were also not mentioned by her mother. She describes who she used to be before the transformation enacted by erotic products' agency:

Sex was just penetration, after penetration, after penetration, and it went nowhere. (...) I had some idea that it couldn't be just that. But since I didn't know where to look, then I kept stalling. And those were long relationships, with people who completed me in other ways, so I didn't worry about that part, which I considered to be small because I didn't know any better.

This is a good illustration of the mutually constitutive relationship between object and subject. The back massager transforms the consumer by providing her with an experience seen as indispensable in the contemporary world, and the consumer transforms the back massager, giving it a purpose not planned by the industry.

Bianca was so delighted with the discovery mediated by the Panasonic massager, that she could not help but share the information with friends. The massager was nicknamed James because, in Brazilian popular culture, this name was associated with butlers, showing that Bianca understood the object as endowed with agency, able to provide a service. Her enchantment is thus described: "Wow, I think that if Facebook existed at the time I would have posted about it. It was like discovering gunpowder. (...) So I told everyone!" One of the girl friends introduced to vibrator consumption by Bianca was Ruth (56 y.o., retired manager, divorced, heterosexual), also interviewed for the present research. By Bianca's influence, Ruth's vibrator was also nicknamed James, because of its ability to serve her at any time.

Francine too told her girl friends about the discoveries made when she took Kegels classes, during which she acquired a vibrator. Her friends then asked her to gift them with vibrators, since they were "ashamed to buy one themselves." So she took two girl friends to a sex shop and bought them vibrators that were similar to hers. One of the friends nicknamed her new possession Paulinho ("little Paul", in English) and referred to it as a boyfriend, with whom she sometimes liked to stay at home instead of going out with pals.

It is not just single or divorced women who value masturbation. Caroline, who, together with her husband, uses a dildo nicknamed Anthony, said she has also used it alone, attaining "a sense of freedom and independence." In addition to expressing her own opinion about individual use of erotic products, Caroline described an unmarried girl friend that possesses a vibrator dubbed Johnnie. "Johnnie is Anthony's rich friend"—she explains—because the latter does not vibrate and is not half as modern and sophisticated as the former. Her friend used to publicly recommend vibrators to people, as Caroline describes: "She talked about it a lot. A single woman... She doesn't have to go out with someone because of sexual need. It substitutes well. She advocated for it a lot: 'It doesn't piss me off, we don't have DTRs..."

Not all informants admitted individual use of vibrators. Some blamed this on prejudice against female masturbation, like Beth (59 y.o., civil servant, widow, heterosexual): "I think the vast majority of women masturbate, but nobody tells. Nobody talks about it. Because the world is sexist." Others claimed not to adhere to the practice, referring to it as a "necessity" of lonely women, like Vivian (56 y.o., business graduate and stay-at-home mom, married, heterosexual): "I don't have the need to do it by myself. I feel that everything is very well married. Sharing very often. So the individual quest is not my necessity. Not the choice I make," which shows that prejudice may lie in women themselves as well. So despite the increasing social acceptance of female sexuality manifestations, old value systems still stand, coexisting with new ones. Laqueur (1992) comments on how masturbation was seen, from the 18th century, as a threat to human community, putting sociability at stake. Therefore, traces of an ancient and persistent condemnation seem to coexist with a more recent realization that



masturbation may be harmless or beneficial. This contrast may explain the resistance expressed by some interviewed consumers to masturbation and to individual use of vibrators.

4.2 Product disposal

For emotional and practical reasons, the social life of a product like the vibrator ends in a problematic death. According to Arnould and Thompson (2005), the stage of product disposal within the consumption cycle may reveal social role negotiations and identity transitions. One of the consumption rituals studied by McCracken (1988) was precisely that of disposal, as a practice that depletes meanings contained in a good. For Miller (2010), discarding certain objects implies the concomitant disposal of personal relationships.

As discussed earlier, erotic products are commonly used by the couple, sometimes being part of all their sexual activity. Thus, such objects adhere to that particular relationship to the point of, if used with a third person, placing even greater seriousness on the betrayal, as reported by Rita: "if it [the couple's vibrator] is used when cheating with someone else, it's mortal. You feel like dying." Therefore, when such relationships are interrupted, consumers are faced with the need to deal with the memory of the couple tied to the object, which may lead to its disposal or, on the contrary, may create difficulty in discarding it.

Three consumers described in detail the episodes in which they left home to discard old or damaged vibrators. These reports, although funny, reveal, from the perspective of marketing, a need not met by industry and, from the anthropological point of view, the strategies employed by consumers to deal with broken relationships. For Ruth, it was necessary to acquire a new vibrator—christened James—so she could get rid of the old one: "[If] someone goes through your trash, they'll know it was you. (...) I put it in a plastic bag, took the car, looked for a public dumpster, and placed it inside. (...) But I only threw it away after James arrived." The same concern permeates the three reports: that of being seen and recognized at the time of disposal or of being identified by the contents of their trash. Michelle preferred the presence of a friend at the time of disposal to doing it alone or with her husband:

I looked like a spy (laughs), throwing those dicks in trash bins throughout Rio de Janeiro. (...) I put each in a black plastic bag and went to dump the corpses. Then a friend was with me and she said "throw it in this trash can here", because there was a trash can outside a house. Then I noticed it was my ex-boyfriend's sister's house. Just imagine if CCTV caught me! [The sister would think:] "The pervert who didn't marry my brother dumping dead dicks in my trash!" (laughs). Then I went to the mall, there I dumped a bunch of cock sleeves, each in a... Because they weren't going to fit in a single garbage can at the mall. So I placed each sleeve in a plastic bag, and went about dumping the dead bodies. I looked like a kidnapper picking up ransom money in the bin. (..) I dumped it and glanced around... Then I walked to another trash can... And my friend laughing her ass off!

Informant Julia (38 y.o., business graduate and stay-at-home mom, married, heterosexual) described the disposal of five obsolete vibrators, which were accumulated until she could finally throw them away. When she moved not only residence, but also country, and changed her civil status, Julia took with her the vibrators that were "already dead" because she could not discard them alone in Brazil. Her new husband, who had given her the vibrators when they were dating and living in separate countries, went along during the disposal in Germany. The association of the product with the relationship becomes evident. When moving to a new residence, the decision of what objects to take and what to leave can be strongly based on which personal relationships still matter to the individual who moves (Miller, 2010). So, for Julia, her relationship, that transformed with the move from dating to marriage, was of the utmost importance. So much so that the erotic objects given to her by her husband, then boyfriend, followed in the luggage to Germany, despite being old and damaged:

I took sorta five broken ones to Germany, because I didn't have the guts to throw them



away here! (...) I wrapped them all in a newspaper and we threw it in a public dumpster. Far from home (laughs)! First because I was already feeling bad, my vibrator was like a friend to me (laughs). Second because I was embarrassed to throw them away, can you imagine?!

As it turned out, discarding erotic products like the vibrator is problematic. It is done in secrecy with the help of trusted people. Reports on the disposal of erotic cosmetics, on the other hand, showed it as less problematic. However, they can also carry profound emotional tensions. Lilian (45 y.o., cook, divorced, heterosexual) immediately decided to get rid of all erotic cosmetics after her divorce, because they brought back memories of her ex-husband. She gave them to her daughter and former sister-in-law: "I turned cold. (...) Costumes, lots of oils and creams, I gave everything away. I said 'Since he's leaving, I don't want to keep those memories in my head."" Miller (2010) argues that the materiality of objects is important in determining the temporality of their disposal. That is, depending on the material of which the object is made, it can be discarded more or less quickly. If an intangible song may remind a departed romantic partner (Miller, 2010), a tangible solid object made of plastic, sometimes shaped like a body part, may have an even stronger association with that person. When it comes to creamy or liquid cosmetics, even if associated with a former husband, those were disposed of with relative swiftness and without embarrassment, by being passed on to others.

5 Discussion: Objectification and Personification

The Dialectical Theory of Material Culture (Miller, 2010) builds on the notion that things create people as much as people create things, in a dialectical process that invariably results in transformations. On the one hand, subjects create objects when they literally manufacture them—as producers—and also when they modify their matter or their meanings—as consumers, which can be done at any stage of the consumption cycle. The adaptation of the back massager to clitoral masturbation is the most emblematic example, within erotic consumption, of the transformation of an object by the subject. On the other hand, objects create subjects when the former exercise their agency over the latter, turning consumers into new people, inextricably part of a larger assemblage or network.

Data interpretation pointed to a process of objectification of the female consumer of erotic products, who submits to the agency of the erotic objects with which she interacts, emerging transformed from this interaction. It is important to highlight the opposite process as well: the personification of the object. While objectification transforms the woman, who allows herself to be indelibly penetrated by the object—in many cases literally—, personification transforms the object, giving it human characteristics.

Bianca and Ruth had vibrators with the same name: James. The vibrator was, therefore, their butler, "who did everything for them." Here we see a relationship between boss and servant. In Bianca and Ruth's conversations, "James" became a secret synonym for "vibrator." Caroline and her husband nicknamed their dildo Anthony. In calling the object by a person's name, they reinforce the idea that there would be a third person participating in the sexual act, that is, a second man. Francine influenced friends to adopt erotic consumption. One of them named her vibrator Paulinho: "Tonight I'll stay home with Paulinho, open a bottle of wine..." In this case, the relationship between consumer and product is that of lovers, and not of a servant or a third person. Julia said that her vibrator was "like a friend" to her.

Frida, who gifted her boyfriend with a basket of erotic products in a frustrating experience, thus justifies her rejection of erotic consumption: "Because if you have to depend on a product to spice up your relationship... A third person. (...) an interference in your relationship. Which actually enters your body." With this, she also attributes to the vibrator the role of a "third person", like Caroline. For Frida, penetration seems to confirm and reinforce the personification of the vibrator, which becomes an undesirable intruder.

In describing the disposal of vibrators, informants Michelle, Julia, and Ruth used the following terms: "corpse," "burial," "dying," "dumping bodies," and "black plastic bag." In



addition, when talking about storage, Julia said that three of her vibrators, made of the same material, "go to sleep together." To discard her old dead vibrator, Ruth had to buy a new living one and christen it James. Treating such objects as alive, dead or asleep is a form of personification. The adoption of names like Johnnie, Anthony, Paulinho, James, and Barbie, are also evidence of the personification of the vibrator—an object with its own life and death, besides the previously discussed attributes of agency and obduracy (Miller, 2010). In the emic talk, it is possible to notice more than the mere adoption of a figure of speech. The unconscious use of prosopopeia denotes a solid network formed by the different actors participating in erotic consumption. In other words, it denotes the strength of the glue that keeps these assemblages together, making it difficult to break them apart.

6 Conclusion

The present study aimed at understanding the social life of erotic products along their consumption cycle, extending previous neomaterialist studies, by focusing on how erotic product's agency allows them to become mediators of the interaction between interviewed consumers and other actors. While attaining these context-bound objectives, the study uncovered a series of transformations performed by the object on the consumer (i.e., objectification of the consumer) and vice versa (i.e., personification of the object). These processes help understand tensions inherent to networks and assemblages formed by material and immaterial actors that are part of erotic consumption. They also suggest, along the consumption cycle, unmet consumer needs that may be tended to by industry, like disposal issues, consummating this study's practical contribution (Brei et al, 2017).

As a context-transferable theoretical contribution (Brei et al., 2017), this research showed that the erotic product's consumption cycle may be scrutinized for more than just meanings; each stage contains evidence of objects' and subjects' agency and transformation. This underlying premise may be extended to other business sectors. The study also discovered the phenomenon of personification not as symbolic language but as enforcer of objects' agency. With regard to a methodological contribution (Brei et al., 2017), fieldwork included innovative video techniques, like video-elicitation and videography, whose details could not be discussed due to space restrictions, but may be retrieved for a longer paper.

This report tried to follow size requirements present in the call for papers and is, therefore, limited to only two stages of the consumption cycle: usage and disposal. The method itself contains limitations, as it pertains to the interpretive paradigm, waiving the possibility of generalization to any population. The adoption of the Itinerary Method was limited by the impossibility of watching products in use, due to their very intimate nature.

Future studies may try to understand if different assemblages emerge in different groups of consumers, such as: single and married; old and young; homosexuals, bisexuals and heterosexuals; high income and mid to low income. Many other future possibilities exist for CCT studies on sexuality-related consumption, since scholars have only just started to investigate and theorize about this rising phenomenon.

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