Intersectional perspectives on intimate technology

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ABSTRACT

In this text, we discuss if and how an intersectional perspective on design may be critically practiced from a privileged position. More precisely, we ask how intersectional perspectives on race, gender and class may be useful in reflecting on and critically intervening in a privileged, Northern European culture. Our discussion is motivated by considerations into what impact culture and context have on the practice, representation, and reception of critique.

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14 and 15 November 2016

INTRODUCTION

In this text, we discuss if and how an intersectional perspective on design may be critically practiced from a privileged position. More precisely, we ask how intersectional perspectives on race, gender and class may be useful in reflecting on and critically intervening in a privileged, Northern European culture. Our discussion is motivated by considerations into what impact culture and context have on the practice, representation, and reception of critique.

Coming from a privileged position as white Northern European females and exploring a feminist agenda for design, we wish to open a dialogue about how design may propose ways of intervening in the power relations of what one might call "solutionist" tech culture (Morozov 2013). In the following, we analyze how power operates in the design of intimate technologies, such as menstruation tracking apps and sex toys, and we discuss if and how one of the authors' design projects intervene and/or reinforce intersectional power relations in design. Consequently, we discuss what impact the design researchers' personal background and context have on the practice of critique.

We are writing this in response to the symposium "Intersectional perspectives on design, politics and power" and reflect central questions and concerns emerging as a result of engaging with the theme and the overall discussion in relation to a PhD project that engages with the politics of intimate technologies. We will sketch out some of the central issues that seem to follow from pondering how a design researcher's own position in the world influences the project as a whole.

Instead of offering a clear and coherent argument in the form of a traditional research paper, this text has three sections presenting 1) an analysis of menstruation trackers and sex toys as design, 2) a presentation of our own design projects, and 3) intersectional perspectives on these projects. With these questions and sections we hope to provide a transparent background to open a dialogue about how an intersectional perspective on design may be critically practiced even from a privileged position. The text is based on the design decisions made in the PhD project of the first author, Marie Louise, and we will thus continue in the first person narrative.

1. POLITICS OF INTIMATE TECHNOLOGIES

With a focus on intimate technologies, I investigate a number of power relations in my PhD project that are relevant for the symposium. Understanding intimate technologies from the perspective of critical practice highlights aspects concerning body and gender, user and machine, user and company, and more generally the ideologies inscribed in contemporary technology development.

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Intimate technologies – such as menstruation tracking apps and sex toys – produce and reproduce meaning and power structures in intersectional ways across race, gender and class. This is not only due to the intimate connections that these technologies have to the human body, but is mostly a reflection of the larger context and culture in which this technology is developed and used. It makes manifest the inherent power relations in a particular kind of culture, but it also renegotiates and possibly intervenes into the socio-cultural construction and understanding of gender, sex, identity, etc. The following short analysis of menstruation tracking apps and sex toys aims to show how design determines power relations but also how it intervenes and reflects them.

Not until recently was menstruation tracking part of what is often referred to as self-tracking culture, where we most often see discussions of fitbit, running apps, calorie intake and so on. It has taken a while for the industry to address this bloody aspect of tracking culture, and when investigating how design expresses the power relations in "solutionist" tech culture, it is interesting. Similarly, research into menstruation as a cultural phenomenon is scarce – at least until 2015 where menstruation gained a new status in pop culture. From an intersectional perspective, the female gender has up until recently, played a minimal role in technology development (Prado 2014), and the development of menstruation tracking apps seems to be a great example of that (Bell 2010). However, from looking at the majority of menstruation tracking apps now available on the Apple AppStore, it becomes clear that although more apps are made, they depict a particular, and quite stereotypical way of seeing and designing for the female gender and menstruation (Lupton 2015). Consequently, menstruation tracking apps exemplify an unnecessarily gendered service that strikes to balance essentialist design with a design that intervenes rather than reinforces present gender oppression in technology.

Another example of how design intervenes and reinforces power relations is sex toys. In different historical and cultural contexts sex toys have reflected, constructed, and intervened into different and often antagonistic power relations. From a historical perspective, sex toys can be read as oppressive since they were developed to "treat hysterical women", whereas a present political perspective on internet-connected sex toys such as We-Vibe propose a neoliberal understanding of sexuality. From a cultural and social perspective, sex toys can be read as either tabooed, because of the tabooed female sexuality, or liberating, because of the enabling of a mobile, independent sexuality. From this perspective, it is not possible to design sex toys without engaging, reinforcing or intervening the past, present and future understandings.

2. CRITICAL INTERVENTIONS: PERIODSHARE & MARCELLE
With the aim of reflecting on and intervening in(to) the understanding of menstruation and intimacy, I have made two designs: *PeriodShare* and *Marcelle*. They were made while I conducted theoretical and analytical

research into the areas of menstruation and sex in computational culture. On the one hand, both design projects seek to highlight values and norms built into everyday technology, but on the other hand they also make manifest my own implicit values and norms that are largely based on my background and engagement in a white, Northern European context; a context that in many cases would be considered a privileged position.

PeriodShare is a WiFi enabled menstrual cup that proposes to automatically track menstruation data directly from the blood, and instantly share it on social networks. The prototype is comprised of white cotton underpants, implemented with a WiFi-chip, battery, and connection to a menstrual cup with a sensor, as well as a website.

Marcelle is a wearable sex toy garment that is activated as a response to WiFi-activity. The higher activity of WiFi, the higher intensity of the built-in vibrators. The prototype is comprised of white cotton underpants with electronics (WiFi chip, battery, and vibrators). The vibrators are made of transparent silicone, and can be connected at different positions in the pants.

Both objects use fiction (Bleecker 2009), uncanny means, and humour (Dunne and Raby 2013) to present speculations on the future of intimate technology. The intention of the object prototypes in my otherwise theoretically based PhD project is twofold: it seeks to critique the cultural as well as the political logics of how we use technology (Bardzell et al. 2015) and it does so through seeking to explore how the already intimate bodily aspects such as menstruation and sex are also part of intimate relations with larger computational processes (Søndergaard 2016; Søndergaard and Schiølin 2017). By reconfiguring intimate and often tabooed bodily aspects in public and networked spaces, we use the networked underwear to propose that being intimate with technology both relates to bodily aspects of gender, sexuality, and agency, and to the symbiotic relation between big data analysis, network-connectivity, and social media publics.

3. INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON MY DESIGN PROJECTS

While the prototyped objects in my PhD project are meant to provoke reflections on issues of gender oppression and/or questions of identity in a private vs. public setting where commercial interests intervene intimate living, they do not explicitly intervene into other minority oriented issues, such as race and class for instance. Or at least, that was not my intention. However, as I created them and started discussing them with others – including discussing them from the perspective of readings and projects from other designers

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and researchers – it became clear that a project like this is culturally situated and thus biased. It is obviously possible to question the privilege of the white, Northern European context that the projects are built in and from. But what consequence does this position have, for good and bad? One aspect is that in different contexts and cultures, these projects will gain different meanings that reflect these issues in some way or another. Another aspect then becomes if and how this is relevant and to whom, and here the perspective of intersectional feminism seems to be a fruitful perspective to bring into play.

Questioning my design projects from an intersectional mindset means to ask: If my position in the world is that of a white, middle-class Northern European female, then how does this affect the designs? How did my position affect my design process, and how does my position affect the reading of the design objects? And does this matter, provided that I make my position and awareness of my position (and bias) clear? Is it even possible to be aware of all biases? Also, how can I act on this: Is it possible for me as designer to do anything else, given that these particular designs seek to discuss issues of gender, embodiment and data agency in a "solutionist" tech context?

These are open questions, and as fragments of a larger discussion they can hopefully prove useful for others engaged with design, politics and power, as well as with the culturally situated context of the designer and researcher. Because even though the sites of power that my design projects live in – such as issues of identity, values and norms in "solutionist" tech culture – seemed to be very important for discussing the privileged context in which they were made, these can prove very different from another perspective. How do I keep my self and other designer's accountable for my/their privilege? And how do I/they use my/their privilege to not only talk to people in power such as the "solutionist" tech culture, but also people in lack of power? This short text is a starting point for discussing how an intersectional perspective on my design projects can help make some of the implicit biases and privileges more explicit – in my projects as well as in the "solutionist" tech culture – and discussing how intersectionality can be an antidote to privileged, "solutionist" design approaches.

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