Sexual datafication

This editorial brings together the articles on sexual datafication available in Vol. 27, Issue 7 of Sexualities.

Digital technologies have become thoroughly integrated into sexuality over the past twenty years, affecting marriage trends and reproduction, the evolution of sexual cultures, sex work, proprioception and societal norms regarding even the mechanics of sex itself. The integration of smart and now AI technologies into people's bodies and relationships renders data crucial to understanding contemporary sexuality. Data is central to smart and AI assisted Things, to platforms and apps and to large-scale infrastructures of datafication related to digital capitalism and state institutions, and so data also becomes central to sexuality.

This special issue introduces the concept of sexual datafication to describe the importance of data to the development of contemporary sexual culture(s), rights and discourse. The concept was first introduced in *Bodies of Work: the Labour of Sex in the Digital Age* (Saunders, 2020) to describe the impact of data economies and cultures on the evolution of pornography. Here the concept is expanded to investigate how sexuality more broadly is shaped by datafication, that is the 'render[ing] into data […] aspects of the world that have never been quantified before' (Cukier and Mayer-Schoenberger, 2014: 29; see also Kitchin 2014). Sexual datafication describes how sexual relationships and bodies are transformed into data in ways that influence sexual norms and moral values in societies and change in highly material ways how people desire, love and have sex. The datafication of sex takes place through the technological and virtual means, including through: platforms, apps, wearables and devices; machine learning and AI; the production and of big data; and the deployment of algorithms both to shape cultural content and parse user data.

Sexual datafication also focuses on the monitoring and regulation of sexualities that takes place through dataveillance (Van Dijck, 2014). The regulation of sexuality has historically been vital to the functioning of capitalist, state and colonial systems of power. The regulation of the body and the 'manipulation of the "collective affects" – 'passion, emotion, feeling or sentiment' (Rose, 2007) are the foundation of biopower. Regulating sexual bodies and behaviour is key to generating economic value and constructing societal structures of legitimacy, morality and deviancy (Foucault, 1990; Foucault, 1977; Dabhoiwala, 2012; Morini and Fumagalli, 2010; Rose, 2007). Kafer and Grinberg describe sexuality as a key 'technique by which states

manufactured systems of behaviors and social relations to channel the pleasures, energies, and sensations of the body into birth rates, reproductive guidelines, and matrimonial customs.' (2019: 592). Stryker describes the 'somaticization by individuals of the bodily norms and ideals that regulate the entire population to which they belong' as 'conjoined by the domain of sexuality.' (2014: 38). Sex is the ur- form of biopower.

How people have sex, fall in love and relate to their bodies and sexual identities is inseparable from power. Now that capitalist, colonial, governmental and medical systems of power are bound up with data, data power becomes key to understanding contemporary sexuality. Data power describes how governments and private corporations exercise power in many spheres of human life and society, including immigration, policy-making, health, journalism and education, through the production and deployment of data (Kennedy and Bates, 2017; Lynskey 2019). The regulation of sexuality – that is, the construction of forms of sexual expression as morally good or degenerate, the violent policing of certain bodies and relationships and the freighting of particular groups with an excessive sexualness that creates renewed disciplinary imperatives – now takes place through data power. Sexual datafication considers data to constitute the next significant phase in the history of sexuality.

As a conceptual framework, sexual datafication grows from feminist, queer and postcolonial surveillance studies and data studies (Boyd and Crawford, 2012; Conrad, 2009; D'Ignazio and Klein, 2020; Dubrofsky and Magnet, 2015; Kitchin and Lauriault, 2018; Noble, 2018). These disciplines recognise the importance of regulatory systems of surveillance and dataveillance to how intersectional axes of social difference such as gender, race, class and sexuality are experienced. Sexual datafication draws out the sexuality component that is often lifted up by scholars in these fields. It uses these disciplinary perspectives to explore the specific contexts in which datafication is brought into relation with sexuality; how data cultures and practices significantly impact on sexual relationships and attitudes; and how, through data, sexuality is shaped by capitalist, state and colonial systems in new ways. Sexual datafication clarifies continuities and shifts in how sexuality is constructed and regulated by data power.

Sexuality is central to some of the most pressing human rights issues of our time and is currently at the heart of-judicial, political and cultural regulation. While the twenty-first century has included progressive sexual rights movements for women and trans people, it has also witnessed the rise of far-right sexual politics, a significant reversal in women's sexual rights including in North America, China, Afghanistan and Iraq, and violent backlash against non-heteronormative sexualities and communities in countries including the UK, Russia, America,

Hungary and Poland. Understanding how sexual expression is monitored and controlled in the age of data power is crucial.

This introduction identifies five key areas to begin theorising sexual datafication. They investigate data as a cultural phenomenon, a capitalist and colonial enterprise, a tool of the state, and as a means of justice and visibility. These are introduced in five sections related to: the impact of data culture and data practices on sexual culture; data as an intermediary between people and the state; the privatisation of datafication and sexuality's evolution in relation to data capitalism; the role of data as a necessary means of justice and visibility; and the importance of data colonialism to understanding global formations of sexuality.

Data cultures and data practices

Sexual behaviour and attitudes are now powerfully shaped by data cultures and data practices. Data cultures are defined by Acker and Clement as 'reflect[ing] epistemologies about […] ordering, classification and standards' (Clement and Acker, 2019: 3). The epistemological rationale of data cultures are expanded here to include: knowability, quantification, binaries, formalisation, hierarchies and ranking and ideas of objectivity and truth (see Katyal and Jung, 2022; Mau, 2019; Porter and Haggerty, 1997; Striphas, 2015). The economisation of data also produces particular cultural effects which are relevant across the different aspects of data cultures set out by Albury et al. that relate to how data is produced, cultivated and used (2017). As desire and relationships accrue new capitalist value in the data economy, the imperative of growth that governs platforms and app ecosystems produces concomitant cultural imperatives. More relationships, more sex, more matches and connections signify greater fulfilment and socio-sexual success. Managing this growth efficiently through data practices becomes the responsibility of a 'good neoliberal citizen' (Randles and Woodward, 2017). Building on Ruppert and Scheel's rich exploration of data practices from multiple infrastructural and professional perspectives (2021), the data practices that are the most culturally influential are those employed by users. Individuals' imaginatively transforming experiences into numbers and regularly checking devices and applications; and engaging with data visualisations. Self-management, improvement, externalisation and control are established here as important, interrelated features of data cultures. Moore and Robinson have also gestured towards a related temporal culture that emerges from datafication that is efficient, linear and dromological (2016; see also Virilio, 1986; Swan, 2013).

These aspects of data cultures, arising from the epistemological and economic foundations of datafication, permeate the online pornography and dating app industries. Both technologies categorise, quantify and algorithmically manage people, bodies and emotions. Features of data culture such as speed, imperatives for more and the reduction of people to quantifiable metrics of desirability are central to these technologies. The digital porn and dating app industries, worth over one hundred and fifty billion dollars and used by three hundred and fifty million people respectively, have been hugely influential in shaping sexual cultures (Adult Entertainment Market, n.d.; Curry, 2025). Changes in sexual cultures bound up with these technologies include attenuations in the primacy of monogamy and marriage (Yeo and Fung, 2016); the flowering of marginalised sexual cultures (Chan, 2021; Miles, 2017); increases in STD rates (Alsing et al., 2021; Lehmiller and Ioerger, 2014; Queiroz et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2023); and changing attitudes towards sexual violence, anal sex and BDSM (Cama, 2021; Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2024; Keilty, 2018; Rama et al., 2023; Tarzia and Tyler, 2021; Tziallas, 2018). The extent of people's immersion in these technologies, with daily or even hourly engagement with a dating app or porn site, influences significantly how people conceptualise love, sex and relationships, new sexual norms are forged through data cultures and practices.

The sex-tech and fem-tech industries are rapidly growing, worth seventy and forty billion dollars, with both set to double by 2030 (Albury et al., 2023; SexTech Market Size, 2025; Global femtech market size, 2024). The sex-tech industry comprises a wide range of technologies, including sex tracking apps, sexual therapy and relationship apps, AI relationship chatbots and smart sexual devices. These technologies often require even more explicit transformations of sexual relationships and bodily sensations into data than take place on dating apps and porn platforms. Users are required to conceptualise their bodies and relationships in quantifiable terms and engage with data visualisations about their sexual activity. Many sex tracking apps quantify sexual experiences in terms of longevity, number of sexual positions and calories burned and blend economised aspects of data cultures with sex positivity and corporatised sexual wellness (Saunders, 2024). Data practices are brought into people's intimate relationships and often literally people's bodies, as is the case, for example, with the Lioness vibrator and FirmTech cock ring where users can monitor data visualisations gathered data directly from the vagina and penis during sex. In these smart and AI devices, as with relationship apps and sexual consent apps, data is also established as a communicatory mediator. Users learn about their partner's desires, fears, traumas or whether they give consent through engaging with categorised and numerical information in a shared app (Saunders, 2023). Fem-tech includes devices, platforms and tracking apps related primarily to menstruation, fertility and menopause. These technologies are defined by similar ideas of

datafication and quantification as providing superior and definitive knowledge about the body and sexual activities (Rizk and Othman, 2016). Like many types of sex-tech, these technologies draw on the authority of data science to endow them with a medical validity and often market themselves as sexual health products, with connections with sex education providers and medical institutions. Data practices are rendered normative and even essential for the digitally affluent and health-conscious individual.

Sexual datafication describes the ways that data cultures and practices in these industries shape dominant sexual norms and moral values, particularly in the Global North where these technologies are prevalent. The impact of these industries on sexual behaviour typify 'soft biopower' (Cheney-Lippold, 2011: 172). People's pleasurable and willing engagement with dating apps, porn sites, AI sex toys and sexual health devices, together with a culture of constant phone use, powerfully shape sexual attitudes. The intimacy, physicality and constancy of these libidinal relationships between sex and data cultures also has a peculiarly material impact. Data practices are integrated into orifices, bodily fluids, hormones, love and desire, typifying the material basis of data's extraction and the materiality of its effects (Ajana, 2017; Ball et al., 2016; Saunders, 2023). Through these technologies, data therefore becomes central to the evolution of new notions of sexual morality, health, purity and discipline that have been central to the history of sexuality.

The state, the sexual subject and data

The ways in which big data is deployed by state institutions amplifies their capacity to regulate sexuality. Counting and labelling sexual bodies and behaviour has been central to states' regulatory function (Alonso and Starr, 1987; Bowker and Star, 1999; Martin and Lynch, 2009). Sexual bodies typify the 'immeasurable excess' power has sought to control and economise and so have been particularly vulnerable to the rationalizing strategies of states (Anderson, 2012: 36; see also Gleeson, 2007; Greenberg and Bystryn, 1984). Control through classification was at the heart of social hygiene initiatives, colonial sterilisation and religio-psychiatric hospitals and prisons that have historically policed female sexuality, women of colour and non-heteronormative sexualities (McCormick, 2013; Parish et al., 2021; Pluskota, 2018; Stote, 2015; Thomas and Gurevich, 2021; Whitehead, 1995). The eighteenth century 'age of statistical observation' (Espeland and Stevens, 2008: 417) formalised counting as a function of state power. Labelling and categorising people produced the sexually healthy and the degenerate, the sane and the hysterical, the heterosexual and the Others.

Data is a continuation of these 'analogue antecedents of power' (Clarkson, 2014: 36), as big data, AI-assisted technologies and algorithmic prediction become utilised in welfare, prisons and policing, immigration and the biomedical sciences (Ferguson 2017; Karatas et al., 2022; Sangaramoorthy and Benton, 2012; Van Zoonen, 2020). This has significant ramifications for the regulatory relationship between the sexual subject and the state. Big data is an extension of previous forms of state surveillance and control. Browne calls it a 'a technology of social control' (Browne, 2015) and Dağdelen and Poyraz describe it as a 'social classification tool' (Dağdelen and Poyraz, 2023: 518) characterised by power inequalities. New relationships between the state and the sexual subject evolve and intensify because of the scale and pervasiveness of datafication. This relates to the 'interconnected and perpetual' mass dataveillance (Maras and Wandt, 2019: 160; see also Tufekci, 2014) enabled by the Internet of Things; the capacity to rapidly aggregate different datasets from different branches of state and corporate actors; and automated decisionmaking and predictive analytics taking place through AI and algorithms (Wachter and Mittelstadt, 2019). Data establishes a new biopolitical frontier between the state and the sexual subject and render counting and quantification even more important to the shaping of sexuality.

It is hard to separate the epistemological rationale of classifying populations on the basis of their sexual orientation, sexual health status or gender identity from particular colonial and heteropatriarchal contexts in which classificatory systems are deployed. Counting can seem inherently heteronormative, seeking to produce fixed and knowable sexual bodies, binary and definitive identities and dyads of sexual legitimacy and deviancy. Where non-heteronormative people, particularly trans people, circulate in state systems of surveillance, their 'inconsistent administrative identity' arises from the epistemological limits of classification itself (Spade, 2015: 339). A significant part of the violence trans people face derives from their numerical inability to function in taxonomical state systems (see also Baker et al., 2018; Squatriglia, 2008), making it harder to access welfare services, homelessness services or engage with the justice system. Critical data scholars note the inherent opposition between datafication and LGBTQI + sexual bodies and identities.   describes non-heteronormative sexualities as necessarily 'challeng[ing] big data-driven truths' and the 'gendered assumptions of […] data systems […] which are reliant upon the fixed/reductive categorisations of individuals.' (). Ruberg and Ruelos describe the 'friction between LGBTQ lives and data' that 'challenge us to reconsider the logics of data itself.' (Ruberg and Ruelos, 2020: 2-3; see also Gieseking, 2018; Drabinkski, 2013: 96; Currah and Mulqueen, 2011). The epistemological foundation of datafication and societal discrimination against LGBTQI + people are therefore intertwined.

This discriminatory relationship between counting and classification and non-heteronormative sexualities now takes place across state institutions that use big data. In health, where government strategies utilise big data for sexual healthcare and disease surveillance, epistemological reductiveness and sexual discrimination converge on marginalised sexualities (Bao et al., 2024; Mello and Wang, 2020; Waldman, 2023; Young et al., 2021). The Data-to-Care initiative, for example, that undertakes 'HIV surveillance' of prisoners in North Carolina jails is linked to potential criminalisation and distrust of the motives for dataveillance (Buchbinder et al., 2022). The repurposing of data, between state actors as well as private companies, puts LGBTQI+ people at risk, particularly in countries with extensive homo- and transphobic nationalistic projects and advanced cultures of digital surveillance. Health data has been purchased by credit card, insurance and credit scoring companies and used, for example, to reduce credit for individuals using marriage counselling and psychotherapy. Data brokers have been found selling lists of rape victims and of men with erectile dysfunction (Redden and Brand, 2017; Hirsch, 2014). State initiatives to digitise patient records and automate medical care can also replicate state-sanctioned sexual discrimination. Australia's National Digital Health Strategy that began in 2023 is described, for example, as 'straightwashing data medicine' and 'does not serve minority communities or address health needs that attract stigma and prejudice.' (Davis et al., 2023). Donnelly and Stapleton also describe the way automated decision making through machine learning algorithms 'act as a vehicle to reignite negative bias towards the LGBTQI+ community' through mislabelling, prejudiced training data and over- and under- representation (2022: 117-118).

Automated decision-making and aggregated data sets expand and naturalise existing prejudice against various sexual Others, combining state surveillance on community, national and state border levels. AI-assisted technologies such as biometric facial recognition software and Automatic Gender Recognition software used, for example, in airport body scanners discriminate technosocially against queer bodies through their 'abstraction of […] a human body into a series of data points' (Shelton et al., 2021: 520) related to voice, face, breast shape and gait. The use of big data and algorithmic prediction in policing, to generate risk models and anticipate areas and individuals most likely to commit crimes also negatively impacts marginalised sexualities (Brayne, 2017). Non-heteronormative sexualities are often over-policed, freighted with a dangerously excessive sexualness that demands further regulation. Big data, dataveillance, algorithmic predictions and AI-automation blend with the heteropatriarchal epistemology of datafication to produce both new ways and continuations in how the state monitors and regulates people on the basis of their sexuality.

Data capitalism

Data as a mediator between the state and the sexual subject is bound up with data capitalism. Data capitalism describes the centrality of data to various forms of capitalism, such as platform and informational capitalism; the commodification of data; and the power inequalities between those from whom data is extracted and those who financially benefit from gathering and selling data (Fuchs, 2019; Myers West, 2019; Sadowski, 2020). Where the regulation of sexuality has been crucial to the historical development of capitalism, principally through the production of a work force and free gendered labour (Canaday, 2009; Federici, 2004; Turner, 1992), the biovalue (Rose, 2007) of sexual bodies and affect find new expression in data capitalism. A small monopoly of technology companies dominate the production and processing of big data that is utilised by states. This section sets out how the largely privatised context produces new constellations of power between nation states and data capitalism that shape sexual discourse and sexual cultures in new ways.

The recent alliance between tech CEOs Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk with US President Donald Trump point to the potential connections between religio-political state interests and newer technological systems of power. Tech companies have a greatly expanded capacity for monitoring populations through individuals' use of search engines, social media platforms and myriad tracking devices. This privatised dataveillance can work in tandem with regressive state ideologies to discipline female and non-heteronormative sexualities. In the United States, where abortion is now illegal, data gathered from women's purchase history, geolocative tracking and social media activities can be released to federal and state law enforcement agencies in cases where women have sought reproductive healthcare (Chin, 2022; Tian et al., 2021). Social media platforms have become a key site for monitoring and disciplining groups whose marginalisation is related to their sexuality. The oppression of trans people has been central to Musk's politicised purchase of Twitter and his role as Director of Government Efficiency is closely linked to the US Government's subsequent outlawing of pronouns and anti-trans legislation sweeping the country. In China, the suppression of 'male effeminacy' (Griffiths, 2019) is enacted partly through the monitoring and censorship of social media platforms. Douyin, WeChat and Sina Weibo have repeatedly been forced to undertake ' 'cleanup' effort[s]' (Hernandez and Mou, 2018) to ensure their content aligns with the sexual conservatism of 'Xi Jinping Thought' (Xu and Albert, 2017; see also Timmins, 2021; Caini, 2022; Mozur, 2022). The changing ownership of Grindr's data stores from the United States to China between 2018 and 2020, which included individuals' sexual images and conversations from the male gay hook up app, illustrates how privatised dataveillance endangers

nonheteronormative people (Kokas, 2024). Social media companies' ability to predict people's sexual orientation with over 80% accuracy (Kosinski et al., 2013) poses a danger for women and LGBTQI + people, particularly in contexts of right-wing nation building where data capitalism and regressive state ideologies can work together to regulate sexualities (Foremski, 2013; Jernigan and Mistree, 2009; Mosse, 1985; Nagel, 1998).

Data capitalism is also central to the construction of sexual discourse. Social media platforms, whose sustaining principle is the datafication of relationality, affect and attention, are now at the heart of public discourse and cultural production (Hillis et al., 2015; Alaimo and Kallinikos, 2017; Fuchs, 2013; Huberman, 2013). The economic imperatives of the data economy shape the discourse around sexual justice issues related to, for example, sexual consent and trans rights. The need to maximise the time people spend on social media platforms and their affective engagement with these spaces has facilitated discursive extremism and polarisation related in particular to transphobia and misogyny (Govers et al., 2023; Whittaker et al., 2021). Data capitalism is now instrumental in shaping public discourse on sexual identities, sexual politics and sexual rights. It is also bound up with the algorithmic management of online content, which constructs both cultural discourse and users' sexual subjectivity.

The algorithmic parsing of big data from users' online activities employs simplified and fixed parameters in the production of gender and sexuality data for marketing and advertising companies affects how users are addressed. Inferential and recommendation algorithms reproduce cisheteronormative stereotypes through targeted advertising and filtering cultural content (Myles et al., 2023; Nieuwenhuis and Wilkens, 2018; Noble 2018; Vormbusch, 2022; Bivens and Haimson, 2016). What people consume and how they are addressed online significantly shapes their sexual subjectivities, Raley describing the movement from 'descriptive (monitoring)' to 'predictive (conjecture) and prescriptive (enactment)' that takes place in the algorithmic shaping of user identity (2013).

The algorithmic sorting of sexual content and user data also censors. Female sexuality is simultaneously monetised on platforms like OnlyFans and Instagram, and policed, with sex workers and porn performers shadowbanned and marginalised through unregulated online abuse (Blunt and Stardust, 2021; Pilipets and Paasonen 2022; Rauchberg, 2022). Algorithm-driven content moderation systems discriminate against nonheteronormative sexualities. Across META platforms filtering software conflate any LGBT content with 'mature content', resulting in discussions of gay marriage and trans and bisexuality content being removed

(Katyal and Jung, 2022; Myles et al., 2023). Sexual health organisations such as the American Sexual Health Association have found LGBTQI + sex education information automatically removed from digital platforms as inappropriate, harming organisations' ability to provide people with vital sexual health advice (Madison, 2015; Pérez, 2021). Meanwhile, dataveillance and algorithmic analytics are not instrumentalised to police male sexual violence, with social media and porn platforms failing to protect female and non-heteronormative content creators from various data harms (Redden and Brand, 2017). Data capitalism now regulates sexuality in multiple reactionary ways, controlling how and what sexual content and sex education people can access, how sexual rights issues are understood and framed in public discourse and the labour rights of sex workers.

However, the demands of data capitalism – for more data, more growth and therefore more relationality – can also shape sexual cultures in progressive ways. Just as the needs of industrial capitalism shaped the moral primacy of the family and heterosexuality, so forms of sexual sociality that have emerged on social media platforms and in dating app cultures represent departures from heteronormativity, marriage, monogamy and reproduction (Castro and Barrada 2020; Olivares-García, 2022; Onanuga, 2021; Yue and Lim, 2022). Recommendation algorithms can also spread queer and trans content across heteronormative networks, just as they can spread extremism (Wang et al., 2023). The blossoming of non-heteronormative sexual cultures across digital networks poses clear problems for states seeking to oppress and control citizens on the basis of their sexuality. Where tech behemoths have attenuated state power so significantly, data capitalism can operate in opposition to the interests of heteropatriarchal state institutions. Sexual datafication, by providing a conceptual framework that highlights the different contexts in which sexuality and data interact, clarifies contradictions in how sexuality is regulated through data capitalism. The biopolitical interests of state and capital can be dangerously aligned in ways that intensify the monitoring and control of sexuality, but there can also be tensions in how capitalist and state forms of power operate on sexuality, playing out on sexual bodies in at times unpredictably progressive ways.

Data as visibility

The sexually progressive effects of data capitalism in some cases point to the important role of data as a means of visibility. Datafication and dataveillance are not only tools of economisation and bureaucratic control. They are also an essential means for bringing to light sexual discrimination and human rights issues connected to sexuality. Adrienne Rich's assertion that

an identity needs to be named in order to exist is true of data too (2003; see also Caswell et al., 2016). To be counted is to be recognised by society as deserving of recognition and societal support and is necessary for understanding the specific health, educational, welfare and justice needs of sexually marginalised groups.

Organisations and initiatives such as the United Nation's Data2x, the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative's Data-Pop Alliance and Mexico's Global Centre of Excellence for Gender Statistics assert the necessity of data for bringing to light 'sexual rights' issues (Richardson, 2000) such as child marriage, sex trafficking, and rape in marriage and as a tactic of war. The UN warns that 'important data about women and girls is incomplete or missing' (Data2x, n.d.). Its goal is to expand the production and demand for this data as the key way to improve sexual and gender equality. The Data-Pop Alliance similarly describes its objective to 'Change the World with Data,' asserting that gathering data about women and children's experiences is crucial for change. The 2019 LGBTIQ survey of 100,000 Europeans conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Human Rights, for example, sought to gather data on nonheteronormative people's experience of discrimination and violence in employment, education, healthcare and housing. Large-scale datafication is necessary to better understand the lived realities of people and communities with marginalised sexual identities - over half of the world's population - and address their needs. Counting can also be key to societal recognition and respect. Data is 'witness and action,' in Coleman's words (2018: 391) and many critical data scholars assert the necessity of data for social justice related to gender and sexuality (Heeks and Renken, 2018; Kshetri, 2014; Vaitla et al., 2017; Cruz, 2020; Henne et al., 2021). Data as a means for fighting for sexual rights is a vital consideration for sexual datafication.

Data colonialism

The role of data as visibility is prominent in humanitarian and philanthropic contexts. What the World Economic Forum terms 'data philanthropy' (Big Data, Big Impact, 2012: 6) not only describes the positive aspects of visibility afforded by data gathering. It also points to the relevance of 'data colonialism' as a final important theoretical framework for developing an understanding of sexual datafication (Couldry and Mejias, 2019; Milan and Treré, 2019; Raval, 2019). Organisations in the Global North, often working with branches of technology companies like Google.org and Microsoft's Tech for Social Impact, gather data about sexuality from the Global South: data is gathered, often in local, community contexts about people's sexual attitudes, their experiences of gendered sexual violence and their access to sexual health

services and education. Such data philanthropy needs to be analysed with regard to the powerful rhetorical role it plays in establishing the infrastructures and ideologies of datafication in the Global South which is vital to global digital capitalism (Browne, 2015; Hoffmann, 2021; Mann and Daly, 2019; Taylor and Broeders, 2015). Synonymising datafication with sexual rights is a potent justification for the expansion of tech corporations in the Global South and can also function as an effective whitewashing for other forms of exploitative data practices. Data colonialism and related questions of data agency and data justice (Taylor, 2017; Taylor and Broeders, 2015) are important for understanding how sexual cultures are framed in international contexts and constructed through power inequalities between the Global North and South.

Sexual datafication is interested in exploring how data is constructed as a benevolent and civilizing force, while sexualities on the margins of digital Empire are subject to pathologisation and decontextualisation through datafication. The complexities of sexualities across multiple regions and cultures are also often obscured when sexual bodies in the Global South are framed by the numerical parameters set by organisations such as the ICT Global Agenda and Corporate Human Rights Benchmark (Costanza-Chock, 2020; Lepri et al., 2017; Leurs, 2017; Welles, 2014).

Controlling sexuality has been central to colonial enterprises, where justifications for European and Christan colonial expansion leant heavily on the construction of African and Asian sexualities as dangerous and uncivilised (Fanon, 1963; Said, 1979; Smith, 2015). Now, data colonialism is important for interrogating how datafication is wielded by Western democracies and technology companies. Ideologies of big data uncritically celebrate the production of philanthropic data as a seductively simple and reassuringly technological solution to the complexity of the patriarchal, capitalist and colonial systems in which global sexual inequalities are embedded. Sexual datafication interrogates not only how data can be used to foster sexual justice through visibility, but how a simplistic notion of data as justice can obscure new ways that data colonialism legislates marginalised sexualities.

Conclusion

This special issue explores these different aspects of sexual datafication, in order to better understand the impact of data on sexuality. Oscar Tianyang Zhou and Shuaishuai Wang analyse how the algorithmic management of social media data provides a new visibility of gay culture in China on the Douyin and Zhihu platforms. David Myles relatedly considers the implications

for queer citizens in China of both the commodification and censorship of queer hook up Grindr. Darra Hofman and Michele Villagran explore the relationship between LGBTQ + communities and dataveillance in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The 'soft biopolitics' of sexual datafication is explored in Alberto Cossu and Carolina Bandinelli's article on the evolution of reputational metrics in dating app culture. Cosimo Marco Scarcelli explores the rise of sex tracking apps and their biomedical, sexual and cultural implications in HIS article 'The datafication of sex: sex tracking apps and big data collection.' Finally, Natalie Hammond and Angelo Moretti's article focuses on the rise of big data in addressing sexual and reproductive health in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and consider the challenges related to gathering sexual data in the Global South. These articles demonstrate the necessity of attending to data in order to understand how sexuality is being disciplined, shaped and economised in the twenty-first century. They also show the interdisciplinarity of sexual datafication, spanning fields including critical, queer and feminist data studies, surveillance studies, digital health, platform studies, political economy, digital sociology and gender and sexuality studies.

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