Touch and contact during COVID-19: Insights from queer digital spaces

Abstract

The aim of this conceptual paper is to discuss the transformation of socialisation processes due to the digitalisation of entertainment and community formation during COVID-19. More specifically, we focus on alternative modes of touch and contact within the context of queer digital entertainment spaces and question how the world is shaped and sensed in a (post-) COVID-19 era. Inspired by the work of Karen Barad on a quantum theory of queer intimacies, we highlight that the rise of hybridised experiences in-between physical and digital spaces captures a series of spatio-temporal, material and symbolic dimensions of touch and contact. We conclude by drawing implications for the future of organisations and work.

Introduction

This conceptual paper started with diary notes and discussions between the authors on life under lockdown. We aim to reflect on our observations of how interactions with surfaces, objects, and of course, other humans have been wholly transformed during the pandemic. We consider different scenarios whereby touch and contact have become heavily policed during COVID-19. By discussing processes of prohibiting and policing touch and contact, we refer to such juridical processes enforced by governmental structures, as well as those implemented by individuals and collectives based on their own sense-making of biomedical rationalities around epidemic control (Foucault, 2008). We further consider instances of resistance to biomedical rationalities and other modes of reasoning in reframing touch. In this bizarre real-life scenario, we have started viewing the outside world (outside our 'homes') as impure and then became afraid and/or sceptical of contact and touch. Prior research on the sociocultural dimensions of risk (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Douglas, 1992) illustrates how risk management is bound up with the rhetoric of individual choice, particularly in the context of health risk. Hilgartner (1992) used the term 'risk object' to qualify entities that have been identified as the cause of harm or danger. In the context of a global pandemic, everything becomes suspicious since every entity (human or non-human) can become a temporary container of the infectious agent. Indeed, we have all become risk objects.

In order to adapt to the new social reality put forth by the pandemic, we sanitised our laptops to give us access to a virtual 'outside' world as a means to cope. We have been trying to keep in touch with loved ones and stay 'entertained' online with the likes of binge-watching, streaming services, and real-time digital events wherein we have aimed to consume both real and fantastic time and space (Skandalis et al., 2016). For instance, in the context of the live music industry, we have witnessed the rise of virtual, 'risk-free' concerts within imaginary settings (e.g. digital games, virtual worlds) with artists taking the form of digital avatars and

inviting audiences to engage with them via the use of emerging technologies such as virtual reality (Skandalis, 2020). Similarly, in the context of queer entertainment, digital pride events and queer parties have occurred during the pandemic worldwide communicated as 'safe' alternatives to their 'offline' equivalents. Such events have enjoyed a most significant reach in terms of audience participation and link back to the historical relationship between queerness and digital technologies (*cf.* Miles, 2018). Nevertheless, can such emerging initiatives be conceived as an authentic way of experiencing entertainment or do these highlight a shift towards a dystopian entertainment milieu marked by corporealness? In other words, digital atmospheres of entertainment need certain affective and sensory qualities in order to be experienced, as such (Anderson, 2009; De La Fuente and Walsh, 2020).

Online, we could argue that the intensity levels of affective atmospheres of entertainment are being diminished due to the lack of bodily touch and contact (Anderson, 2009). In fact, a significant part of the socialisation process is lost in translation due to the digitalisation of entertainment and community formation. Or is it really lost? In line with de la Fuente (2019), we then ask the following questions: how will the world be *shaped* and *sensed* in a (post-)COVID-19 society? And how do organisational efforts of digital entertainment shape audiences' corporeal experiences in a (post-)COVID-19 era? We draw upon queer theory and, in particular, the work of Barad (2007; 2012a; 2015) to develop a critical discussion of non-conventional forms of haptic encounters in digital spaces and draw implications for organisational theory and work.

On the possibility of queering 'touch' in organisations and work

A growing number of studies have started to investigate the social relations of touch in organisations and work (Mik-Meyer, Obling and Wolkowitz, 2018; Steyaert, 2015; Oerton, 2004; Hancock et al., 2015), particularly in relation to 'body work' (Wolkowitz, 2002). For

example, Cohen and Wolkowitz (2018) explore touch in the context of the feminisation of body work. They investigate the "deep-seated social expectations about the meaning of touch (among recipients, workers and the public) and [the need] to manage these effectively" (Cohen and Wolkowitz, 2018: 46). They argue that the social codes and meanings that infuse touch within and outside organisations participate in the discursive and material constructions of gendered value orientations. This, in turn, shapes the expectations deriving from bodily experiences. To these ends, a woman's touch is expected to be caring, servile, and responsive, whereas a man's touch is supposed to be predatory, controlling, and expert (Hancock et al., 2015). Cohen and Wolkowitz (2018) highlight that these expectations can generate cultural dilemmas for body work. Other studies in organisational theory have explored touch in the context of canine-human companionship (Satama and Huopalainen, 2019; Charles and Wolkowitz, 2019). Indeed, as Donna Haraway (2008) points out, touch is a central practice to forming interactions between humans and their non-human companions. This line of scholarship shed light into the importance of the role of our affective relations with companion animals within organisations. Another strand of research explored the commodification of touch in the context of sex work. For example, Chen (2018) studied the role of intimacy in body work of erotic gay massage in Taiwan. His work provides insights for the intertwinement between corporeal and affective dimensions in sex work and highlights the importance of touch in sex work in constituting not only a commodified form of intimacy but also a caring practice.

These streams of organisational research have been fruitful in illuminating the various processes of policing of touch in the workplace, as well as the gendering and commodification of touch. Our reflections in this paper aim to broaden the scope of this literature by considering scenarios such as the pandemic where touch is heavily policed, prohibited or abjected. Drawing on the work of Karen Barad on a quantum theory of touching and queer(ed) intimacy (2007, 2012a, 2015), we further reflect on the (im)possibility of alternative forms of haptic encounters

in digital spaces. Her work places emphasis upon the non-human entities of performative accounts of such encounters. More specifically, Barad argues for the development of a 'textured fabric of universal hapticity' which binds the actual and the virtual (De Freitas, 2017). To these ends, we draw upon the context of queer digital entertainment spaces in order to further explore emerging scenarios of touch and contact and draw implications for organisations and work. An event description for a queer digital fetish party alerted us to such scenarios of alternative possibilities of 'touch'. The event was organised as part of a digital series for pride 2020 which has largely shifted to a virtual format during COVID-19. The excerpt of interest from the event reads: "the digital space is not an unknown territory for many LGBTQI+ people, as these were the spaces where many of us took the first steps in exploring our identities". Following de La Fuente (2019), we highlight the need for the development of a digital textural sociological understanding of queer entertainment in light of the policing of touch and contact within COVID-19 and beyond. We use the term 'queer' to refer both to "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (Halperin, 1997: 62), as well as explicitly queer subject positions. We are as much interested in queering the understanding of touch as in the lived experiences of queer embodiment.

Queerness and digital entertainment in COVID-19

Queer practices have been long infused with textural sensibilities while, at the same time, touch and contact have been historically policed for queer people, whether this was performed through juridical or societal norms. In fact, there have been a plethora of practices used to police touch and contact for queer people including their criminalisation, medicalisation, abjection, mockery, social exclusion, and so on. Such practices have evolved with the progress of acceptance of certain LGBT identities, but never entirely disappeared. Russell (2019) argues that the processes of the so-called decriminalisation and surface

inclusion of select LGBT identities are based on reproductive regimes of the discourse of the 'good queer citizens.' This imaginary form of queerness often serves to reproduce several heteronormative practices. In fact, it contributes to modernising and creating a socially acceptable form of the policing of touch and contact for queer people. Queer touch and contact have historically been constructed as something deviant and abject (Kristeva, 1980), and therefore regulated culturally and legally. As Butler (1988: 526) notes, "the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives". Subsequently, queer folks had to identify creative ways to find and bond with like-minded people in a safe environment in order to engage in resistant practices that challenge heteronormativity. Queer creativity has been crucial to challenging and reworking sexuality and leveraging technology in a way to create a safe space to do so. Indeed, there is a historical relationship between queer communities and digital technologies in fostering and nurturing embodied socialities in safer environments, particularly when corporeal possibilities of touch and contact were limited (Kirby, 1997). As Miles (2018) notes, queerness has long occupied liminal spaces within the social sphere with digital platforms and technologies being widely considered as safe and protective environments for queer people in the past.

It is not surprising to see that queer communities have been pioneers in utilising digital technologies to connect with each other and create alternative 'virtual intimacies' (McGlotten, 2014). For instance, the launch of geolocation dating apps such as Grindr and Scruff for gay men have completely transformed the world's dating scene into a gamified erotic terrain (Tziallas, 2015) wherein "bodies, places, and identities are discursively constructed through the interplay of virtual and physical experience" (Roth, 2014: 2113). In recent years, this has also led to a reconfiguration of embodiment in such digital spaces since geolocation dating apps actively foreground embodiment and physical encounter and adopt a hybrid approach

which also focuses on material spaces and physical encounters. In other words, queer locative media have largely reconfigured embodied practices by bringing into the forefront a series of hybridised experiences of sexuality (Miles, 2017). The effects this can also be observed outside the context of queer digital spaces with the development of dating apps such as Tinder and many other apps that followed for queer and straight folks alike. Although these dating apps highlight the gradual transition of queer people online, along with the decline of historic gay institutions (Cavalcante, 2019), we still lack a solid understanding of the variety of ways through which such online apps influence and shape existing interpersonal relationships and practices in offline contexts (Wu and Ward, 2019). In other words, hybridised experiences become even more central to theorise digital organisational futures in light of the ongoing COVID-19 situation, especially when alternative modes of touch and contact are involved.

Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that some of these spaces also constitute a fertile terrain for the reproduction of systems of oppression and inequality such as racism, xenophobia, transphobia, fatphobia, and hegemonic masculinity, amongst others (Garcia-Gómez, 2020; Shield, 2018). For instance, it was only after the global protests following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 that Grindr finally removed their 'ethnicity filter'; a move which has been considered to be insufficient to deal with the widespread racism and xenophobia on the platform. Therefore, we argue that an intersectional approach is essential to ensure that the processes of digitisation of queer spaces are safe and inclusive. By intersectional approach, we refer to "the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena" (Collins, 2015, p.1). In other words, the concept of intersectionality acknowledges various forms of discrimination against repressed groups (Shield, 2018) and helps us to perceive digital media and technological spaces as contested cultural terrains which are orchestrated, regulated and based upon dominant sexual politics (Ahlm, 2017). The creation

of alternative forms of virtual intimacies should align with a commitment to decolonising regimes of domination (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013). This means that digital safe spaces need to develop an environment that can nurture virtual intimacies that are inclusive to all the members of the community such as queer people of colour, with disabilities, trans folks, migrants, and so on.

Digital spaces can be joined either synchronously or asynchronously, meaning that both 'temporal' and 'spatial' setups of the encounter are metamorphosed. Careful crafting of the 'material' and 'symbolic' dimensions of the space is necessary for enacting a rich experience of interaction. This is a space where the clash and tensions between soft (such as art and aesthetics) and hard (such as technology and economic rationality) textural qualities (Molotch, 2004) are not just an issue to be overcome, but a necessity to bring into being new forms of human encounters. In other words, queer digital spaces re-orient the intimacy of social relationships and interactions towards specific embodied qualities. The intra-activity between humans and screens (as well as other materialities) provides both challenges and alternatives to the power of touch to symbolise human interactions. Aesthetics play an important role in reframing contact and interaction from various qualities of 'touch' (such as texture, shape, temperature, and vibration) to being confined with those of 'sight' (such as colour, shape, movement complexity, and depth) and 'hearing' (pitch, rhythm, harmony, and dissonance) (Ott and Dickinson, 2019). The effects of these aesthetic qualities are "produced on and through the live and lively bodies of audiences" (Hawhee, 2009, p. 13). The flow of matter-energy shifts from a multi-sensorial experience to one that focuses on auditory and visual stimuli (Barrett and Bolt, 2013).

During the pandemic, digital entertainment events have been organised worldwide. For instance, in the UK, due to COVID-19 restrictions, pride in its usual format with live outdoor events, street parties and large crowds of people coming together to celebrate diversity and

equality has not been a viable option. Instead, digital pride festivals were organised, which have been particularly successful and well-received such as the Brighton and Hove digital pride festival. In other domains such as in the context of the live music industry, we have also experienced the rise of virtual, 'risk-free' concerts within imaginary settings (e.g. digital games, virtual worlds) with artists taking the form of digital avatars and inviting audiences to engage with them via the use of emerging technologies such as virtual reality (Skandalis, 2020).

Implications for organisational theory and work

The current pandemic pushes us to think of touch beyond conventional phenomenological framings of hapticity and consider the vast alternative possibilities of intimacy (such as haptic encounters through language) through a quantum ontology perspective. As Barad (2012b, p. 215) put it: "In a breathtakingly intimate sense, touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is: matter is condensations of responses, of response-ability." This implies the need to develop new abilities when screens and technologies mediate sensorial experiences. Whereas previous geo-localisation apps create a hybridisation of socialisation processes in that online spaces are extensively entangled with human physical experiences (Miles, 2017), lockdown enforcement participates in further disentangling these. This is exacerbated in certain situations such as recent examples of borders being closed for extended periods. In this sense, virtual spaces represent an attempt to fill the void of nothingness resulting from a touchless world. Although prior research documents the material nature of organisational body work (*cf.* Cohen and Wolkowitz, 2018), we need to acknowledge that virtual spaces can destabilise the body and lead to alternative modes of organisational theorising (Satama and Huopalainen, 2018). We highlight the necessity to develop a digital textural understanding of gendered body work which bears the potential to create endless possibilities for new subject positions in interaction with digital textures. The dance of virtual

indeterminacy and virtual creativity can provide us with the necessary tools to navigate a touchless society. In other words, we argue that organisational theorists need to take into account the role of non-human entities (screens, colours, definitions, frequencies, bandwidth, and so on) when "it comes to performative accounts of abjection, subjection, agency, and materialisation" (Barad, 2012a, p. 124) in a digital post-COVID19 landscape.

Global pride 2020 represents an interesting example to illustrate our claims. Due to COVID-19, the event was held online on June 27, 2020. The movement from streets to screens highlights the processual dimensions of embodiment and its symbolic representation online (Mik-Meyer et al., 2018). More specifically, this movement was accompanied by certain digital tools for virtual march mapping to reminisce the past possibilities of walking for pride. Virtual marchers could use a website called 'pride march from home: united for Covid relief' to map the route they would have taken should the pandemic not preventing them from doing so. They could also share the virtual map on social media subsequently. The digitalisation of the global event also meant that it was difficult to ignore the geographical locations where same-sex sexual activity was still criminalised. A Lebanese queer activist stated 'Covid-19 means I can join Pride and not get arrested'. Global pride 2020 moved from streets to screens, and so did the attention to the celebrations and struggles, which had to adjust accordingly. Furthermore, pride's timing that coincided with the Black Lives Matter protests meant that it was no longer possible to ignore the racism and xenophobia within certain gay communities. There was also a sense of the return to the movement roots in being a protest, following years of the corporatisation of Pride and LGBT inclusion more broadly (Johnston, 2005; Calvard, O'Toole and Hardwick, 2020). For instance, there were growing discussions around reclaiming the pride flag against the corporatisation of textures of resistance. There was more acceptance towards a reworking of the original pride flag by including colours from the Trans-liberation movement

flag, as well as the inclusion of the colours black and brown to account for the inclusion of queer, trans, and intersex people of colour (QTIPOC).

The art of drag was also prominent during global pride 2020 and beyond. Drag artists make imaginative use of cosmetic products to create facial and bodily textures that defy gender norms. The movement of drag performances to online spaces also allowed for more visibility for under-represented artists such as drag kings, 'bio-queens', and trans drag performers. We argue that the influence of the art of drag during lockdown is a testament to the rich, creative, and resilient textures of digital queer lives. Digital queer spaces attempt to create a virtual affective experience through imaginative sets of digital textures. Organisational theory needs to further acknowledge the invisibility of the physical body and the impact of corporeal imaginaries upon the politics of identity work (Rajan-Rankin, 2018; King, 2016). This includes instances of invasion of employees' digital privacy in such contexts of invisibility, and its effects on their wellbeing. Furthermore, our observations have additional implications beyond the current context, to include multiple scenarios of absence and invisibility of bodies in the workplace. The queering and digitisation of interaction, touch and contact requires creativity, resilience, and courage.

Conclusion

In light of COVID-19, it is important to develop a digital textural sociological understanding of both current and historical experiences of queer resilience and queer creativity in mobilising digital technologies to create digital entertainment spaces that engage artists, creatives, organisers, promoters and audiences in times where contact and touch are policed. As Miles (2017, p.1607) notes, the "hybridisation of virtual and embodied domains expedites new encounters" which bring about a series of tensions which lie between "the generative potential of ubiquitous technology and ambivalence towards the implications of

being so plugged-in" online and call for a more critical understanding of "how technology mediates real-life social and sexual encounters in embodied space". As part of this research project, our 'lurking' within queer digital spaces led us to revise any pre-conceived notions of the corporeal and material aspects of bodywork (Chen, 2018) and question conventional forms of haptic encounters. Digital spaces provided us with a much-needed sense of connection with other people. They also contributed to a sense of frustration at the end of online social interactions; when closing the laptop, this meant a return to a space that felt terribly empty. We started to put more effort and love in the production of digital content that would initiate our encounters in these spaces. This created a sense of anticipation that, albeit different from that of physical encounters, made for a more interesting use of these digital spaces. We were also attentive to how our emotions were vivid during these trying times, and how that affected our interactions – digital spaces constituted both solace and trigger for those experiences.

To sum up, the growing literature on touch in organisation studies has previously highlighted its importance as a central analytical element in bodywork (Cohen and Wolkowitz, 2018; Chen, 2018) and affective relations in organisations (Satama and Huopalainen, 2019; Charles and Wolkowitz, 2019). We therefore call for the need to further theorise alternative modes of haptic encounters in digital spaces. We need to ensure that the digital milieu we attempt to grasp through our thinking and writing is not textureless and hence lifeless (de La Fuente, 2019) in a post-COVID-19 era for work and organisations.

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