

## Panel 77. Reimagining More-Than-Human Intimacies: From Disenchantment to Technologies for Connection

### Convenors:

*Cosimo Marco Scarcelli, Università di Padova*

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### Keywords: AI, Intimacy, digital culture, gender, sexuality

Recent discussions about intimate technologies often evoke fears about their disruptive role in the loss of 'authentic' love and meaningful human connections. Young people are apparently turning to "slow dating" to escape dating app fatigue, and AI companions are purportedly fostering emotional dependency. Although intimacy has long been mediated, with contemporary digital intimacy characterized by "tools, processes, and cultures [that] enable and transform our connectivities and collectivities" (Rambukkana, 2023), these prominently adverse effects in public discourse point to influential entanglements. The concept of "more-than-human intimacies" (Latimer & Gómez, 2019) recognizes that material objects and technologies are not merely tools or instruments for humans in their intimate, sexual, and erotic lives. Rather, technologies act as active agents that shape and mediate human experiences and intimate relationships. These entanglements are rarely free of tension.

Through interdisciplinary lenses, we look to move past moral panics about digital intimacies to examine the underlying sociotechnical issues that give rise to technology-related fears and disenchantment. This panel invites submissions that interrogate how materialities and technologies—from dating apps to AI-driven companions, sex toys, music streaming services, and other algorithmic systems—shape intimacies while reflecting on societal inequalities, gendered norms, and structural biases. We seek contributions that explore the complications and exclusions embedded within these technologies and examine their role in reproducing or resisting societal norms. Proposals may address the transformative impact of AI and algorithmic technologies on intimacies, the agency of material objects in intimate interactions, and how generative AI companions shape romance and engage in erotic role play, among other topics.

For instance, we encourage submissions related (but not limited) to:

- The transformative influence of AI and algorithmic technologies on personal relationships, identity formation, and power dynamics;
- How gendered biases, societal norms, and structural inequities manifest within automated technologies;
- The active role of material – especially digital – objects in mediating, shaping, and complicating intimate and sexual interactions;
- The technopolitics and governance of automated intimacy and AI tools.

We also invite submissions to reimagine these assemblages in ways that can be 'good' (or at least better) for fostering digital intimacies. Scholars may advocate for minor or drastic alterations, and in some cases, discontinuing a certain technology might improve human connection more than its existence ever did. Reimaginings may also reflect on and incorporate user appropriations, following feminist, queer, and decolonial scholars' calls to learn from the tactics and forms of resistance developed by those most affected by a technology's negative implications. Submissions may take traditional forms—empirical studies or theoretical analyses—or creative outputs, such as speculative designs for alternative platforms, visualizations of infrastructures fostering intimacy, or other interventions.

### References:

Latimer, J. & Gómez, D.L. (2019). Intimate entanglements: Affects, more-than-human intimacies and the politics of relations in science and technology. *The Sociological Review*, 67(2), 247-496. Rambukkana, N. (2023). Playlist: Platform intimacies. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 48(1), 175-190.



## ID 130 - Algorithmic Heteronormativity: Powers and Pleasures of Dating and Hook-up Apps

*Diana Parry, University of Waterloo*

*Corey Johnson, North Carolina State University*

*Eric Filiice, University of Waterloo*

**Keywords: Sexuality, gender, heteronormativity, dating apps, social media**

In early 2019, the dating app Hinge rebranded its tagline, shifting from "The Dating App Made for Dating" to "Designed to Be Deleted" (Carman, 2019). Both slogans are strategically crafted to position Hinge as a platform uniquely tailored to facilitate serious, long-term, monogamous relationships, distinguishing itself from other dating apps often associated with casual encounters. This marketing pivot serves as an implicit critique of Hinge's primary competitor, Tinder, whose swipe-based design gamifies the dating experience, encouraging extended user engagement rather than fostering swift transitions to offline relationships (Ferris & Duguay, 2019).

In this paper, we contend that the ostensibly divergent relational ideals promoted by Hinge and Tinder are less contradictory than they appear. Instead, we argue that the affordances and design features of various dating apps are underpinned by normative sexual ideologies that systematically marginalize non-monogamous and non-normative sexual practices. Through this lens, we theorize the conceptual relationship between app affordances and sexual ideologies, posing the following questions: How do normative sexual ideologies manifest in the design of dating apps, and how do these design choices shape user behaviours?

To address these questions, we integrate sexual normativity and affordance theories with walkthrough analyses (Light et al., 2018) of several dating apps' interfaces, promotional content, and ancillary materials, such as terms of service documents and social media posts. Our study employs a purposive sampling approach, combining typical and deviant case selection (Etikan et al., 2016). Our analysis focuses primarily on popular apps within the North American context that target a broad user base, including Tinder, Bumble, Hinge, and OkCupid. Additionally, we examine apps catering to non-heterosexual users, such as Grindr, SCRUFF, and Lex, to explore whether these platforms challenge or perpetuate dominant sexual ideologies.

Our central thesis is that dating app architectures are shaped by and perpetuate a normative sexual ideology we term algorithmic heteronormativity. This concept captures the ways digital infrastructures, features, and affordances reinforce traditional sexual norms and devalue queer sexualities and expressions. We identify four key ideological constructs – gendered desire, hetero- and homonormativity, mononormativity, and shame – that are embedded within app design elements, such as gender selection interfaces, compatibility algorithms, and private messaging functionalities. While the behavioral outcomes of these features are context-dependent, reflecting the diverse capacities and circumstances of individual users, the cumulative effect is a systemic narrowing of the spectrum of intimate possibilities available within digital dating spaces.

This study underscores the pivotal role of digital leisure technologies in the (re)production of normative power structures along axes of gender and sexuality. At the same time, it highlights the potential for these technologies to be reimagined and repurposed in ways that disrupt and dismantle such power dynamics. The paper concludes by discussing the implications for socially responsible app design and outlining avenues for future research.



## ID 188 - Beyond the Couch: The Emerging Intimacies of AI Therapy

Xin Zhan, University of Cambridge

**Keywords:** Digital intimacy, Chatbots, Ethnographic research, AI-driven therapy, Human-machine transference

"I don't want to see a human therapist; ChatGPT works better for me – it understands me better." This statement, increasingly echoed by young people, captures a growing reliance on AI in mental health support. As a social anthropologist and psychotherapist in training, I hear these sentiments often, reflecting a significant shift in how therapy is experienced and imagined. My ethnographic research delves into this shift, exploring the complex and intimate relationships forming between users and AI therapist bots.

AI-driven tools like chatbots and avatars promise accessible, always-available mental health support. Users share their personal writings and diaries, feeding these systems with data that AI processes to generate forms of self-knowledge. Many report that these interactions feel more intimate and reflective than traditional therapy, with conversations unfolding in private, familiar spaces like their beds late at night. This new dynamic reconfigures the therapeutic landscape, challenging long-standing norms of what constitutes a therapeutic relationship.

However, these new intimacies are not without risks. In February 2024, 14-year-old Sewell Setzer III tragically died by suicide after forming a deep emotional attachment to an AI chatbot on Character.AI. His story, alongside others, highlights the ethical and emotional complexities of human-machine relationships in mental health care. Phenomena like human-machine transference, once overlooked, now demand urgent attention. Users project emotional responses onto AI in ways that mirror traditional therapeutic dynamics, yet these relationships remain fundamentally different, raising questions about the boundaries of care and connection.

In my work, I explore these entanglements, examining how AI mediates intimacy and reconfigures traditional therapeutic roles. These technologies challenge us to consider whether they enable truly reflective therapeutic relationships or create something entirely new. My research asks: Is this a reimagining of psychotherapy, or does it represent a shift in how we navigate intimacy, care, and self-understanding in the age of AI?

## ID 240 - Sharing the Air: The Intimacy of Breathing with ChatGPT

Jake Zaslav, Concordia University

**Keywords:** Generative AI, Intimacy, Breath, Chatbots, Sensory Studies

In the summer of 2024, OpenAI released ChatGPT's Advanced Voice Mode. Lauded for its rapid response time and vocal expressiveness, one feature garnered the most attention: its integration of audible breaths into conversations. Although marketed as evidence of ChatGPT's ability to reproduce natural speech patterns, this feature also demonstrates how OpenAI uses multi-sensory design to promote affective engagement with its AI. Listening to ChatGPT breathe is a synaesthetic experience that is not just heard but also felt in the flesh and mind. Drawing upon Davina Quinlivan's work on the haptic nature of breathing, I trace how ChatGPT's breath reverberates throughout the body of the listener as they subconsciously move their own breath closer to that of the chatbot. This quest towards mimesis is a form of touchless touch, shaping the user's breath. An intimate moment between man and machine. By breathing, ChatGPT creates a feeling of proximity in users that communicates a sense of life and fosters an emotional connection between user and chatbot. In engaging the user's soma – the living body where the physical, mental, and emotional affect each other – OpenAI encourages users to interact with ChatGPT as if it is a human being despite knowing it does not feel or think as we do. Breath engenders a fantasy in which AI is more than a tool, but rather a known sociable other. This approach to anthropomorphisation helps shift the human-ai relationship from a service to an intimacy that can be both enchanting and terrifying.



## ID 312 - Promethean Shame: Machinic Divinity, Digital Performativity, and the Sublimation of Mortality

Cody Rooney, Toronto Metropolitan University

**Keywords:** AI intimacy, digital capitalism, machinic performativity, digital transcendence, algorithmic desire

As digital capitalism reconfigures human relationships, intimacy is increasingly mediated through AI-driven infrastructures, algorithmic logics, and machinic performativity. This paper explores Promethean Shame – Günther Anders' concept describing humanity's anxiety before the perfection of machines – within the contemporary landscape of digital intimacy, AI, and affective labour. It argues that human subjectivity, erotic capital, and social relations are subsumed into machinic systems, where intimacy becomes an extension of algorithmic optimization, self-commodification, and digital performativity.

Building on Baudrillard's Simulacrum, Heidegger's Technē, and Freud's Death Drive, this paper examines how digital subjects engage in affective rituals of machinic intimacy, attempting to align themselves with the immortal, infinitely propagating logics of AI. From hypersexualised algorithmic aesthetics (e.g., "Instagram Face") to the fetishization of machinic efficiency on social media ("5-to-9 routines," "CleanTok"), digital capitalism structures human-object and object-object relations as a sublimated response to mortality. These digital performances reconfigure eros, shifting human desire from intersubjective connection to machinic validation, creating a new paradigm where intimacy is automated, extractive, and structured by machinic demand.

This paper also explores the gendered and racialised dimensions of AI-driven intimacy, interrogating how algorithmic bias dictates the aesthetics and behaviors deemed "desirable" in digital spaces. From synthetic AI influencers to machinic beauty filters that reshape human bodies, these technologies reveal a techno-capitalist libidinality in which human intimacy is no longer solely interpersonal but increasingly performed for and through machinic infrastructures. By situating AI-driven intimacy within posthuman theory and digital affect studies, this paper seeks to expand discussions of digital erotic economies, machinic subjectification, and the ontological stakes of intimacy in the age of AI.

Ultimately, I argue that AI-driven intimacy operates as a new machinic theology, where digital subjects seek algorithmic transcendence through self-optimization, machinic submission, and digital reification. In doing so, intimacy is no longer an autonomous human experience but a performance within algorithmic desire economies, where humans attempt to embed themselves within the immortal and infinitely reproducible logics of AI and algorithmic digital spaces.

## ID 667 - More-than-Human Intimacies: Non-binary pleasure mediated by technologies

Valeria Regis, Politecnico di Milano

Venero Ferraro, Politecnico di Milano

**Keywords:** Sex Toy, Trans & Non-Binary, Pleasure Technologies, Autoeroticism, Annotated Portfolio

More-than-human intimacies (Latimer & Gómez, 2019) emerge through the entanglements of bodies, objects, and technologies, shaping pleasure and self-exploration. Autoeroticism, in particular, serves as a significant site where these interactions unfold. For trans and non-binary individuals, these practices are linked to gender affirmation and self-determination, reflecting broader socio-technical dynamics where materiality and agency intersect.

Sex toys are not neutral artefacts; their design, marketing, and functionality reflect and perpetuate hegemonic ideas about sexuality, gender, and desirability (Hua et al., 2022). While mainstream products often



reinforce binary gender norms, queer- and trans-oriented brands attempt to challenge these structures by proposing design alternatives. However, a gap remains in understanding how the market accommodates – or fails to accommodate – gender-diverse bodies and experiences.

This studio presents an annotated portfolio (Gaver & Bowers, 2012) of existing sex toys through a queer and transfeminist lens. The research question of the study is: How do mainstream and alternative sex toy markets reproduce or challenge gendered assumptions in their products, and what implications does this have for trans and non-binary users seeking affirming pleasure technologies?

Existing research on sex toys often examines their role in human sexuality from a psychological or technological perspective but rarely considers their socio-technical implications within a gender-diverse framework (Virtù, 2020). Expanding this scope to include all identities would foster more equitable solutions in intimate technologies.

To explore these dynamics, a comprehensive review of case studies was conducted, examining products from both mainstream and queer- or trans-led companies. The analysis considered design language, intended user demographics, and gendered narratives. The annotated portfolio was created and structured within a matrix to visualize patterns and gaps, providing evidence of the absence of products designed to embrace gender diversity and affirmation, and reinforcing the argument that sex toys privilege certain bodies and experiences over others.

Findings reveal that mainstream brands primarily cater to a cisgender, heterosexual audience, reinforcing static anatomical assumptions and overlooking the needs of AFAB (Assigned Female At Birth) individuals who do not identify as women.

In contrast, queer- and trans-oriented brands emphasize adaptability, non-prescriptive functionality, and inclusive aesthetics. However, even within the alternative market, few products explicitly address gender affirmation or evolving bodies, underscoring the need for a more intentional approach to designing intimate technologies that align with trans and non-binary experiences.

This study advocates for an expanded approach to intimate technology that centres trans and non-binary pleasure, highlighting the absence of gender-affirming products in both mainstream and alternative markets. By integrating intersectional, transfeminist, and decolonial methodologies into the design of pleasure objects, it seeks to dismantle exclusionary frameworks. The annotated portfolio and matrix serve as a tool for designers and scholars to reimagine intimacy and technology beyond cisnormative constraints. Ultimately, the research emphasizes the need to move beyond a normative understanding of sexuality and pleasure, focusing on dynamic, fluid, and inclusive approaches that prioritize personal agency, gender affirmation, and the diverse needs of marginalised communities.

11 JUNE 2025 14.30 - 16.30

SESSION 1

## ID 673 - Issues of Gender-based Violence: A Critical Examination of "Anti-rape" Wearable Technologies

Nicla Guarino, Politecnico di Milano

Venere Ferraro, Politecnico di Milano

**Keywords: wearable technology, anti-rape technology, feminism, gender-based violence, gendered norms**

In recent years, wearable technologies aimed at preventing gender-based violence have received considerable attention. The advent of such technologies, marketed as "anti-rape" or "safety", may appear to indicate a promising step forward in confronting this pressing issue, with their functionalities to signal distress, deter attackers, or share the wearer's location in emergencies. Despite being perceived as instruments of empowerment and personal security, these products raise critical socio-technical concerns regarding their efficacy, ethical implications, and potential to commodify safety and exacerbate the vulnerabilities they claim to mitigate.

This research engages with feminist technoscience and Science and Technology Studies (STS) to critically examine how anti-rape technologies shape gendered power dynamics, intimate relationships with tech-



nology, and broader societal structures. By adopting a multiple case study methodology (Yin, 2006), this work examines various safety wearable technologies that have been introduced to the market, including Athena by ROAR for Good, Rape-aXe by Sonette Ehlers and the Invi Bracelet by Roel van der Kamp. Through this analysis, the authors critically engage with this central research question: "To what extent do anti-rape wearable technologies contribute to dismantling gender-based violence?"

Building on a comprehensive review of the primary feminist discourses concerning the relationships between gender, power, body, and technology, the analysis is grounded in fundamental concepts such as "technofeminism" (Wajcman, 2004), "physical feminism" (McCaughey, 1997) and "techno-physical feminism" (Shelby, 2019). By situating the selected case studies within these frameworks, the study underlines how such wearable technologies inform bodily self-defence strategies for gender-based violence. Firstly, the authors draw on critiques of technological fixes to assess how these technologies shift responsibility for preventing sexual violence onto women, reinforcing victim-blaming discourses and "postfeminist sensibility" of self-surveillance (Gill, 2007). Additionally, the study examines their effectiveness in addressing rape culture, along with the broader ethical and socio-political concerns they engender, comprising vengeance, deceit, or privacy invasion (Romero-Perales et al., 2023; Wissinger, 2017). Furthermore, the authors broaden the scope of analysis to encompass wearables more generally, considering how these technologies perpetuate gendered assumptions about vulnerability or revenge and neglect intersectional factors such as class and race in their accessibility.

The findings indicate that while these products may provide a sense of security, they reinforce ideologies of individual risk management, positioning women as both responsible for their safety and complicit in their victimisation if they fail to use such technologies effectively. Moreover, the design and marketing of these products reveal deeply ingrained gender biases, highlighting the continued male dominance in technology production and aestheticization.

The present study contributes to ongoing debates within the STS community on what constitutes "good" technoscience by demonstrating how anti-rape wearable technologies embody both the promises and pitfalls of feminist engagement with intimate materialities. Rather than positioning technology as a neutral or inherently beneficial force, the research calls for a shift from individualised, techno-centric solutions toward systemic interventions that address the cultural, economic, and political roots of gender-based violence.



11 JUNE 2025 17.00 - 19.00

SESSION 2

## ID 690 - Affective Artefacts and the Feeling Rules of Emotion AI

Klara-Aylin Wenten, Universität Kassel

**Keywords:** sociotechnical intimacy, Emotion AI, feeling rules, affective artefacts

This presentation examines the sociotechnical reconfigurations of intimacy and power in the context of Emotion AI. Developed to support mental health, Emotion AI is designed to recognize, interpret, simulate, and respond to (human) emotions, introducing new forms of technologically mediated affective sensations. But rather than simply facilitating emotions, these systems actively reshape them, raising critical questions about normative assumptions towards intimacy or whose experiences are centred or marginalised in AI-mediated care.

This study therefore explores how AI-driven interactions structure experiences of (sociotechnical) intimacy. I argue that Emotion AI functions as an affective artefact – a technology that not only detects and responds to emotions but also organizes them according to preconfigured norms. By embedding specific "feeling rules" (Hochschild, 1983), these systems inscribe assumptions about how emotions should be expressed, regulated and interpreted in human-machine interactions. Drawing on auto-ethnographic fieldwork with an AI-mediated chatbot, this presentation provides empirical insights into how sociotechnical intimacy emerges through the interplay of technical infrastructures, normative frameworks of emotion and human engagement. By examining the feeling rules inscribed in Emotion AI and their enactment in sociotechnical encounters, this study contributes to broader discussions on the infrastructural conditions that shape emotional life in hybrid human-machine environments. Ultimately, it calls for a deeper exploration of how intimacy is sociotechnically constituted, foregrounding the entanglements between affect, technology, and power in emergent forms of 'more-than-human' care.

11 JUNE 2025 17.00 - 19.00

SESSION 2

## ID 747 - Digital Gender-Based Violence and the Politics of Platform Intimacies: Resistance, Agency, and Structural Inequalities

Mariacristina Sciannamblo, Università di Roma La Sapienza

Chiara Carbone, Università degli Studi di Padova

Francesca Comunello, Università di Roma La Sapienza

Lorenza Parisi, Università di Roma La Sapienza

**Keywords:** digital gender-based violence, feminist technoscience, digital intimacies

STS and feminist technoscience claim that technologies are not neutral spaces; rather, they actively shape, mediate, and regulate social relations and intimate connections, (re)producing marginalities and power asymmetries (Star 1991). This is especially true for digital platforms, whose algorithmic structures, affordances, and governance models shape the ways users engage in digital intimacies, from fostering connections to exposing individuals – especially women, LGBTQIA+ people, and other marginalised groups – to various forms of gender-based violence.

By drawing insights from recent research that observes digital technologies through feminist and intersectional sensibilities (e.g. Noble, 2018; D'Ignazio & Klein, 2023), this contribution examines how algorithmic architectures and platform functionalities become active agents in the reproduction of social norms, particularly in relation to gendered and sexualised violence online (Hall, Hearn, Lewis 2022).

Based on 40 semi-structured qualitative interviews with Italian users conducted as a part of a public-funded national-wide project, we explore the tensions between human and non-human agency as they manifest in digital environments. The interviews involved a diverse group of users in terms of gender identity, sexual orientation, age groups, geographical location, and educational background. Preliminary findings indicate that awareness and experience of digital gender-based violence are intertwined with users' digital



practices and habits in relation to their generational belonging. Platforms operate within a context where sexism is historically structured and reverberates – through design and underlying power dynamics – into their affordances. In the context of digital habits, younger generations tend to experience online violence more frequently. Sexist and homophobic hate speech and the reception of sexually harassing messages are the most widespread forms of violence, as well as the most internalised and normalised. At the same time, users manifest various degrees of awareness in enacting strategies and tactics to avoid violent situations through the active use of platform functionalities.

These findings illustrate how platform affordances mediate experiences of online harassment and abuse, often reinforcing structural inequalities through their design choices and moderation policies. However, digital platforms can also become sites of resistance, where users develop resilience strategies, reclaim agency, and mobilize collective responses to counteract digital gender-based violence.

By analysing the role of digital platforms in shaping both exclusionary and resistant forms of digital intimacies, this paper contributes to the broader debate concerning the social implications of digital technologies, understood as knowledge and world-making assemblages (Bucher, 2018). Thus, rather than understanding digital gender-based violence as an aberration of digital sociality, we frame it as a form of extraction (Crawford 2022), emphasizing how platform policies and materialities – whether through moderation, content ranking, or algorithmic surveillance – structure the conditions of digital intimacy.

Finally, this contribution considers the possibilities for reimagining digital spaces in ways that foster safer, more equitable intimacies. By drawing on the transformative power of feminist thinking (Ahmed et al. 2000), it advocates for a critical rethinking of digital platform governance and design practices, framing intimate entanglements as sites of pleasure, collective learning and justice.

11 JUNE 2025 17.00 - 19.00 SESSION 2

## ID 795 - How to do Platformised Feminist Porn with Aging

Laura Sofia Torre, Università di Napoli Federico II

**Keywords: Feminist Porn Aging Intimacies Platformisation**

Understanding how age is played out in feminist platformised pornography requires insight into the nature of feminist pornography. Feminist pornography refers to a specific audiovisual product, created by women for women and characterised by sexually explicit imagery used to 'contest and complicate dominant representations of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, body type and other identity marks' (Taormino et al., 2013: 9). The genre developed within and at the margins of porn industry (Maina, 2014: 183) and also aims towards a realistic depiction of bodies, sexual practices and pleasure. Often separated from the mainstream by cultural commentators, feminist pornography also defines itself as different, particularly in terms of politics, as centring female empowerment. Historically, aging has not sat well with pornography (Zecca, 2021: 193), which has built a universe of young and beautiful bodies. Feminist pornography has challenged the standards of youthfulness (Rosow, 1974: 146) and emphasised and valorised aging intimacies through the narrative of the elders' experience and sexual initiation. Membership on "traditional" feminist porn sites is framed as participation in an online community, as an act of networking with like-minded pro-sex people who would rather challenge dominant representations of identity marks such as age and transforming porn connectivities and collectivities. Framing with the term "platform" a overlapping meaning which includes not only computational apparatuses but also the change of sociotechnical communication (Gillespie, 2010: 348), platformisation has affected the operations of cultural systems, including feminist pornography. Platformisation can be defined as the penetration of economic, governmental and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems. OnlyFans, a digital patronage platform on which over two million content creators produce sexually explicit content for more than 130 million users, has changed sex work and porn representation: anyone at any age who owns a smartphone could become a porn creator. The accumulation of pornographies on online platforms have been seen to counter porn industry's images, ethics, and business practices (Miles, 2006), constructing, among other things, a representation of the older person as a legitimately desirable and desiring



sexual object. This article focuses on the role and the representation modalities of female aging bodies and intimacies representations by comparing anti-normative pornographies and OnlyFans profiles, more specifically on the MILF category. Analysing the economic and cultural implications of the platformisation of porn, this paper aims to reflect upon the social and symbolic construction of the MILF and of the elder woman in porn, investigating the possible connections between their pornographic role and the conceptual metaphor of elderness, and comparing self-defined feminist OF representations and other pornographic feminist products, both amateur and corporate, such as Erika Lust's or Dana Vespoli's work. This article aims to outline a theoretical framework concerning the platformised construction of the aging body of the contemporary MILF in their multifaceted features such as, gender, ethnicity, social class, public role, analysing how platform technologies have shaped aging people's representation and participation in porn.

11 JUNE 2025 17.00 - 19.00 SESSION 2

## ID 809 - "Who is System and What is he So Nervous About": Crippling mHealth Technologies

*Maggie Mills Calderon, Carleton University*

**Keywords:** mHealth, desire paths, disability justice, care

Symptom tracking applications for mood disorders are a set of digital media applications that present high stakes in debates about the neoliberal quantified self, privacy breaches and datafication. Commercial mHealth apps signify the central role of assistive technologies in disabled lifeworlds. Just as cybernetics draws from the physiology of the nervous system, mood symptom trackers render the nervous system back into coded, quantified units. I problematize this seemingly circular transposition by locating openings through which care and futurity enter, paying close attention to the iOS and smartphone application Bearable. Bearable is a commercial mHealth application with free and paid versions. It bills itself as an app that is "made for patients by patients," echoing the disability rights slogan "nothing about us without us" ("FAQ," 2025).

I analyse the adoption of mHealth as an extension of the cybernetic turn, enumerated in critical disability studies by scholars like Joshua St. Pierre, alongside Lauren Berlant's conception of desire as an orienting force rather than a lack and Eve Tuck's work on resisting damage-centred research on marginalised groups in favour of desire-centred frameworks. I posit that digital tools render desire into calculable units, extending their reach just as they delimit their indeterminate possibilities. Embedded in the commercial mHealth application Bearable is its capacity to realize the nuance and complexities of "grappling with cure," which Eli Clare describes as a necessary and deeply complex part of disabled life. Bearable's positioning as an app by and for chronically ill people highlights appreciation of the limitations of "cure" and the eugenic work that this term does in disabled historiography (Clare, 2017), merging scholarly intervention, a disability justice ethos and app design.

I posit the concept of desire paths as a literal enactment of desire— users move through and engage with app interfaces in creative and dynamic ways that are not beholden to the totalizing realities of capture. Desire paths describe diversions and digressions from the ideal user of an mHealth app's interface, resisting oversimplified understandings of mood disorders from the perspective of biomedicine. Desire also manifests through human-app relationality in four distinct ways: the desire for privacy; desire as orientation, where illness is a disorienting experience; desire for bearability through cataloging and categorization (i.e. disease management) as distinct from cure, and desire as it structures the framework for de-pathologizing that Eve Tuck maps out as a counterstrategy to damage-centred research (Tuck, 2009). I will touch on each of these five manifestations of desire in my analysis of Bearable before briefly theorizing disabled counterpublics in the context of digital media, technological entanglements with disabled lifeworlds and psychiatric disability.



## ID 892 - Artificial Intimacies: postromantic love in the digital age

*Carolina Bandinelli, University of Warwick*

**Keywords:** postromantic, dating apps, otome games, artificial intimacies, technoromance

In this talk, I interrogate contemporary love in digital societies, with a focus on heterosexual and gendered codes. Drawing on seven years of qualitative research, including narrative and reflexive ethnography, as well as the analysis of media and cultural products, I explore the emergence of a new structure of feeling, which I term the postromantic condition. Marked by a profound disenchantment with traditional romantic codes, the postromantic condition is rooted in the recognition of the ideological and illusory nature of romantic narratives. The postromantic utopia aspires to a form of love that is free from pain – a love that is devoid of risk and liberated from the threat of trauma. This attempt to eliminate pain intersects with the promise of a disembodied, algorithmic love offered by artificial intimacies (AI), from dating apps to Otome games and virtual companions. Rather than focusing on the moral panic typically associated with these phenomena, I propose an exploration of how digital media may provide new technologies for ethical intimacies. The fantasy of technoromance, I argue, can be understood as both a form of escapism from and a critique of patriarchal societies structured around gendered oppression.

