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‘Potency is important for a real man’: Affective readings of shame and performance anxiety in spam selling Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals

Mie Birk Jensen and Stefan Jänicke

Abstract

Viagra is a popular topic in spam, but contrary to Pfizer’s official marketing of Viagra, little attention has been directed at how the content of spam plays into gendered discourse on masculinity and men’s sexual performances. This is not surprising, if we consider how spam is mostly treated as a nuisance to digital infrastructures. Yet, studies have demonstrated how spammers build on, reflect and transmit gender ideologies (e.g. Mullany 2004; Paasonen 2009; Yu 2014). In the present paper, we contribute insights to the existing studies on Viagra and spam, as we examine how spammers promote Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals. Taking our point of departure in an online spam archive (Guenter 2010), we combine qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse the textual content of spam emails. Using TagSpheres models, we have produced an overview of the most frequent and relevant terms in spam which we have further subjected to a qualitative analysis. Drawing on Sara Ahmed (2004), we subject selected spam emails, generated by randomised samples, to an affective reading. In the analysis, we argue that spammers attempt to move possible consumers away from official and legal sale methods by emphasising shame and anxiety related to procuring Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals. While shame moves the consumer away from legal sale methods, anxiety is invoked to encourage the possible consumer to envision a hypermasculine future, in which virility is everlasting. We further discuss our findings in relation to masculinity, arguing that spammers capitalise on existing communication- and pharmaceutical technologies, whilst taking gendered discourse in advertising to their ‘functional extremes’ (Brunton 2019: xiv).

Keywords: Viagra, masculinity, medicalisation, sexuality, spam, information visualization.

Introduction

While it has been argued that the wide circulation of Viagra in spam email has contributed to a narrowing of discourse on male sexuality, the content of these types of emails remains understudied (Vares and Braun 2006). The gap in research on Viagra spam is not surprising, if we consider the fact that most of the existing research on spam is rooted in efforts to annihilate its very existence. Yet, it has been argued that spam does in fact build on, reflect and transmit gender ideologies, emphasising gendered, sexual and racial binaries (Mullany 2004; Paasonen 2009, 2011; Vares and Braun 2006). With the present paper, we aim to contribute our insights into the content of spam and Viagra through an in-depth examination of the textual elements of spam emails selling Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals for men.

Every day billions of spam emails are sent across the globe, and if not for substantial efforts directed at filtering spam from our inboxes, our email accounts would likely have become unusable long ago (Brunton 2013). Wasting our precious time, demanding our attention, selling illicit and possibly unsafe products, spreading malware or breaking with the regulations of advertising, spam is often considered a threat to human health, safety and productivity (Alongi 2004; Brunton 2013, 2019; Carmi 2020; Hinde 2003; Paasonen 2011). However, the negative connotations that stick to spam are not a direct result of the content of spam itself: they are rooted in long-lasting disputes concerning commercial legitimacy, aimed at privileging some economic purposes at the expense of others, which in turn have defined what we have come to know as spam (Carmi 2020). The tendency to categorise spam as unimportant, evil, noisy or deviant can thus gloss over the history of how spam has evolved over time and its affective force (Carmi 2020; Paasonen 2011). As we turn our analytical gaze toward spam, we hereby acknowledge that the very categorisation of spam and its content plays into existing structures of inequalities in relation to economic incentives embedded in online platforms, as well as their relation to inequalities

concerning gender, sex, national belonging and race (Carmi 2020; Nakamura 2014; Paasonen 2011).

When spam is considered vis-à-vis the human, it often serves as ‘an ever-growing monument to the most mundane human failings’, because we tend to link spam email with negative affect, such as ‘gullibility, technical incompetence, lust and the sad anxieties of male potency’, with humans being ‘suckers, criminals, exploiters, and fools’ (Brunton 2013: 8). Susanna Paasonen argues that (porn) spam is defined by being the ‘lowest of the low’ (2011: 115), and with the many limitations in design, Szde Yu argues that ‘the only thing left to appeal to the customers is the underlying component of the message, sex’ (2014: 41). Thus, while spam remains ‘undesired’ in online life, as an impersonal pulp or mass of emails that comes in bulk, it nevertheless often attempts to invoke desire, and commodify desire itself (Paasonen 2011).

In the present article, we take our point of departure in a Spam Archive dataset of millions of spam emails sent from 1998 to 2020 (Guenter 2010). We analyse both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the archive. Using TagSpheres, we generate an overview of the most frequent words in the archived spam, and, using randomised samples, we provide insights into overall tendencies in the archive. Drawing primarily on Sara Ahmed’s (2004) theoretical insights on the circulation of affect, we subject individual emails to an affective reading. In the analysis, we examine how the illicit sale of Viagra imbues the erect penis with meaning, and by extension, constructs masculinity around notions of shame and anxiety that may orientate the recipient toward spammers. From here we go on to discuss how spammers capitalise on existing pharmaceutical and communication technologies, whilst taking gendered discourse in advertising to their ‘functional extremes’ (Brunton 2019: xiv).

Medicalisation of men and the invention of Viagra

When Viagra was released in 1998, it was presented alongside an origin story of an accidental discovery: In Pfizer's search for a treatment for heart disease, they found that the side effects of their medicine was in fact a pharmaceutical treatment to an age-old problem for aging men: erectile dysfunction (ED). However, scholars have argued that the official 'master story' of Viagra underscores the scientific work that came before its release, and the cultural and technological context that contributed to its success (e.g. Fishman 2010; Loe 2004).

According to Jennifer R. Fishman (2010), Viagra was simply the latest invention in the biochemistry of erections, and part of a larger process through which men's bodies have increasingly become subjected to a medical gaze, as sites for consumption. Viagra's origins are therefore also to be found in a more general tendency concerning the technological and pharmaceutical developments that made a wide array of consumer practices possible, also for men, as fitness, health, and style have become more important than ever as signifiers of identity – with fixing, enhancing or transforming the body through the consumption of pharmaceuticals now being an integrated part of everyday life for many people who have the financial means (Clarke et al. 2010; Hakim 2019; Loe 2001; Mamo & Fishman 2001). Although women have traditionally been the primary object of medical intervention and control, the expansion of the market of medicalisation is rooted in gender segmentation as a particularly profitable strategy, where gendered norms are used to define both medical problems and solutions (Conrad 2005; Loe 2004). The medicalisation of men thus includes the increasing supply and normalisation of treatments, modifications, and medicine directed at men, and masculine enhancement (Bordo 2000; Conrad 2005; Eriksen and Hvidtfeldt 2020). The emergence of pharmaceuticals such as Viagra hereby speaks to the gendered nature of such corporatised medicalisation, including medical interventions, from cosmetic surgery to hormonal treatments, which have become 'tools for sexual enabling, reinvention, and goal-attainment' (Loe 2001: 102; see also Conrad 2005; Croissant 2006).

Furthermore, with the emergence of new technologies, this process of medicalisation has played out together with an increased exposure and circulation of sexualised male bodies in different forms of media (Hakim 2019; McKay, Mikosza and Hutchins 2005).

The popularity of Viagra is therefore not simply rooted in the chemical properties of the pharmaceutical itself, but due to its emergence within a cultural context that allowed for Viagra to become culturally intelligible. As Meika Loe argues, the cultural and technological climate was vital for the interest in Viagra, because an increased attention was already being directed at masculinity as in crisis alongside the emergence of a ‘pharmacology of sex’ (2004: 13), which enabled Viagra to come to the rescue for men who felt ‘that they were not quite masculine enough’ (2004: 72), hereby fixing cultural troubles by offering to repair both confidence and masculinity within the individual man’s body.

The release of Viagra was also followed by extensive media interest, and stories of the drug quickly began circulating widely in all forms of media, from newspapers to appearances in some of the most popular television shows at the time, such as *Sex and the City* and *Sopranos* (Vares and Braun 2006; Loe 2004). Viagra’s impact hereby ‘goes well beyond its official remit as a “cure” for erectile dysfunction’ (Vares and Braun 2006: 316), as it became part of what Scott Lash and Ceila Lury have termed the ‘global culture industry’ (2007: 19). As a globally recognised brand, Viagra was able to circulate across the globe as part of a capitalist economy in which cultural objects form the focal basis for establishing cultural meaning and value. The popularity of Viagra, which paved the way for its presence in spam, thus further arose from an economy increasingly invested in brands and objects. As Lash and Lury (2007) argue, by following specific objects or brands, we can study their trajectories in different media and across different cultural contexts to gain insight into how they become infused with meaning. However, the cultural meanings ascribed to Viagra and other popular brands are not static, but subject to change as they circulate (Lash and

Lury 2007). As Viagra has circulated across many different bodies and media platforms, its circulation has also shaped its meaning, including its circulation in spam.

Not only was Viagra accompanied by many other similar sexuopharmaceuticals, such as Cialis and Levitra: The official sale of Viagra was also quickly followed by illicit sale of the drug in spam email. In fact, spam featuring Viagra became so widespread and central that Pfizer publicly distanced themselves from it, teaming up with Microsoft to combat its increasing presence in inboxes across the globe to protect their brand (Teather 2005). Since Viagra became a central topic in spam, its affective and cultural meanings thus evolved in new ways, parallel to Pfizer's official advertisement campaigns. As we go on to analyse spam, we therefore find it necessary to further consider the specific technological context in which we explore the promotion of Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals, including its affective dimensions.

Affective dimensions of spam

Affect constitutes a key site for social and cultural research, and in feminist scholarship the concept of affect has, among other things, been employed to explore how emotional attachments and responses travel, or circulate, between bodies, rather than reside in the individual (Ahmed 2004; Gurevich et al. 2015; Wetherell 2013). Contemporary feminist scholarship on affect hereby contributes insights into how social life becomes shaped by the circuitry of emotions between bodies (e.g. Gurevich et al. 2015; Jensen and Hunt 2020).

Sara Ahmed, a prominent scholar in feminist, queer, and critical race studies, argues that through this circulation of affect, emotions directed at specific people or signs can come to characterise their very being, because feeling involves 'specific orientations toward the objects that are identified as their cause' (2004: 13). Specific emotions may hereby come to 'stick' to people or objects if repeated over time, but in order to become 'sticky' emotions are dependent on past

histories of contact between bodies and objects to generate effects; emotions are thus inherently performative in that they cite norms that already exist (Ahmed 2004; Gurevich et al. 2015; Jensen and Hunt 2019).

While Ahmed (2004) argues that emotions neither reside in people, nor in text, she emphasises how texts play a central role in that they can generate effects by naming emotions and sticking specific figures together. In her work, Ahmed engages in meticulous analysis of texts circulating in public domain, as she is ‘tracking how words for feeling, and objects of feeling, circulate and generate effects; how they move, stick and slide’ (2004: 14). In the present paper, we are inspired by her approach, as we engage in an affective reading of spam in order to explore how words for and objects of feeling circulate and come to stick together in different ways in the archive. This means that we consider these emails as performative acts that encourage some orientations over others, as we examine how affect is generated in spam through promotions of Viagra, and other sexuopharmaceuticals, as they become infused with meaning through specific portrayals of masculinity, sex, and youthful virility.

Studies of masculinity and men’s sexual performance are particularly interesting in relation to spam, not solely due to our focus on Viagra, but also in the gendering of spam more generally. While Paasonen (2009) has pointed to how the content of porn spam capitalises on and reproduces gendered binaries, Louise Mullany has emphasised that spam in itself is often directed at men, reinforcing a gendered binary between men as technologically competent and women as more ‘techno-phobic’, men as consumers of online pornography, and women as sexual objects for consumption (2004: 296). In a similar manner, researchers have argued that the algorithmic politics of some online platforms may prioritise the interests of heterosexual men, making visible how online life is saturated with gendered meanings in its content and its very structure (Ging 2019; Massanari 2017). The affective force of spam is thus inherently intertwined with gender, and

although masculinity is not a fixed set of attributes or a static identity to be uncovered and examined, it is often ascribed meaning through its role in a gendered order, where power is distributed unevenly in the gendered relations between men, and between men and women (Connell 1995; Waling 2019). While there has been much debate in recent years on the changes and more inclusive nature of modern masculinity, a more narrowly defined masculine ideal centered on heterosexual power relations continues to serve as a powerful symbol in the making of affectively charged content online (e.g. Ging 2019; Nakamura 2014). Thus, the presentation of men's sexual performance and masculinity in spam remains culturally relevant, as part of a wider circulation of masculine ideals in online life.

In analysing spam, it is thus necessary to consider the specific technological context in which we explore affect in amalgamation with masculinity. Here, affect is not solely to be understood in amalgamation with human bodies, but rather with bodies in a physical, social and technological sense, as affect is also deeply intertwined with online life, networks and technological developments (Gurevich et al. 2015; Wetherell 2013). Online life is saturated with affect, as 'one of the primary ways in which digital media are experienced, embodied and engaged (with) is through feeling' (Coleman 2018: 608). In the case of social media, Paasonen has argued that it is founded on a form of 'affective modulation' (2018: 3), as its users become directed and affected by content that is not only catered to keep the user engaged through targeted content and algorithms, but which can also impact their emotional states and their emotional responses (Paasonen 2018). Affect thus circulates between bodies and networks, as users click, like, share, and experience content in a process that involves both human and non-human actors (Paasonen 2018).

While spam email may seem archaic in form and content compared to the rapid development and popularity of social media, or web 2.0 more generally, it is useful to consider how its functions are intertwined with notions of affect. Spam allows us to gain a deeper understanding

of a part of ‘a digital infrastructure of feeling’ that has historically been overlooked (Coleman 2018: 601), and to understand how spam generates affect that may come to stick to Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals over time, and by extension to our cultural understandings of masculinity and sex that continue to impact online content.

Methods

The full spam archive (Guenter 2010) consists of millions of emails that were gathered with honey-pot addresses by Bruce Guenter, with the number of emails increasing over the years (Wang, Irani and Pu 2013). This reflects a general tendency in spam worldwide, as spam has grown from consisting of approximately 10% of all emails sent worldwide in 1998, to approximately 90% by 2013 (Wang, Irani and Pu 2013).

In order to prepare the archive for analysis, it was necessary to filter out irrelevant and potentially dangerous emails from the archive, that is malware, and spam on topics other than sexuopharmaceuticals. Cleaning the archive of malware and viruses reduced the number of emails to 6.62 million email. Furthermore, in order to filter out emails that were not relevant for the present study, we have engaged in two processes to prepare the data for analysis.

The first step consisted of a manual reading of large bulks of emails from different years. This reading provided us with insight into tendencies in different types of spam and was used to generate a manually derived list of keywords. These keywords were chosen on the basis of their appearance in relation to the sale of Viagra and similar sexuopharmaceuticals, including: ‘youth’, ‘young’, ‘aging’, ‘regain’, ‘restore’, ‘sex’, ‘perform’, ‘enhance’, ‘viagra’, ‘cialis’, ‘uprium’, ‘stendra’, ‘levitra’, ‘zenegra’, ‘tadalafil’, ‘herbal’, ‘sildenafil’, ‘pill’, ‘viagrow’, ‘pfizer’, ‘releasor’, ‘dysfunction’, ‘erect’, ‘poten’, ‘sexual’, ‘prescription’, ‘pharmac’, ‘medicine’, ‘meds’, ‘drug’,

‘generic’, ‘apoteke’, ‘fda’, ‘cpa’, ‘doctor’, ‘bulge’, ‘penis’, ‘dick’, ‘muscle’, ‘johnson’, ‘medication’.

Taken together, these keywords cover multiple types of promotions of Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals, for example those that cite medicinal discourse, name specific diagnoses and brands or engage in more sexually explicit forms of advertising. This enabled us to filter out the emails that were not relevant for the present study, in order to gather a diverse set of emails from the archive that provide insight into how Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals are promoted in spam.

This approach reduced the archive to 1.35 million emails, which were scanned for each keyword-based search. In order to also consider emails using deliberate misspellings of sexuopharmaceuticals, aiming to evade spam filters, we employed a user-configurable string similarity metric, which ranges between 0 (no match) and 1 (exact match). A string similarity of 0.75 has proven to be most appropriate to discover a diversity of spelling variants which can be analysed in a tag cloud visualisation (Jänicke et al. 2018). Figure 1 shows 921 spelling variants of *viagra*. The number of times a variant is used is encoded with font size.

this purpose, the TagSpheres visualisation (Jänicke & Scheuermann 2016) was adapted to operate on the large-scale spam archive. For a given keyword, which is placed in the center of the tag cloud, the most frequently co-occurring words are placed around it; five words before and after a found keyword are considered co-occurrences. Font size again encodes how frequently a word co-occurs with the keyword. In addition, the color as well as the position of a word encodes the average distance to the keyword in the text. A result can be analysed as follows: (1) all words in the tag cloud compose the context of the keyword, (2) the closer a word is positioned to the keyword, the stronger the two words correlate, and (3) the larger, the more important a word is for the concept defined by the keyword. Up to 1,000 most frequently co-occurring words can be shown.

We then conducted specific searches to get insight into the frequency of the different terms. We employed the word searches to augment our observations of manual readings of the archive, which further informed our choice of analytical focus. Looking at the presence of specific words such as ‘Viagra’ (Figure 2) and ‘erection’ (Figure 3) that occurred hundreds of thousands of times, we found specific tendencies in the material; including the focus on the benefits of shipping and on the specific connotations that became attached to the ability to get a pharmaceutically induced erection – both of which make up the starting point for our qualitative analysis.

Most importantly, the term searches involved a generation of randomised samples. Clicking a co-occurrence lists a maximum of 100 emails containing the keywords and the clicked term. We made use of these samples to gain insight into how the tendencies first observed in manual readings of the archive and the results of term searches played out in specific emails, using them as a basis for an affective reading across a broad sample of emails.

qualitative analysis; it also makes it impossible to gather an archive that can contain the full scope of spam. However, this spam archive still presents a unique opportunity to work with a large sample of spam which can provide insight into how spam produces and circulates gendered discourse in the sale of Viagra and sexuopharmaceuticals.

While our broad scope of keywords enabled us to gather a significant part of the spam promoting and selling Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals, it also has some limitations. These include the fact that there may be emails from vendors that do not sell Viagra or other sexuopharmaceuticals, for example instead selling products for penis enlargement. The archive may also contain some types of emails that could be relevant for this study, but that we have inadvertently filtered out. However, it is our assessment that this will only pertain to a small number of emails, due to the broad scope of keywords.

It is also necessary to point out that while these emails promote the sale of Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals, it is not within the scope of this article to uncover whether or not these emails actually do sell a product, or if there are other incentives behind such marketing, such as creating botnets (see Brunton 2013). However, regardless of the incentives of such illicit marketing – these emails still produce and circulate gendered discourse. Furthermore, while scholars have argued that the release of Viagra was accompanied by spam (Vares and Braun 2006), such spam is scarce up until 2001 in the present archive. While the years 1998-2000 present only a few spam emails focused on Viagra, numerous ads appear by 2004 as seen in the chart below (figure 4), and in total the archive contains approximately 400,000 emails on Viagra. Along with spam that sells Viagra, there are numerous other products that are promoted as similar to or better than Viagra, from Cialis to herbal remedies. These are included under the umbrella term of Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals.

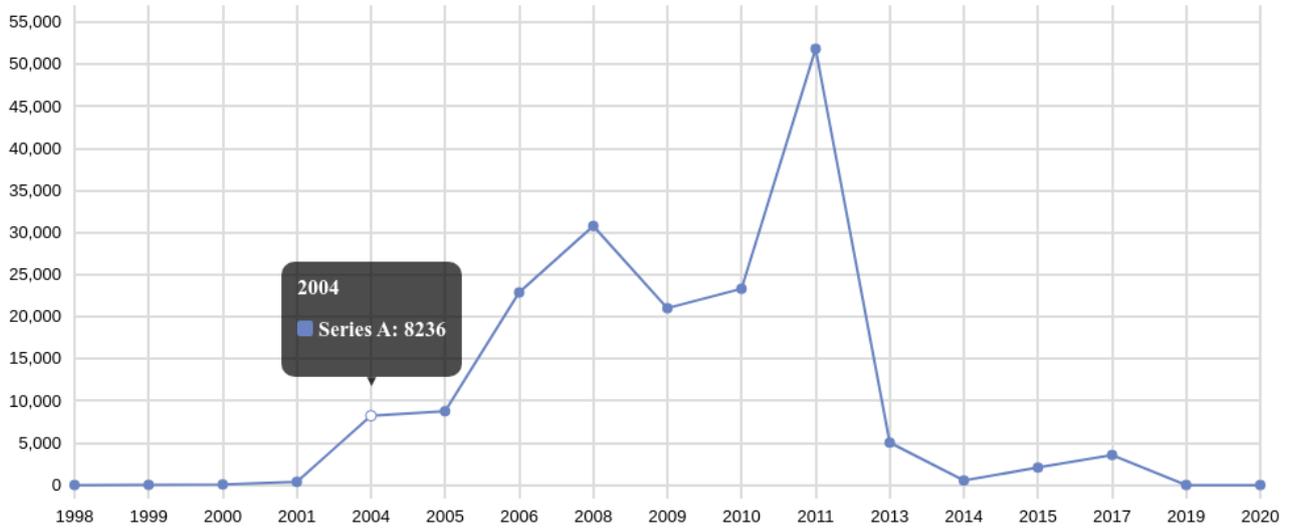


Figure 4: Emails on Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals over time.

Analysis: Affective readings of Viagra spam

Introduction: Happiness can be yours

Reading through large amounts of spam email, one becomes familiar with a world that Brunton (2013) has deemed the ‘shadow history of the internet’. Initial readings of spam over the years bear witness to an ever-growing ‘technolust’, that is, a desire for new technologies (Fernbach 2000: 234). Whether the aim is to provide the recipient with a way to make money, become a better lover or play in online casinos, the promises of spam are often focused on providing something that is new and better than what one has, and what was before. With capital letters, sentences, and words full of promises are emphasised. One may become ‘BIG’, ‘HARD’, ‘RICH’, and ‘LUCKY’ in ways that are much more ‘CHEAP’, ‘FAST’, and ‘EASY’ than one has been accustomed to. Take for example this caption from a spam email that claims to promote a new banking system that will give you access to quick cash with a ‘magic wand’: ‘IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM BUNDLES OF CASH AND HAPPINESS CAN BE YOURS!!!’ (2000/05).

Despite being saturated with such grand promises and affectively charged content, spam is often thought of as an impersonal bulk of email (Paasonen 2009). However, our analysis of the archive bears witness to how spam’s content varies, for example in terms of topics, formatting, and level of detail. The archive overall contains emails on a wide array of topics, such as: porn, mortgages, investments, loans, MLM invitations, coffee, ink cartridges, software, cable TV, spyware, Rolex watches, painkillers and, of course, Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals. In the latter cases, the extent of the details included differs. For example, there are those emails that only briefly list the type of product (e.g. ‘ed meds: www.website.com’) or the brand in line with many other drugs (e.g. ‘... buy prozac, valium, Viagra ...’); those that mostly briefly state the price or delivery method (e.g. ‘Get overnite discreet shipping for viagr ...’), or which simply contain a link inside coupled with a subject line that indicates that the link leads one to sexuopharmaceuticals

(‘Sexual Strength’, 02/2009, ‘73% OFF. My stamina increased 2 folds with Viagra’, 05/2010). By extension, many emails also engage in more elaborate forms of advertising that typically outline the qualities of the product, and why it is needed by the recipient, often by referencing grand claims far beyond the chemical properties of the product, such as how ‘potency is important for a real man’ (11/2008).

Reading through spam emails reveals that when spammers promote Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals, they are often concerned with emphasising the specific perks that they offer. These incentives vary, but there are some tendencies that are widespread across the data, and we take our point of departure in these to explore how affect circulates across a broad range of spam.

In the first part of the analysis, we zoom in on descriptions of the promised ease and professionalism of the purchase, particularly on the emphasis on the confidentiality in their delivery methods. Reading these emails through an affective lens allows us to explore how such emphasis on confidentiality circulates notions of shame concerning ED (erectile dysfunction) by orientating the consumer towards spammers rather than local pharmacies and the doctor’s office. In the second part of the analysis, we investigate the promised effects of the products spammers are selling. We especially pay attention to how this form of masculinity often centers on forms of virility, youth, and control that are intertwined with anxiety and promises of a better future. We further extend this point, as we consider how notions of shame and anxiety become linked to portrayals of masculinity that are presented as normative, yet, paradoxically, whilst only being accessible through the consumption of sexuopharmaceuticals.

Discreet delivery, confidential shipping and the circulation of shame

The emails that sell Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals often emphasise their methods for delivery and shipping. While this is unsurprising for any online provider, the ways in which this is done in spam is of importance, because it plays a central part in the circulation of affect. Searching in the archive for ‘delivery’ and ‘shipping’, it becomes clear how spammers often emphasise the ease and speed by which one can receive sexuopharmaceuticals with declarations of ‘worldwide’ shipping and easy ‘online’ purchasing that can be delivered ‘quickly’ in only a few or even in a single ‘day’ with ‘noprescription’ (see Figures 2 and 3). At the same time, it is also visible how this is followed by words such as ‘secure’, ‘discreet’, and ‘confidential’ which show up in proximity in different spelling formats – the distance most often being 3-4 words away from Viagra – at a high frequency (see Figure 2).

Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals are hereby promoted in line with words that emphasise how the purchase is risk-free, as numerous emails offer their product in ‘Discreet Packaging’ (09/2008), or as a ‘Discreet parcel’ (04/2013). However, this also makes it important to ask what forms of affect are circulated through the emphasis on this method of purchasing, as readings of the individual emails demonstrate how the ease of purchase becomes sticky with a variety of risks. Risk are indirectly introduced as spammers emphasise that their service comes without the need to ‘worry about embarrassing bills or packaging’ (05/2015), or ‘privacy exposure’ (05/2005).

This tendency was present across a wide range of different forms of Viagra spam throughout the years, for example in the following email in which the legal procurement of sexuopharmaceuticals is constructed as entangled with multiple levels of possible embarrassment:

No Embarrassment No Appointment Discreet &
Overnight Shipping No Physical exam Protected
delivery From a Licensed pharmacy! Secure ordering
Fully Confidential. (11/2008)

Here, the risks of embarrassment are presented in relation to the whole process of procuring sexuopharmaceuticals: from making an appointment to meeting with a doctor, including the possibility of physical exam, as well as in receiving a package. This discreetness and ease of the delivery method allegedly makes it superfluous to go to the doctor, or even the pharmacy, which are constructed as risky places that one must orientate oneself away from. In contrast, this vendor promises to alleviate such risks, providing a ‘discreet’, ‘secure’, and ‘fully confidential’ service – one that is devoid of ‘embarrassment’.

In a similar manner, many spam emails emphasise the urgency with which one must make sure that the purchase remains hidden so ‘Nobody knows what you bought’ (05/2011). Another spam email also directly states that the vendor’s service is beneficial because it can save one time and money whilst keeping one’s intimate life private:

Need some love pills? So, why go to your local dr@gstore? Why waste time and extra money? Why let people know about your intimate life? Evil-wishers are always around to spread rumors. We give you the issue! Make a quick, secure and ABSOLUTELY CONFIDENTIAL purchase online and receive your LICENSED love life enhancer right to your door! No privacy exposure, nor time waisted, no exorbitant pri\$es! Start a super life now! (05/2006)

Here, the local drugstore is not constructed as a resource for treatment, but a risky place that may expose one’s intimate life in opposition to this purchase which is ‘ABSOLUTELY CONFIDENTIAL’. Once again, the mere possibility of others becoming familiar with the recipient’s need for a sexuopharmaceutical is risky, but in this case the risk is even more apparent and alarming; others are imbued with malintent, as ‘evil-wisher’ who ‘spread rumors’ and cause embarrassment.

In order to understand this emphasis on discreetness, confidentiality and the avoidance of embarrassment in these emails, and why they are repeated over time, it is necessary to consider its affective implications. As spammers emphasise and circulate the importance of concealing one's need for ED medicine, they are simultaneously circulating an understanding of ED as a source of shame and embarrassment, which urges the consumer to keep ED private, confidential and hidden from others in order to avoid social stigma.

Ahmed (2004) argues that shame is a response inherently intertwined with social life. She emphasises that shame emerges as a person feels that their behavior has failed to live up to social ideals, and as a result the subject turns away from others to avoid that others bear witness to their shame. Shame is thus a feeling that involves an eagerness to hide from the gaze of others, meaning that in shame, 'the subject may have nowhere to turn' (Ahmed 2004: 104). However, in this instance, shame serves the purpose of giving the recipient only one place to turn: to this specific vendor. As the email appeals to the recipient by coupling embarrassment and secrecy with ED, they are presenting an ideal version of male sexual potency that, if the recipient does not live up to it, must be so shameful that it is both urgent to fix, and to keep secret.

This emphasis on the need for discreetness and secrecy circulates an understanding of ED as a cause of shame, and it is in coupling ED with shame that spammers can sell relief. They are positioning themselves as the only safe path to sexuopharmaceuticals, as they offer a fast and confidential way to attain a sense of self that is aligned with an ideal for male potency, but without exposing the consumer's need for pharmaceuticals.

Interestingly, it seems that spammers hereby make use of the same tactics used by anti-spammers, but they emphasise them as strengths: It is exactly because the spammer is

unknown, online and anonymous that it is risk-free – risks are instead presented as belonging to the pharmacy, the doctor or by sharing one's worries with others.

This strategy also mirrors a tendency in Pfizer's own marketing of Viagra, which from its onset was focused on reducing stigma and embarrassment associated with ED in some ways, for example by emphasising the widespread prevalence of the condition (Loe 2004; Vares, Potts, Gavey & Grace 2003; Irvine 2006). However, this stigma was sought alleviated because by normalising the condition, Pfizer could encourage men, who were otherwise reluctant to seek out their doctor for such a sensitive and embarrassing condition, to procure a prescription (Loe 2004; Vares and Brown 2003). Thus, paradoxically, whereas Pfizer actively attempted to destigmatise Viagra in order to make new costumers, spammers have simultaneously worked actively to enhance this stigma in ways that turn the consumer away from their doctors and pharmacies, and towards illicit online sale. In both the official advertising of Pfizer and in spam, however, the shame of ED primarily lies in refusing to seek out sexuopharmaceuticals. Shame hereby becomes 'the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence' for men's sexual performances (Ahmed 2004: 107), and such shame attempts to move men towards a pharmaceutical fix, albeit in different ways for pharmaceutical companies and spammers, respectively.

Erections, virility, youth, and manhood

Up until this point, we have demonstrated how specific descriptions of delivery methods construct ED as a source of shame that orientates the consumer towards spammers, and away from the doctor's office and the pharmacy. However, in emphasising the risk of even attempting to procure sexuopharmaceuticals, it becomes relevant to ask, what possible incentives then lie in taking such a

risk by procuring the product? And by extension, what possible risks lie in not procuring sexuopharmaceuticals?

Janice Irvine (2006) argues that the de-stigmatisation of procuring a prescription in the official and legal promotion of Viagra is intertwined with an emphasis on and inflation of men's sexual performance anxiety, to emphasise the need and urgency by which they should seek out a cure, i.e. Viagra. Furthermore, Kristin Swenson argues that Pfizer is selling a form of 'affective potency' as Viagra becomes meaningful through what the erect penis gives access to, not the erection itself: obtaining a prescription for Viagra, and the mere potential for an erection that comes with it, instead becomes synonymous with masculine confidence and success in work and relationships for men (2008: 319). In a similar manner, the archive demonstrates how the procurement of Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals becomes connected to a wide range of different affective states.

The search for 'erection' demonstrates how the erect penis is described as 'big', 'large', 'rocksolid', 'huge', 'explosive', 'incredible', 'amazing', 'enhanced', 'huge', 'powerful', 'impressive', and 'successful' (see Figure 3). In contrast, the word cloud also indicates that the man who fails to procure sexuopharmaceuticals suffers not only from 'ed' and 'dysfunction', but also from 'worry' and 'anxiety'. This is further unraveled in the randomised sample. For example, one claims that: 'There is no reason to feel depressed if you, like so many other men today, have hit the rough spot of your sexual life when you cannot seem to be performing as well as you used to do' (01/2011), another that: 'there are certain factors that can interfere with a man's optimum enjoyment of sex – lifestyle, health habits, stress, aging, and many others' (02/2011). Thus, as these emails make grand promises of the potency that comes with procuring sexuopharmaceuticals alongside the dangers of going without, the focus is not limited to experiencing the erection itself, but how it affects one's overall life, emotional well-being – and masculine self. In other words, the

possible consumer is encouraged to envision a better future that they can orientate themselves toward through this purchase.

This is evident, as spammers make both more level-headed claims of how Viagra ‘helps men to achieve and = maintain an erection for sexual activity’ (01/2008) and promises of life-changing benefits, such as how:

Viagra is sure to CHANGE YOUR LIFE into a
POSITIVE DIRECTION endless nights of lasting love
and pleasure will stay in your memory forever.
(01/2011)

Here, the consumer is encouraged to buy Viagra, extending the possible pleasures of sexuopharmaceuticals from penetrative sex itself into producing memories that will remain ‘forever’. Time becomes extended as the quality of one’s erections improve, and through this, they open up the possibility of a better future in which one has better sex, better memories and an overall better quality of life. They are inviting the possible consumer into ‘seeing the future as that which may be brought into, oriented around, felt and embodied “within” or as the present’ (Coleman 2018: 608), as they buy sexuopharmaceuticals through spam. Furthermore, the focus on ‘optimum enjoyment’ and pleasure that ‘stay in your memory forever’ connects Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals to a youthful virility; the lack of proper enjoyment from sex is presented as the result of stress and aging having taken precedence over the ability to ‘live longer, healthier, happier lives’ (03/2008).

The future made possible by procuring Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals through spam is often one in which every man embodies a youthful virility, including those who suffer from ED and those who do not, regardless of age, as the following email exemplifies:

When you are young and stressed up
When you are aged and never give up

Cialis gives you confidence in any chance, every time.
(05/2008)

This decoupling of aging and ED reflects a broader tendency to place aging male bodies under medical jurisdiction, as processes that were previously considered inevitable when growing older are increasingly framed as reversible, problematic, and by extension, treatable (Clarke et al. 2010; Fishman 2010; Gross and Blundo 2005; Johnson 2008; Katz and Marshall 2003; Marshall 2006). In turn, younger men are encouraged to question not if stress affects their sexual performance, but how to get rid of such stress through pharmaceutical means. By taking Viagra, and hereby reinstating the ability to achieve and maintain an erection, male sexual performance becomes increasingly tied to ‘a youthful, erection-on-demand state, so that anyone can have sexual intercourse at anytime and any age’ (Johnson 2008: 33). This encouraged use of sexuopharmaceuticals bears witness to how ED has indefinitely moved away from considering forms of impotence as ‘a disease of the young, and a condition of the old’ in recent decades (Marshall and Katz 2002: 53).

Spammers have thus been circulating extreme depictions of the need for pharmaceuticals to envision a future masculine self – all of which is dependent on the ability to get an erection and perform sexually with youthful and confident virility, necessary for any man of any age in order to be a ‘real man’, but paradoxically, such realness can only be achieved through sexuopharmaceuticals. However, by taking sexuopharmaceuticals the choice of when to be erect becomes possible to control regardless of age or mental state: ‘Instead of begging your penis to work, better swallow the blue pill’ (01/2011), and through this, the future becomes within one’s reach and control too. Our research hereby demonstrates that the benefits of erections are not solely connected to penetrative sex itself in spam, but also to that which the ‘rocksolid’ penis gives access: A youthful virility that extends into, and transforms, the future – a future that is ripe with potency and hypermasculine success in ways that make men’s age redundant for the quality of their life.

Discussion

With the medicalisation of even the most intimate parts of human life, drugs are increasingly consumed as an aspiration towards a specific lifestyle (Swenson 2008). This makes pharmaceutical advertisements particularly fruitful as an exploration site for how contemporary capitalism works to produce specific notions of desire that transcend the intended physical effects of the drug itself (Loe 2004; Tiefer 2006; Swenson 2008). The existing research on the official advertisement for Viagra has demonstrated that Pfizer's marketing strategies over the years have been adamant in constructing specific forms of advertising that promote an understanding of masculinity as in crisis and in need of a 'techno-fix' or a 'techno-boost', emphasising the affective potential in notions of masculine desire and success (Vares and Braun 2006: 317; see also Loe 2001, 2004; Swenson 2008). In this way, Viagra advertisements have reproduced the penis as a proving ground for masculinity and its promises are not only of the potential of an erect penis, but also an erection of male power more generally (Loe 2001, 2004; Vares and Braun 2006). Viagra is therefore not simply a pharmaceutical, but 'a material and cultural technology' that produces and shapes discourse on gender and sexuality 'under the guise of techno-scientific progress' (Loe 2001: 97).

In this study, we have chosen to focus on the illicit advertising of Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals in spam. We have demonstrated that spammers have circulated textual content that reproduces notions of shame and anxiety concerning masculinity, sex, and aging in different ways, in order to offer a solution that encourages the potential consumer to orientate themselves toward a more potent future that is available through the illicit procurement of Viagra and other sexuopharmaceuticals. These elevated promises bear witness to how spam not only capitalises on existing communication technologies, but also on pharmaceutical technologies for

profit. However, in both cases, it becomes clear how spammers take the online platforms as well as gendered discourse in advertising to their ‘functional extremes’ (Brunton 2019: xiv), as they ask potential consumers to envision an almost perfect, prolonged and hypermasculine future. In the case of spam, it hereby becomes clear how the past few decades have brought about new impossible standards for men’s sexual lives, but also for their lives more generally, in ways that seek to produce a masculine shame and anxiety from which pharmaceuticals can offer relief. The depressed, anxious, shameful, and altogether failed masculine self sticks to the flaccid penis, whereas the chemically induced erection brings promises of a bright and positive future.

The present study centers on spam emails, some of which date back decades. However, aside from pointing to an important shadow history of Viagra advertisement, we find that our study also demonstrates some important aspects of the ways in which new forms of advertising may emerge alongside technological and pharmaceutical developments. Loe (2004) argues that the practice of direct-to-consumer advertising, legalised in the United States shortly before the release of Viagra, paved the way for Viagra’s popularity. However, since then the platforms for advertising have multiplied with new forms of digital media. Although new platforms have emerged, and it may be tempting to dismiss spam as undesired, outdated or simply a form of commercial noise, it is an example of how advertising can break with the financial incentives embedded into platforms’ very structure, circumventing regulation (van Dijck 2013). As we increasingly live ‘in media’ rather than ‘with media’ (Andreassen et al. 2017: 3), it becomes even more pressing to understand the ways in which advertising evolves with digital technologies, circulating content that help shape gendered discourse.

While new technological developments hold the potential for creating platforms for content that expand cultural norms pertaining to gender and sexuality, the present study exemplifies how new technologies may instead contribute to narrowing discourse in new ways, as users produce

content that reproduce existing power relations and pave the way for increased circulation of content akin to that found in spam here. When such content continues to circulate in spam email across such a wide span of time, this further points to the continued powerful symbolism of this type of masculine potency. As suggested by Debbie Ging (2019), stereotypical portrayals of hegemonic masculinity online can serve to uphold gendered inequalities in heterosexual relations, regardless of whether it is presented as a wishful ideal and when disavowed as an indication of the oppression of men who fail to live up to contemporary fantasies of male power. Thus, the circulation of male potency is powerful, no matter the interpretation of the receiver, because it circulates a fantasy that continues to be culturally intelligible, albeit in new ways and on new platforms.

Since spam also appears to mirror tendencies from the official marketing of Viagra, the content of Viagra spam may also evolve alongside the official campaigns. If the more recent official campaign promoting Viagraⁱ is any indication, the gendered industry of medicalisation seems to continue to define both medical problems and solutions through affectively charged content in new ways. Notably, the most recent video commercial on Viagraⁱⁱ shows a heterosexual couple struggling with intimacy and penetrative sex due to the stresses of modern life, including the demands and distractions of technology. In the end of the video a new product – Viagra connect – is presented as a pharmaceutical fix to an increasingly technologised world that stands in the way of authentic intimacy. While spam email may be somewhat archaic in form, they mirror such tendencies in advertising, demonstrating the power of such affectively charged content in which a happy future is increasingly dependent on a techno-fix. Studying spam thus paves the way for understanding how the pharmaceutical industry continues to affect how we see both challenges and solutions to modern sexual problems, as new pharmaceuticals are still marketed in ways that

increasingly appeal to consumers not through their chemical compounds, but in the cultural meanings attached to their use (Clarke et al. 2010; Letiche 2002; Loe 2004; Tiefer 2006).

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Notes

ⁱ Viagra Connect UK Campaign: <https://www.viagraconnect.co.uk/what-is-viagra-connect#what-is-viagra-connect>, date of access: 1 November 2010.

ⁱⁱ Viagra Connect UK: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wdd03dPBzfY>, date of access: 1 November 2010.