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Sexual consumption within sexual labour: producing and consuming erotic texts and sexual commodities

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This paper explores the various connections between two particularly feminized fields of sexual culture – erotic fiction and sex toys – through an examination of the accounts of five UK women who are both readers and writers (or producers) of erotic fiction. The qualitative data evidence, first, a network of production and consumption across the fields of erotica and sex toys, and, second, the formulation of erotica writing/producing as a form of implicit sex work in which sexual commodities are mobilized. Analysis is divided into three themes: ‘informing sexual knowledge’, in which the educative function of erotica is examined, particularly around sex-toy use; ‘mobilizing sexual experiences’, in which I argue that writing erotica involves mobilizing one’s body and sexual experience to add value to the product; and ‘managing emotional risks’, in which the emotion, identity and boundary management strategies particular to this form of implicit sexual labour are examined.

Keywords: erotic fiction; sex toys; female sexuality; sexual consumption; sex work

Introduction

I do [read erotica], because it has to have some kind of plot to it. I can’t be doing with it when there’s absolutely nothing to it except the sex. There’s got to be something else in there. (Karin)

Women need to be more mentally aroused and for me that usually comes from reading something ... Yes, the problem with porn is this: it’s very samey, I want more story with my sex. (Jennifer)

As these quotes suggest, erotic fiction is predicated on its clear distinction from pornography (Juffer 1998; Sonnet 1999). As a genre that is primarily both read and written by women, and given its association with the higher cultural capital of the field of literature, erotic fiction often lays claim to a more authentic or nuanced representation of sex and sexuality from ‘women’s point of view’, setting it apart from the ‘crasser representations of pornography’ (Juffer 1998, 106). These quotes, from interviews with two women who both read and write erotic fiction, also echo the popular idea that erotica provides women with that ‘something else’, namely plot and characters, which will arouse them on a more emotional or mental level. Yet despite these

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claims, mainstream erotic fiction is, like many popular women's genres, regularly denigrated as formulaic, predictable and badly written (Deller and Smith 2013).

This paper explores the connections between erotic fiction and another particularly feminized field of sexual consumer culture: sexual commodities commonly known as 'sex toys'. I argue that sexual texts and commodities can and should be understood relationally; that is, pornographic and erotic texts and sexual commodities – including lingerie, sex toys and BDSM accessories – are connected in various ways through sexual practice and are frequently understood and experienced in relation to one another. Sexual commodities are part of sexual texts (the porn scene featuring restraints and paddles) just as sexual objects are part of the practice of reading/viewing sexual texts (the erotica reader getting out her vibrator). As the former example suggests, the makers and performers of erotica and pornography are also themselves consumers and users of sexual commodities, revealing that sexual consumption can itself be mobilized within forms of sexual labour and the production of sexual texts. The five women whose interview accounts are examined in this paper are involved with both producing and consuming sexual materials across and between the related fields of erotica and sex toys. The women are readers but also producers or writers of erotic fiction, all of whom were interviewed as part of a larger research project exploring women's experiences of sex shopping. As such, their experiences point to the network of connections between erotica and sex toys, from the erotic story that inspires a sex-toy purchase or demonstrates its use, to the sex toy purchased and used to 'research' and write an erotic scene.

These accounts also indicate a blurring of boundaries between 'production' and 'consumption' in contemporary sexual economies. This special issue of *Porn Studies* is timely; it is vital that research on pornography does not shy away from a sustained focus on consumption, particularly given the media preoccupation with a simplified effects model of porn audiences (Attwood 2005b). However, this article contends that 'production' and 'consumption' are not necessarily discreet categories in the study of sexual culture, and speaks to the value of examining moments of making and consuming alongside one another. There are numerous moments in contemporary sexual life where consuming and producing co-exist, from posting a review on a sex toy website to photographing or filming the use of sexual commodities. This is not to say that all consumers are also producers, or 'prosumers'. Research focusing wholly on consumption is invaluable to studies of sexual cultures, and I do not intend to suggest that consumers must also be producers in order to be more active or critical than those who are 'just' reading, watching or using sexual products. Moreover, I contend that the neat formulation 'prosumption' is not the most useful when looking at related practices of production and consumption across the related fields of sexual texts and sexual commodities. Instead, this research indicates an interrelated network of production and consumption between related fields of sexual culture. In these women's accounts, moments of 'consuming erotica' cannot be neatly isolated from moments of sexual commodity consumption and use, porn consumption, and researching, writing and producing erotic texts.

In contemporary digital economies, these kinds of blurred boundaries between producing and consuming across related fields may not be uncommon, from beauty blogs to video-game YouTube channels or car modification communities. Where the activities here differ is that producing sexually explicit texts involves the management of implicit sexualized labour that may receive some financial reward but might also

come with a degree of stigma and emotional risk, requiring careful management in everyday life. Given these distinctions, I argue that erotica production can be understood under the expansive heading of implicit 'sex work', and that the consumption and use of sexual commodities is mobilized as a key part of this labour. I contend that the management of boundaries between the sexual practices of 'work' and personal relationships may be harder to maintain for those involved in these implicit forms of sexual labour, and that this comes with particular advantages and disadvantages for the women involved. The conceptualization of erotica producer/writers as implicit sex workers indicates that further studies of the sexual consumption practices of actors who engage in sexualized labour in the broadest sense would yield further insights into the interconnectedness of different fields of sexual culture, and into the blurred boundaries between sexual consumption and production in contemporary sexual lives.

Research participants

The five women whose accounts are explored in this paper were part of a larger research project examining women's experiences of sex shopping in the United Kingdom. In total 22 women were interviewed in one-to-one, semi-structured interviews, some of whom also participated in accompanied sex shopping trips. A range of snowball sampling methods were used, making use of the researcher's local and online networks. At an early stage in the research an organizer of an annual conference for erotic fiction writers noticed the call for participants on Twitter and offered to publish a guest post on their blog. The women who responded to that post are the participants focused on here, referred to by their chosen pseudonyms: Jennifer, Karin, Katie, Jillian and Jane.

Ranging in age from early twenties to mid-fifties and living in various locations in the north and south of England, the women all described themselves as middle class, three as heterosexual and two as bisexual. Whilst Jillian, Karin and Jennifer are all erotica authors, Jane and Katie can more accurately be described as 'producers' of erotic fiction. They are of particular interest here because their businesses are predicated on the connectedness of sex-toy and erotica consumption. Jane edits a blog featuring erotic stories, erotic book reviews and sex-toy reviews; Katie owns an adult business selling packages for couples that include sex toys and accessories, erotic stories and sex tips. Jillian, Karin and Jennifer were all earning various modest amounts from writing, but were using this as a supplement to their 'main' income from jobs in areas such as administration and secretarial work; Katie and Jane, both married to men and with young children, had both recently left demanding full-time jobs in order to run their businesses. Producing and writing erotic fiction was understood as an addition to the main income of either a day job or male breadwinner, placing it within the context of other casual, low-paid work often undertaken by women such as Ann Summers party organizing (Storr 2003).

At the start of the research an interest from erotica writers was not particularly anticipated, but with the first emails from these participants it became apparent that sex shopping plays an important role in the personal and professional lives of erotica writers and producers. Jennifer, for example, emailed before our meeting to explain: 'I write erotic romances including BDSM stories, and as such visit stores and buy products so I know what the sensations are when writing them into my

stories'. Themes emerged across their accounts that pointed to an intricate network of connections between the practices of reading, producing or writing erotica, and buying and using sex toys. This kind of blurring of production and consumption is embedded within a number of contemporary economies.

Sexual 'prosumption'

Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) contend that 'prosumption' has become central to contemporary economic structures, with a wide range of industries adding value through facilitating the labour of consumers. They demonstrate that prosumers can be found in settings such as petrol stations, fast-food restaurants and supermarkets, but that their labour has been most easily and comprehensively harnessed by Web 2.0 platforms such as Wikipedia, Amazon, Facebook and YouTube. Prosumption has been harnessed in online sexual cultures: including amateur pornography and the facilitation of participation on porn streaming sites (Paasonen 2010); and the creative labour of fetish communities in modelling fetish wear and creating and modifying their own designs (Langer 2007). Sex shops both online and offline have similarly mobilized 'prosumers' in their business models.

Lovehoney, the UK's leading online sex retailer, has a comprehensive prosumption-based business model. Customers are encouraged to post detailed product reviews, upload photographs of themselves modelling lingerie, answer other potential consumers' questions on an advice forum, or become a 'sex toy tester' who receives new products to review. Whilst reward is nominally provided in the form of 'Oh points' that can be put towards the cost of other Lovehoney products, participants are primarily expected to contribute 'to connect with others, to create an online identity for themselves, to express themselves, to gain attention, but not to share in whatever profits can be wrung from their generosity' (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010, 27). Ann Summers also allows online customers to post product reviews and, perhaps more exploitatively, uses 'real women' to add value to their brand; running a national competition in 2012 and crowning a size 16 woman as a new lingerie model ('Ann Summers Champions Curves' 2012), and participating in a Channel 4 documentary where women collaborated in designing new sex toys but were given no share of royalties (*Sex Toy Stories* 2013). The mobilization of these 'prosumers' within sexual consumer culture evidences Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody's observation that 'the ideological recruitment of consumers into productive co-creation relationships hinges on accommodating consumers' needs for recognition, freedom, and agency' (2008, 185). In lieu of financial remuneration, the primary reward that these sexual 'prosumers' are expected to gain is that of cultivating, performing and improving the knowledgeable, desirable and active sexual self. The forms of labour enlisted by these prosumer economies converge neatly with neoliberal subjectivities (Hong 2013) which privilege commodity-focused forms of self-realization (Comor 2010). In this context women are principally incited to work upon their sexual selves and sexual knowledge through a regime of 'intimate entrepreneurship' (Gill 2009).

The erotica writer/producers whose accounts I examine here could well be described as 'prosumers' in that they simultaneously produce and consume sexual materials, often receiving scant financial reward for their labour. However, their practices point to a further layer of complexity that cannot quite be accounted for in the neat formulation 'prosumer'; they are consuming and producing across two related

but distinct fields of sexual culture. Jane's interview, to take one example, includes her descriptions of a range of producer/consumer practices such as: shopping for and buying sex toys online and in sex shops; using sex toys with her husband; reading sex-toy reviews online; using a sex toy for the purpose of writing a review of it on her blog; commissioning sex-toy reviews from other reviewers; reading erotic books; reviewing erotic books; participating in online erotica reader discussion; and editing erotic stories from contributors. This range of experiences points to the relational nature of sexual commodities and sexual texts, and demonstrates the way in which Jane shifts between 'producer' and 'consumer' across these fields. Rather than distilling this series of activities into the portmanteau 'prosumer', I contend that production and consumption can be viewed as a network in which connections are forged both within and between interrelated fields of sexual culture. In addition, the five women whose accounts are examined here cannot simply be characterized as 'prosumers' because they do gain financially from at least some of the work that they do. Their labour is also sexualized, carrying a degree of social stigma. In this respect, I contend that the work of producing erotica can more be productively understood as a form of implicit 'sex work'.

The implicit 'sex work' of erotica writing

Recent studies have reflected an understanding that the selling of sexual labour can and should be understood as 'work', and that this work involves not only the direct selling of 'sex' itself but also of various indirect sexual or sexualized services and activities (Kingston and Sanders 2012, 3). A number of professions involve forms of labour that, although they may not necessarily be straightforwardly categorized as 'sex work', are connected to the wider sex industry. Melissa Tyler's (2011) research with Soho sex shop staff, for example, suggests that their work requires the performance of 'implicit' forms of sexualized labour and necessitates careful management of the stigma and taint of 'dirty work'.

Writing and producing erotic fiction clearly requires only implicit forms of sexual labour, these women are not after all directly selling 'sex' or sexual services to patrons. Yet as I will demonstrate, sexual activity, particularly using sex toys, is a key part of the work of producing and writing erotica. Indirectly, these women use their bodies and experiences as a resource to enhance the authenticity and detail of their writing and so add value to the erotic product they wish to sell. Framing their accounts within the broad boundaries of the body of research on sex work presents a productive lens through which to interpret a number of themes that emerge from their accounts (Sanders 2005a, 2005b; Brewis and Linstead 2000). In particular, Sanders' conceptualizations of a 'manufactured identity' (2005b) and emotional risk (2004a) open up an interesting perspective on the issues examined in this paper.

Using ethnographic methods Sanders argues that sex workers create and emotionally manage a manufactured identity specifically for the workplace (2005b, 322). This identity is primarily constructed by sex workers in order to attract and keep clients and so aid financial gain. As I demonstrate below, the producers and writers of erotica create a version of sexual 'realism' in their writing that is always constrained by an awareness of the market and what will sell to readers. As Sanders contends, seeing this as a manufactured performance allows for a feminist reading in which sex workers' potential reiterations of heterosexist norms are not understood as

internalization or exploitation, but as a calculated performance based on a perception of the requirements of the industry and client. A sexual persona constructed for the workplace allows sex workers to protect themselves from harm, maintaining emotional, social and material boundaries between their professional and other identities (Sanders 2005b).

Sanders (2004a) demonstrates that sex workers face a range of physical, health and emotional risks that need to be managed. As erotica writers do not directly sell sexual services and work mainly from home, the management of health and physical risk is not apparent in their accounts. However, Sanders contends that the emotional risks of sex work can be seen as more damaging and harder to control, and therefore are often foregrounded from the perspective of sex workers themselves. She examines the various material and emotional boundaries that women construct to contain the threat of discovery and the stigma of their work (Sanders 2004a, 2004b). It is important to note that, largely due to its legality and the indirect nature of the work, erotic writing is far less stigmatized than other more direct forms of sex work and so cannot be simply compared with them. Yet as I explore below, erotica writers still experience a degree of stigma, and construct various emotional and material boundaries to contain this. The accounts examined here suggest that the boundaries between work and personal sexual identities and practices may be even more difficult to maintain in the case of implicit forms of sexual labour, and that the overlap between professional and intimate sexual identity and practice may be experienced as useful or harmful to women in different contexts.

In the following sections, I analyze the evidence in the qualitative data for, first, a network of production and consumption across the fields of erotica and sex toys, and, second, the formulation of erotica writing/producing as a form of implicit sex work in which sexual commodities are mobilized. Analysis is divided into three themes: 'informing sexual knowledge', in which I show the educative function that erotica is seen to have, particularly around sex-toy use; 'mobilizing sexual experiences', in which I argue that writing erotica involves mobilizing one's body and sexual experience to add value to the product; and 'managing emotional risks', in which I examine the emotion, identity and boundary management strategies particular to this form of implicit sexual labour.

Informing sexual knowledge

Erotic fiction scenes that featured the use of sex toys were seen as potentially useful in directing readers towards products. Here reading was seen to have a potentially educative or informative function, allowing readers to develop the 'right' kinds of sexual knowledge about sex toys and how to use them.¹ This could be as simple as widening the repertoire of objects that one might consider using; erotic scenes would reveal a kind of product that the reader had not previously been aware of, as Jane described: 'Yeah there have been certain things I've read about and I think oo I'd like to try that, something gives me an idea'. After reading a story featuring equine role play where a butt plug with a horsehair tail was used, Jennifer purchased a similar item online: 'cause I've read about it and I think, oh yes, I must try that. Because, I mean, I would never in a million years have thought about anything with a tail on it without actually reading about it'. In addition, erotic stories were seen as having the potential to demonstrate how to use a sexual object in the 'right' way.

This demonstrative aspect of erotic fiction was particularly pertinent when it came to the representation of BDSM accessories that may have risks attached to them if not used safely. Jane explained how important it was to represent bondage objects accurately in erotic stories: ‘especially anything that involves something that could damage you, you need to think about these things, you know, cutting off circulation, you could really damage somebody’. Here ‘bad’ representations of sexual activities have the potential not only to irritate but to do physical harm to readers should they use the items as described.

Reading erotica was sometimes positioned in the context of related practices such as writing or reading reviews and taking part in online discussion about erotica, with most of the women locating themselves within a community of readers (and writers) existing online. In addition to reading about toys in books, Jane cited the website goodreads as an ‘interesting place to go’ to find out information. Goodreads is a social site based around reading where members can create reading lists, review books and participate in group discussions. As a member of a number of erotica reading groups, including one called ‘Kindle smut’, Jane noted that there were regularly ‘whole threads devoted to certain kinds of toys or play’. She described a discussion about caning in which group members cautioned others against unsafe materials such as bamboo which may split during use. Both reading and discussions arising from reading are seen here as having the potential to inform, educate or demonstrate sex-toy use, providing inspiration and knowledge to help readers use sexual commodities in safe and pleasurable ways. This was the key connection between erotic texts and sexual commodities for the participants; and the idea that good erotic writing would inform and demonstrate the appropriate use of sexual commodities also shaped their practice as producers.

Writing and producing erotica presented the opportunity to create realistic scenarios that readers could take inspiration from. For Katie, this was about making the content more tasteful by eliminating clichés, and in so doing representing sex that more closely resembled ‘real’ sexual practice:

I was really wary of the story side of it at first ... So I sort of said to [the writer], y’know, I’m not very good with gasping and whispering and, y’know I just can’t do that, so. She’s done really well at writing a sort of, it’s quite a sort of, it could really happen.

Katie’s business offers luxury sex-toy boxes featuring erotic stories and tips. She explained the need for a story alongside the sex toys:

we didn’t really want to *just* give them the products, cause some people had said, we don’t know what to do with it, so we really liked the idea that you would have the sort of little story, uh, to guide you.

Here Katie draws on the notion that erotica can offer educative or instructive ‘guidance’ to potentially naive or intimidated sex toys users. She described what was offered in one of the boxes:

[the box is] very playful, so you’ve got, um, a little massage candle that it’s one of those ones, the, the wax sort of has a lower melting point, so you can burn it, um, for a while, it’s got a really nice scent, sort of nice chocolate-y scent and then when you blow it out you can pour it over somebody and massage it in ... and in the sex tips it’s got sort of how to

give an erotic massage, so it's quite nice because uh y'know I think most people just sort of make it up ... and then the story, uh, is all about someone coming home sort of knackered and getting a bit of an erotic massage ... it sort of sets the scene and there's a bit of um, oh slightly more, uh, explicit at the end, but mainly it just sort of gets you y'know in the mood.

Here the erotic story that Katie has commissioned serves to instruct readers so that they can avoid having to 'make it up'. It also serves the 'set the scene' and get 'in the mood', strengthening the commodity value of the sex toys: 'you're reading the story, and you can then pretty much re-enact yourself if you want to – you could think, that's a nice idea, I'll do that with this month's products, because it's nice to use them'. The narrative informs and guides, but, more importantly perhaps, it strengthens the ideological value of sex toys in improving the sex life of a couple, positioning them as objects that 'make time' for sex and intimacy and thus reinforce the relationship. 'Realistic' sex for Katie, then, is the sex she would like customers to aspire to having in order to legitimize and enhance the value of the product her business offers. The value of informing and instructing readers is contained within the larger goal of enhancing the product being sold, showing that erotica producers are not simply sexual educators in a straightforward sense, and that commercial forces also exert a powerful influence on their practice.

Making erotic stories with a 'realistic' feel was important to all of the women in different ways. However, as in Katie's account, this realism was always constrained by the larger goal of making a desirable and valuable end product. For those women who write erotic stories, adding realism involved using their sexual experiences, particularly those involving the use of sex toys, to add value to the erotic scenes they write.

Mobilizing sexual experiences

When it came to writing scenes featuring sexual commodities, Jennifer and Karin both spoke about how they would often purchase and use sexual objects as a form of 'research'. Jennifer described how she researched for a scene featuring Shibari, a form of elaborate rope bondage:

I wanted to include that so I'd looked that up online and then I decided, no, I need to practice this. So I got out a teddy and tried doing it, but that didn't really work, so I got a very long piece of rope and did it on myself, just so I can get an idea of what the sensations are like. Because that's the thing, by not having anybody to do it with you don't know what it will feel like, and half the time you have to make up what the sensation is like because, that kind of thing won't be on Wikipedia, it's not going to say 'it will feel this way', it just tell you it looks like this, so that's the most difficult thing with the research.

Here Jennifer uses her own body, or more precisely her own bodily sensations and responses, as a resource to make her depiction of the bondage practice more descriptive and realistic. She mobilizes her body to produce knowledge about physical sensation that she cannot read about, and so add to the informative, educative and authentic value of the writing she produces. This is an example of implicit sexualized labour; although Jennifer is not directly selling sexual services here, she is indirectly using her body and sexual responses to add value to her writing and so produce a sexual text that will be both arousing and informative for readers.

Karin related similar experiences of using sex toys to research scenes. She described how she used a strap-on dildo with her husband in order to research a ‘pegging’ sequence for an erotic book she was writing:

- Karin: When it comes to [researching] the actual activities, yes, my husband’s a very happy man. He wouldn’t want anyone to know that anything of these things are from real life, because he doesn’t want anyone to know which things were and weren’t. One story had a threesome in and that was definitely from my imagination, but there were some other bits that weren’t and he didn’t want me to tell anyone about that! But it was quite helpful having him around.
- Rachel: That’s interesting so you’re like, I want to research for this scene, let’s do this?
- Karin: Yeah exactly, see if it works.
- Rachel: So can you tell me about anything you’ve done that with?
- Karin: Yeah. Well there was a pegging sequence in the first novel that I ever wrote which I had done research for. I have to say it was much more entertaining for the bloke in the book than it was in reality, but um, it also wasn’t as bad as you might expect. He didn’t have a problem with it, but it was definitely more for my benefit than for his.
- Rachel: So you bought something to use for that?
- Karin: Yeah. Um, can’t remember, I think we bought it online – just to see how things went. I was actually quite fun really because, um, it was lucky because he was terrified and I was like, ‘excuse me, that thing’s smaller than you, how do you think I feel when you keep nagging me?!’

In this account, Karin – like Jennifer – mobilizes her own sexual practice to add value to her novel. Karin’s account is interesting because, despite the fact that she describes her husband as a ‘happy man’, she reveals the way in which she uses her role as an erotica writer, and the imperative to ‘research’ scenes, in order to negotiate or manipulate the kinds of sexual activities she and her husband participate in. Elsewhere in the interview, Karin spoke in more detail about her husband’s sexual ‘nagging’ and the difficulty of persuading him that she did not want to take part in ‘anal or a threesome’. In the extract above, she mentions that she included a threesome scene in her writing that was ‘entirely from her imagination’; clearly this was not an activity that she wanted to ‘research’ in the same way as she pursued the purchase and use of a strap-on dildo. She also uses the purchase of the sex toy as an occasion to remind her husband why she finds anal penetration unappealing. The pegging activity is done for her ‘benefit’, but what is interesting is the slippage between what ‘benefits’ her in her long-term sexual relationship and what benefits her as a writer, and how she uses the overlapping identities of both wife and erotica ‘researcher’ to negotiate sexual practice with her husband.

Moreover, Karin’s experience points to the qualifications that are placed on portraying ‘realistic’ sex in erotic scenes when she explains that ‘it was much more entertaining for the bloke in the book than it was in reality’. She explained this further later in the interview, suggesting that realism in erotica has to walk a fine line:

I mean you do your best to try and, certainly when you write you try and make sure that it's reasonably realistic, to a degree, obviously people don't want to read completely realistic sex but you don't want it to get silly either.

The boundary that Karin describes here, with 'completely realistic' sex on the one hand and 'silly' unrealistic scenes on the other, is constructed around an idea of what readers 'want to read'. Jennifer also spoke about how the needs of the market constrain the 'realism' of her representations not only of the sex but the relationships and characters in her writing:

I think my heroes probably are far more emotional than they would be in real life, but this is what our female readers want, and they want to know that the heroes are emotional and caring even if that doesn't happen in real life. So part of it is writing to their expectations so there are limits as to how far you're going to go with the accuracy.

Whilst 'realistic' representations are described as important and valuable, the need to write content that will appeal to readers and sell successfully places constraints upon what kind of 'realism' appears in the writing. If erotica writing is understood as a form of implicit sexual labour – and the way in which sexual activities and responses are utilized in researching and writing erotica would suggest this is the case – the creation of this managed form of sexual 'realism' can be understood in relation to Sanders' idea of a 'manufactured' identity for sex work (2005b, 322). Katie, Jennifer and Karin all create a form of 'realism' that is tempered by an awareness of the market and the need to make a profitable end product. This performance is calculated so that potentially unappealing aspects of sexual and romantic life – the nagging husband or the uncaring hero – are elided to create a more pleasurable fantasy. Sanders (2005b) contends that this manufactured identity not only allows sex workers to profit but to protect themselves, creating an emotional boundary between their work and personal lives. However, this research suggests that, in the case of implicit sexual labour, the maintaining of boundaries may not be a simple case of women keeping the sex work of erotica separate from their other identities and intimacies. Karin's account shows that her work provides the opportunity to use her identity as a writer within her sexual relationship in order to negotiate preferred sexual activities with her husband. This indicates the possibility that, in implicit forms of sex work such as erotica writing, identity boundaries may be manipulated to serve different agendas in different contexts. However, there were instances in participant accounts where more distinct boundaries did need to be drawn in order to protect from stigma and emotional harm.

Managing emotional risks

All of the women spoke about a degree of social stigma related to making erotic fiction. Sanders (2004a, 2004b) highlights the way in the stigma around sex work means that workers often keep their work hidden from others, and put a degree of emotional and physical labour into preventing discovery. Karin explained that she never spoke about erotica or sex toys with her female friends: 'I don't think most of my friends like to discuss that kind of thing. It's kept as private as possible to be honest'. Jennifer had shared her identity as an erotica writer with a small number of friends and had received negative responses:

There is one friend, who asked me when I was going to write a 'normal' book! And one friend, bless her, one of my closest friends, I gave her a copy of one, and she's a librarian so I told her that she has to read it, but I gave her my tamest one and she couldn't get past the first page. She doesn't like reading about sex.

In response to this stigma both Karin and Jennifer maintained social boundaries whereby they restricted discussing their writing to a small number of accepting friends, most of whom were also erotica writers. Jillian described the community of other writers as particularly important, speaking about her experiences of erotic meets and writers groups: 'I have made tonnes of nice friends, started writing erotica, just everything exploded for me'. Similarly Jennifer explained:

that was the terrific thing when I became a writer is then making other writer friends in my genre, and being able to talk about sex with them, because most of my average friends they're not interested or would be horrified.

In a more material sense, Katie and Jane spoke about having to construct boundaries within the home to separate the sexual content of their growing businesses from their families. Both discussed the difficulty of trying to keep their extensive sex toys away from their young children, as Katie described: 'when our daughter comes into our spare room she's like "what's this?"', and I'm like "put that back!" – Um, so we've had to separate out the house slightly'; and Jane explained:

I've got a series of boxes that we keep things in, on a very, very high shelf, but I'm going to have to change that storage pattern soon because my kids can now climb things, I need to find something with a lock.

These boundaries, both emotional and physical, allow erotica producers and writers to control and contain the stigma related to their sexualized labour. Scholarship examining more direct forms of sex work highlights the separation of private and professional sexual practice as a key form of boundary drawing and self-protection (Sanders 2004a; Hoigard and Finstad 1992). As I have argued, in the case of implicit sexualized labour these boundaries may be more malleable, as a key aspect of this kind of labour is the mobilization of one's intimate sexual experience and response. This element of the work was seen as particularly draining when it involved writing erotica in blog form, which required the regular and extensive use of sexual experience, as Jillian explained:

Jillian: It's mainly a sex blog, but I've been growing a bit weary of writing about sex.

Rachel: Oh, why's that?

Jillian: At some point you do, at some point you just get so tired of, 'I need to do a blog post on this, I need to do a blog post on this, I need to do that'.

Rachel: Ok, so do you mean, like, if you have a sexual experience you feel like you should then go and write—

Jillian: That's, that's basically the rules of the game [laughs].

Here the deployment of her sexual experiences as material for her blog is explicitly framed by Jillian as a form of labour that is taking a toll, and she described how

she had recently stepped back from her prolific posting. Similarly, Karin related her brief foray as an erotic blog writer:

To be honest I found it a bit hard work, you were supposed to do a blog once every week and I was really starting to run out of ideas, and I think I gave up in the end. There really is only so much that you can talk about after a while ... So you start off with your experiences – like using mirrors or pegging or something, and then after a while you're thinking is there anything else I can write about here? This is getting ridiculous

Both Jillian and Karin's accounts point to their desire to construct boundaries by moving away from the repeated and extensive use of their bodies and sexual experiences as a source for erotic blogging. In the case of this implicit form of sexual labour, the only way to maintain a boundary and protect oneself from emotional harm appears to be to step away from that particular form of work, at least temporarily. Whilst there may be advantages to the blurred boundaries between professional and private sexual lives in implicit sex work, such as Karin's ability to negotiate with her husband, it does also mean that the emotional toll of this form of work may be challenging or even impossible to maintain.

Conclusions

The qualitative data drawn upon here evidence two key critical interventions. First that sexual texts and commodities are connected in a network of practice and can be understood relationally. The accounts indicate that erotic texts may perform an educative function, albeit one always constrained by an awareness of the market, and that the consumption of sexual commodities is mobilized in the labour of producing erotic texts. Subsequently, these accounts suggest that contemporary economies readily accommodate sexual practice that blurs the boundaries between the production and consumption of sexual commodities and texts. The consumption and production of sexual materials can productively be examined alongside one another, revealing a network of consuming and producing across and between fields of sexual culture.

Finally, the formulation of erotica writer/producers as implicit sex workers and the evident connection between sexual labour and sexual consumption in their accounts point to the necessity for further research in this area. With the notable exception of Tyler's (2011) work on sex-shop staff, studies of sex shopping have largely focused on customers as individuals who buy products for personal, private use (Attwood 2005a; Smith 2007; Evans, Riley, and Shankar 2010). There are many possible cases where sex toys, lingerie, BDSM accessories and other sexual commodities are purchased and used in a 'work' context; for example, by sex-toy bloggers, sex advice writers, performers in burlesque or live sex shows, porn performers and producers, prostitutes, escorts, dominatrixes, cam girls, and undoubtedly others. Researching these accounts would continue to enrich an understanding of the complexity and diversity of sexual consumption across related fields of labour and production in contemporary sexual economies and lives.

Note

1. Sex shops and their staff have been constructed as fulfilling a similar education and guidance role regarding sex-toy purchase and use, as studies of 'feminist' sex-toy businesses have evidenced (Loe 1999; Comella 2004).

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