

Brocher Presentation: The commodification of touch and digital touch

Give people catalogue on day 1

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To integrate more:

- *ethics, power, politics, intimacy and vulnerability.*
- *Through presentations, robot demonstrations and interaction, and roundtable discussion, we will explore a number of **themes relevant to the ethical and practical challenges of care robots, and related robotic technologies**, in terms of their **development and implementation in health and social care settings**. Important **themes** that will be explored include: **vulnerability, risk, care, embodiment, human health, cost, affect, intimacy, disability, social isolation** and marginalization.*
- *My introduction to the COT*

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I'm a doctoral researcher based at UCL, and in this short talk and activity I'll be looking at the commodification of touch and digital touch through a collaborative project I've been working on this this year called *The Catalogue of Touch*, which playfully explores and makes explicit, the idea of touch as something that can be bought and sold.



It imagines a “menu” of purchasable touch experiences designed or facilitated by touch professionals, using a very traditional catalogue type format.

I'm going to give some background to the catalogue in this talk, and how it came about, and then ask you to try out one of the touch experiences it features.

But before I do this, I'll give you a little snapshot of my PhD, which is the central project behind the catalogue.

This came out of my PhD exploring connections between digital touch, touch and loneliness.

The PhD is part of the European Research Council-funded project *IN-TOUCH* based at UCL, which has been investigating the *social* impact of emerging digital touch technologies, through a range of interdisciplinary methods



And by 'Digital touch' we mean techs that go beyond the everyday touch screen and which digitally deliver and mediate touch or aspects of touch like temperature, pressure and vibration, between humans, humans and objects and humans and robots

(And you'll be hearing more from the project through Ned and Carey later).

The themes behind *The Catalogue of Touch* have been adapted from my PhD, where I've been exploring how people *frame* and imagine touch and digital touch in experiences of loneliness.

I think one of the themes that's come up both in presentations and informal conversations in this workshop is the how hard it is to work with touch technologies – challenges of helping people imagine them, not always possible to try them out

This was done through creative online workshops with six groups of about 4 participants [mapping, probes, prototyping etc.]

- But to give you a *quick* flavour, some of the things we did included mapping experiences of loneliness and then framing touch within that...
- I also showed participants examples of digital touch designs which directly or indirectly spoke to loneliness, and asked participants for their thoughts...
- *and* I asked participants to make quick mock-ups of their *own* touch technology ideas for this space.
- And, in between the workshops I also gave participants some creative prompts to respond to.
- And I used this creative approach because, for the most part, we *aren't* used to thinking or talking about touch or loneliness. And of course, these technologies are still very new and can be can be hard to get one's head around!

and also later by inviting 3 pairs of participants to try out the hey bracelet, in their everyday lives.

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TO ADD:

MARISSA

wrote 'Vast space, unknown. Awareness of my thoughts, awareness of my heart'.

you're just in this depth of space and time and loneliness'.

In Marissa's case, interoceptive tactile awareness (e.g., of a racing heart or throbbing head) not only became unpleasantly heightened, but in this state, she also experienced a frightening, **disembodying effect** ('that feeling of my body not being my own'). Connecting *back* to her body and regaining control over its 'erratic' rhythms seem beyond her capabilities ('you get more and more scared of that feeling of being kind of just this alone entity that is out of control [...] I'm just this like floating mass of *fear*').

In her reflections on the postcard, she also reflected on other physical interactions (hugs, her cats) could bring her 'back down to earth' ('those physical things are [...] really helpful to bring me back to a place of, of *not* feeling lonely from *myself* more than anything').

Marissa's two cats helped her cope with working from home on her own when her partner was away at work ('they're like my little heartbeat in the house'). This inspired her prototype, a bio-sensing cat (**Fig X**) which mimicked and extended the way her pets comforted, anchored and re-synced her anxious, out-of-control body (e.g., through feeling their purring vibrations and beating hearts). She

Commented [LG1]: She doesn't feel like she exists

imagined the prototype as something that could be used independently in this way, or connected to a loved one, like a partner. In her

Commented [LG2]: Check this

MARK

- Very tactile person
- Hugs, therapy bear
- Mental health
- As a highly tactile person, the social distancing rules had made life particularly difficult
- Mark defined loneliness as **'feeling isolated from people and feeling abandoned by those closest to you'**. He also had a **very clear framing of the opposite of loneliness, which he articulated as 'community' and 'everyone actively cherishing everyone in the room [...]** whereas loneliness is where it's *not* everyone in the room'. This idea came through in his responses to the touch technology examples that facilitated two-way communication, like the In-Touch picture frame (ref) and the Hey Bracelet (ref). Their appeal lay in the fact that someone could express that they were thinking of him (rather than the tactile sensations which the technologies mediated).
- Comfort of human touch not translated into the digital – wanted something very familiar
- Mark was a highly tactile person; he enjoyed and felt comforted by the warmth of hugging others ('one of my main ways of communicating'), hugged himself when vulnerable to feel less so, and also had a large collection of teddy bears ('I'm just a *big* child... I'm basically an overgrown two-year-old!'), including one he referred to as his 'therapy bear'. The touch technology examples which resembled teddies and other furry animals, like Paro (ref) appealed the most to Mark ('it gives you that kind of *warmth* from a hug [...] a mini *radiator* in in in in a cuddly toy'). These technologies appealed because of their sense of familiarity (their visual and tactile resemblance to objects Mark found comforting), yet at the same time, along with Anita and Nimal Mark queried the need for digitally enhanced objects when he already owned ones that held so much sentimental value. In addition, Mark and the others in his group expressed concerns surrounding the hard components inside furry digital touch creatures. For example, of 'The Huggable' (ref) Mark observed, 'It's not going to be as huggable! [...] to change the battery, you've then got to take apart the teddy [...] Velcro is not that cuddly'.
- These features of softness, warmth, familiarity and continuity were also present in Mark's prototype sketch (Fig X) – a heated memory foam blanket that would 'hug the figure [...] when you lie *down*, it's kind of like you *sink* into it'. The prototype supported the physical, bodily response he often experienced when lonely. For example, on his map (Fig X), Mark had focused on a particular occasion – a Christmas gathering of a local group where he had previously known people and now found he did not. Feeling awkward and 'distant' in a small, crowded space of unfamiliar people, he had physically distanced himself by standing in a corner ('going from *feeling* distant from everybody, I just sort of *physically* made myself a bit more distant'). Mark also described other contexts where he would shrink into clothing (placing his sleeves over his hands), sink into a sofa, or cover and cocoon himself with blanket, duvets, and hoodies

JOANNA

Joanna lived in a large UK-based city with a new flatmate. Whilst she normally enjoyed being alone, loneliness had 'a feeling of distress attached to it, a feeling not being *comfortable* with being alone'.

Joanna articulated proximity, closeness and physical presence explicitly as an 'extension of touch'; even the 'possibility', 'expectation' or 'anticipation' of touch had the same effect of tactile stimulation as physical contact. Lockdown and the pandemic's social distancing rules had increased her awareness of the importance of proximity and presence for feeling 'recharged' and less lonely.

V dissatisfied with current DT

Didn't want something too close to a being – wanted something more symbolic -

DILARA

- Not very positive at start about DT
- relationship *between* loneliness and connection, clarifying that for her, there was an inseparable 'dynamic' that joined them. Art as a bridge – tactility – process...
- Not connected to other people – suspicions
- interest in softer materiality fed into Dilara's prototype, a programmable, 'textile ribbon' or 'information string'. The soft, flexible, malleable design offered an alternative vision of digital touch to the predominantly hard materialities of digital technologies that had initially been a barrier for Dilara
- Dilara situated her design within another interest she had been exploring in recent years in 'enhancing' the body with textiles, and to 'uplift the sense of self'.

- Techno-nature touch
- Uncertain and aversive touch Aversive touch Uncertain touch // Please do not touch!
- Touching without being physically present // Touch across the world
- Remote instant touch // Digital touch on the go
- Patterns of touch over time // Keep touch analogue

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In the very initial stages of researching around my PhD three years ago (before the pandemic), I became interested in the idea that touch was increasingly something people marketed, sold and bought, and that this was happening in both subtle and explicit ways.

Touch scholars have commented on this, and as examples, they cite things like tactile toys (as you can see here on the screen) like massaging devices, stress-relieving balls and undulating beds, as well the expansion of different forms of massage and treatments; some examples include foot massage, even reiki (as a non-contact form of touch) ... and here, stone massage.



And then, especially in the last 7 years or so, more explicit forms of touch commodification, like professional cuddlers and cuddle workshops, have also emerged. And I was fascinated to see the ways in which touch and tactile interactions were being designed and 'packaged' to be sold to others. So with professional cuddlers, you hire someone for platonic touch, and you can specify, often from a pre-designed set of options, what type of touch you would like.



This is a book by one professional cuddler called Samantha Hess which aims provide people with a guide to cuddling, especially accounting for differences in people's tactile boundaries, for example, the anti- or cautious cuddler (here on the left).



She gives each cuddle position a name – I really love how creative these are... here are some examples

And then next to each position, she provides a bit of background or context to the position... why it might be useful, and then a step-by-step guide to how to set up the position. So here with 'the cloak' she's talking about the benefits of pressure, she's saying have a pillow under the first person's head, for the second person to be mindful of the first's breathing. And here are a couple more examples; *the pyramid*, and the *bee's knees*...



I was also amazed to learn about curated group touch experiences, like cuddle workshops, where mostly groups of mostly strangers are guided by a facilitator to physically interact with each other over a few hours – again in a platonic way. This is a blog post I wrote about a cuddle workshop I attended in London before the pandemic, where in pairs and small groups, I tried out things like back massages in pairs, sleeping cat in the lap, cuddle pod, boundaries exploration, and a mass group cuddle pile at the end.



And, of course, this pattern of commodification is also notable in the digital realm, where you can see digitally mediated touch experiences also being created and commodified. This example here is by a company called Syn touch, which promises to quantifiably create and re-create 'the perfect touch'. [add info] Syntouch - Surface – 12 categories – how – usage – getting the right feel – standardise – proving



And you can see here the [add Hey Bracelet] promises and hopes for digital touch... packaging / marketing. [Explain the Hey bracelet, what it is and how it works – and that will be demonstrating it later in next session]



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So I was interested in finding a way to make these more recent forms of touch commodification more explicit – and one lunchtime I was talking with colleagues about how I'd love to create some sort of touch catalogue – and we were bouncing idea... one of my colleagues joked about presenting it in an Ikea or Argos-like traditional printed format, which I thought was great.



So for *The Catalogue of Touch*, I recruited and worked with 10 artists, starting with a workshop, where I introduced the background the PhD, and we all had a go together at designing and illustrating touch experiences in response to a few of the of themes.



And, after the workshop, each of us had half a day to go away and develop one theme each, and these were then formatted together into the catalogue.



- These are 3 themes rel to effective techno touch – this is what came out of them...

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Activity – guided – in threes



After the activity

- Who do you think would be the target audience?
- What came up?
- How did it make you think more about commodification?



Provocation to end on: what sort of things in this catalogue in 50 years?

