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Rochester Institute of Technology

Stockholms: An Artifact of Kink as an Innocuous Method of
Bolstering Kinkster and Fetishist Populations

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine
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Abstract

This thesis is an attempt to affect and activate the population of consumers that are open to sexual experimentation, which in turn will provoke further discussion into sexual identity and sex positivity.

Though there is a high percentage of people who engage in some form of kinky sex, there is still a lack of seriousness in accepting sexual fetishes as valid expressions of sexual behavior.

And so designing by approximating a sort of midpoint between the hardcore and the novel, it would eliminate much of the critical nature one would take with an “other” group if people may find that they themselves are part of the kink/fetish community.

A popular kink/fetish recognized by many in the general population is bondage. Designing a pair of handcuffs as both a representative of the greater network of kinks/fetishes and as an innocuous method of establishing access into regular lives.

Keywords: kink, fetish, handcuff, seductive design, sexuality

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Introduction

The ethereal hand that moves the economy has dipped its pinky into fetishism. When the phrase “sex sells” doesn’t sell anymore, the industry must reach further into a person’s base desires to encourage a purchase. Fetishism is this space. Surfacing with the emergence of the sex positivity movement, it offers room to experiment marketing strategies. T-shirts with leather bondage straps printed across the torso are just the beginning. With their imagination sparked, couples may go home and attempt to incorporate whipped cream into sexual intercourse. But have they ever thought about whipping themselves instead of whipping cream? If they’re just trying it out as a superficial addition to sex, it is technically referred to be kinky. But fetishes for both objects do exist in the forms of sadomasochism, domination/submission, and salirophilia, which is a fetish for being messy. According to Merriam-Webster, sexual fetish is described as “an object or bodily part whose real or fantasied presence is psychologically necessary for sexual gratification and that is an object of fixation to the extent that it may interfere with complete sexual expression.”¹ SweetlySensual_Sara, a phone sex operator and dominatrix whose podcasts I listened to religiously for research, puts it more simply as “an individual [you] are sexually aroused by a specific object, body part, or role-play even without a partner. A person with a fetish might masturbate while they hold, smell, rub, or taste the object, or they might ask their partner to wear it or use it during sex.”² Whereas kink is just an “unconventional sexual taste or behavior.”³ The difference between kink and fetish is the demanding nature of sexual fetishes. Kink is the fun activity you supplement sex with, whereas fetish is the intense focus on an object or ritual which may or may not even feature sexual intercourse.

Problem Area

Choosing fetishism as the problem area to address with design offers different and new challenges than more traditional topics in design academia such as sustainability, designing for disabilities, or the education of children. I had attempted to avoid designing for the greater good as it was a popular slogan in the program, but my project ultimately benefits fetishists and more. This should be a reminder to peers in the industry that there are other problem domains to explore in the name of the greater good. As certain topics are constantly promoted over a course of time, students and fellow designers may be enraptured by the invented nobility of tackling aforementioned problems. The reason I am against this is my belief that design needs to be passionate, and certain individuals with their particular talents are better suited for certain topics. But instead of applying themselves to what they are destined for, they are participating in a competitive race of attaining the title of being socially responsible, which brings them a respectability in the field.

¹ "Fetish." Merriam-Webster. Accessed March 16, 2018. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fetish>

² FM, Player. “Must Love Fetish (Podcast).” Accessed October 29, 2017. <https://player.fm/series/must-love-fetish>.

³ "Kink," Merriam-Webster, accessed March 16, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/kink>.

The unique talents of designers and what they are most passionate about can establish their place in a niche. By branding yourself this way, those in your network will recommend you for specific projects. This may be a concern for only those with an art background, where the message and medium become recurring and a lasting theme for the artist. Counter point being that other designers are showcasing their flexibility and well roundedness, proving themselves in their design methods rather than what they'll willing to design for, will convince others of their reliability.

Tackling artifacts for fetishism can eliminate the novelty of this topic and improve the quality and quantity of academic guidance for the next student who works on an uncommon topic such as this. In tandem with the sex positivity movement, conversations about sex related subjects are becoming more commonplace. By eliminating notions that these projects are not just as demanding as those chosen by peers, it can bring more attention any present problems within this area.

Research

At the beginning this project and listening to Must Love Fetish, a podcast about sexual fetishes, an interviewee expressed a concern, a desire, for making a connection with someone else. They expressed that in reality, the fetish wasn't the be all end all for them, rather that they wanted to share this interest of theirs with someone else. Finding that "someone else" can be difficult when much of the population are "vanilla people." According to Psychology Today, vanilla sex refers to "conventional sex that conforms to the very basic expectations with a culture." And so colloquially, people on the other side of the vanilla-kink spectrum are described to be vanilla. Therefore, I decided the goal of my thesis was to generate sexual fetish play through redesigned, introductory artifacts to bridge the gap between fetishists and vanilla people.

During my research I participated in a monthly social for the Rochester Kink Society called a munch. While sitting with some members, I came to the conclusion that fetishists were primarily hobbyists. The term 'hobby' may denote that they are only taking an interest in their fetish, but it is the fact that their fetish has become such an inherent part of their lives that they have incorporated a form of craft into it. This means they will create their own tools and spend their own money to expand their collection of items in that domain. During the design process, I considered the aesthetic, emotional, and meaningful factors of the design. In terms of reaching the target user, their relationship with a new product is established through a satisfactory aesthetic assessment which entices them to approach the product. Therefore, the design of the handcuff is geared toward people who are open to and enjoy collecting artifacts of kink. Specifically, they must assess that the handcuffs are not too novel or deviant from the usual aesthetic of manufactured gear.

During my observations and interactions with fetishists, I came to believe that they have difficulties meeting people open to their needs due to a gap of understanding. This gap is manifest in the form of social stigmas against perverse sexual behaviors and an unwillingness for experimentation. There is no concrete urgency to mitigate this situation, but I think the close relationship between a new generation of Americans and the sex positivity movement means

that there is a societal urge to meld people's personal and private lives with their professional and public lives, respectively. I believe one's true desires coincide with a large part of our identities, and so this entire effort is an attempt to validate our true desires, which also validates our identities.

But the process of seeking this validation is an unending process. The core of popular culture continuously adapts its identity from the fringe.⁴ An example of which is cultural appropriation. Which makes education critical to a new user's exploration of kink. Such as the case with poppers, usually sold as cleaners for electronics, are alkyl nitrites that are inhaled for recreational drug purposes to achieve a rush or high. It is a kink item that isn't regulated by the FDA because it doesn't hold its status as a drug. The danger here is that as the chemical makeup of Poppers change, both sellers and users are not notified of the change and will unknowingly inhale potentially fatal vapors.⁵ The risk is even greater for those thinking of trying poppers for the first time and have no prior experience. This is a reason for encouraging a dissemination of information through an introductory artifact. Without proper education of the risks of fetish play, users jumping into an experience can have dangerous consequences.

Risk and danger is a common concept that appears in many fetishes such as chremastistophilia (being held up and robbed), biastophilia (rape), and of course, the balloon fetish, which is a mixture of a fetish for latex and autassassinophilia, a fetish for the possibility of harm, which is represented in the popping of the balloon. Its value of risk is in its universality when it comes to sex, roleplaying, and fantasies. According to the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, the 1990 Kinsey Institute New Report on Sex reports that "5-10 percent of the U.S. population engages in sadomasochism for sexual pleasure on at least an occasional basis".⁶ Part of the goal of this thesis is that, as other fetishes become more mainstream, design thinking can be applied and distributed to the public with user dignity and safety in mind while maintaining their use and application.

Like most things, sex toys and similar paraphernalia are mass produced and mass marketed to the largest part of the population. After securing a loyal consumer base and adequate funds, they expand to cover specific markets. But fetishes are as unique as there are individuals who have them. So, when I came across the Vajankle, a specialized fetish object, it amazed me how it was an object completely customized to fit the sexual needs of the client instead of having to express their sexuality through established products. The artist who created the Vajankle carved a vaginal opening into the ankle of a foot, which allows the client to fully realize their foot fetish.⁷ Within the time constraints of thesis year, I wanted to explore an example of how to design for a single user's needs. And how the end design has a sort of resolution and completion for both the designer and the consumer.

I chose to tackle this problem by designing a pair of handcuffs, which can be one of the most innocuous ways to get vanilla people to talk about kinky sex. It is the first thing people think of when they imagine sexual activity with a

⁴ Young, James O. Cultural appropriation and the arts. John Wiley & Sons, 2010.

⁵ "What's That I Smell? New 'Poppers' Are Not What You Think." ScienceDaily. Accessed October 11, 2017. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/01/150113111152.htm>.

⁶ "How Many People Engage in SM?" NCSFreedom. Accessed March 16, 2018.

<https://www.ncsfreedom.org/component/k2/item/364-what-is-sm-how-many-people-engage-in-sm>.

⁷ "Making The World's First Male Sex Doll." Vice-videos. Accessed October 4, 2017. https://video.vice.com/en_us/video/male-dolls/57f41d3556a0a80f54726060.

little extra flavor. It can be the best way to entice people to think about their own possible fetishism by introducing them to a new idea via a familiar messenger. As a gateway tool, they may turn collecting sexual artifacts into a hobby. The hope here is that the cuffs are interesting enough that the user finds reasons to indulge their curiosity and look at other designs.

Benchmarking

In the benchmarking process I came across sex cuffs that feature fur lined leather braces or pink fur covered metal cuffs. People laugh at these products because they are tacky and novel, good for a one-time purchase as a gag gift. The impression one gets from these products are why they are shy about entering the corner of the shop that has these on the shelves. When one of these products are brought out in the bedroom and a partner does not have the right mindset to consider the toy seriously, it humiliates the potential user and spoils the experience for everyone, hindering them from purchasing more products further down the line.



Figure 1. Police Cuffs

By Evan-Amos [Public domain], from Wikimedia Commons

<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7f/Handcuffs-Black.jpg>

Figure 2. Tacky Cuffs

By hayabuzo [CC0 Creative Commons]

<https://pixabay.com/en/handcuffs-soft-toy-sex-1503841/>

Police handcuffs on the other hand are painful, and regularly cause injuries.⁸ There are plenty of cases where during an arrest, the police use too much force when putting on the cuffs and injure the arrestee. There are laws that protect both parties, such as the police being required to respond to the arrestee's first complaint of the alleged injury and assess their condition. If members of law enforcement who are trained to use the handcuffs end up using them too forcefully anyway, then civilians who use them for pleasure may do so as well. During these cases, stopping a scene (especially in roleplay) to readjust the cuffs for comfort may break the fantasy and the cuffs themselves become a hinderance to the activity.

⁸ Haddad, F. S., N. J. Goddard, R. N. Kanvinde, and F. Burke. "Complaints of pain after use of handcuffs should not be dismissed." *Bmj* 318, no. 7175 (1999): 55.

Methodology for Developing Designs and for Testing/Validating Concepts

Ergonomics play a crucial role in ensuring comfort and functionality. The wrist is a delicate area of the body. Even if the user is a watch wearer, the other wrist may not be accustomed to being restrained. So, the design must account for the comfort of naked wrists. Typically, the method to ensure comfort is simply to loosen the restraint. That may sacrifice the aesthetics and if not carefully designed, may not even restrain anything.

Even though sadomasochistic fetishists may want some modicum of pain in their handcuffs, by eliminating some of that pain, these handcuffs can become the gateway tool for vanilla people. The original intent of eliminating the gap of understanding between fetishists and vanilla people is most easily done by influencing the behavior of the larger population. When it comes to the general perception of fetishes, for example with foot fetishes, that the source of this infatuation surrounds the specific body part. But the contrary is more accurate. Fetishes should be categorized by their root reasons of infatuation rather than the end result. An example is that a focus on the foot is just the result of separate philiias, such as fetishes for the shoe, animal hooves, odors, or laces.



Figure 3. Mind map of Fetishes that relate to one another.

During the design process, I had a conversation with a professor in the psychology department which served to “right the ship”. He provided insights on how fetishists are somewhat self-sufficient in supplying their own methods of satisfying their fetishes, such as taking up leather work to make their own straps or flogging tools. Therefore, it would be a mistake to design with the assumption that the entire experience needed to be tailored for fetishists, as they are proficient in adapting their environment to their sexual fantasies.

Design Goals, Ideation and Development of Ideas

I first approached the design with an aesthetic view. I took into consideration the shape, size, weight, and color of the object. I began with an absolutely circular handcuff. Further iterations feature an oval body to mirror the shape of the wrist. But the circular design can open up to an elliptical form when being sized. Keeping the geometric aesthetic seemed important enough to ignore some ergonomic issues. I drew on the psychological concept of cross-modal correspondence, where a user may associate organic shapes with the absence of pain because of learned experiences.⁹ This is important as the handcuffs draw on many innate concepts for its design. Here the geometric circle may bring the user back to infancy and associate it with simpler, non-violent meanings.

I sized the cuffs to my own wrist, then sized it down one and up one. But it compromised the shape of the cuff because both alternate sizes would have been elliptical. I made the default size the smallest one so that the cuffs keep an aesthetically pleasing circle at rest. Part of the reason was so that the cuffs can be appreciated both when in use and when displayed.

The thickness of body invites vanilla people to touch and hold and ultimately use the tool. People are familiar with the weight of metal; therefore the thickness of the material should make it an approximately similar weight to metal cuffs. In theory this should allow whoever is holding it to make that connection by experiencing a familiar feeling while looking at an unfamiliar shape. Plastic can present itself in a different way than metal can. For instance, people would never fear that the plastic is too hot to touch, because there would be physical indicators that the object was how, such as melting or soft plastic. Compared to metal, it would also be presumed warmer to the touch because plastic is room temperature. By making the cuffs thick, it softens its edges, giving it a somewhat plush quality. The absence of hard, sharp edges suggests a benevolent function as well.

Colors are intended as a customizable feature. The combination of blue and white give clean, medical connotations. While red signifies sexual intent and positively correlated with attractiveness and black, with moral pollution.^{10,11} Given that it has a plastic body, such a basic form doesn't impose much meaning on the user. Therefore, the most significant indicators of the meaning of the product are from function and color.

As for the length of the chain, 11 inches or so allows users to find an immovable object to hang on or wrap the chain around while giving enough space on the chain for the hands to hold. This gives users the option of holding the chain if they don't find the object the chain is wrapped around suitable for their hands. The possible angle of the cuffs in relation to the wrists because of the chain length also means less stress on the wrists from the cuff themselves.

⁹ Deroy, Ophelia, Anne-Sylvie Crisinel, and Charles Spence. "Crossmodal correspondences between odors and contingent features: odors, musical notes, and geometrical shapes." *Psychonomic bulletin & review* 20, no. 5 (2013): 878-896.

¹⁰ Elliot, Andrew J., Tobias Greitemeyer, and Adam D. Pazda. "Women's use of red clothing as a sexual signal in intersexual interaction." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 49, no. 3 (2013): 599-602.

¹¹ Sherman, Gary D., and Gerald L. Clore. "The color of sin: White and black are perceptual symbols of moral purity and pollution." *Psychological science* 20, no. 8 (2009): 1019-1025.

During the iterative design process before I settled on a final concept, I changed the orientation of the clasping mechanism. I wanted to keep the language of wristbands for playfulness. The orientation could either be like regular wristbands, or parallel to the wrist which I've chosen. Both would never be as easy as throwing on a pair of regular, existing handcuffs. Example being how difficult it is sometimes to put a watch on. But the ceremony of it is in having someone else put the cuffs on you by carefully snapping in the straps and checking if there is enough give, which means contact between the cuffed person's wrists with the other's hands. It reiterates the intention the "predator" has for the "prey" and sets the mood for both parties.

It was also during a munch with some members of the Rochester Kink Society, a potential new member recounted his story of his girlfriend's neighbor calling in a noise complaint. The noise was coming from him as he was being beaten to an inch of his life with a flogger, a short multi-pronged whip. The police answered the call and would not leave until they were sure he was fine and was able to consent to his beating. The interruption by the police risked what he called "popping the scene bubble" and curtailing his high. Scenes are the setting in which BDSM activities take place. Roleplay, as part of BDSM, is similar to acting. Both these fetishists and actors need appropriate environments to enact their roles. It was then that I realized sex dungeons are meant to be a safe space for fetishists. They are usually underground or hidden away to minimize disturbances by the public. There may be a misconception that this is done for the benefit of the public. This has very little to do with shielding themselves from judgment. So I chose to give the handcuff features that try not to invite scrutiny, but if and when it undoubtedly attracts attention, the user will have a platform to share their interest in fetishism with an artifact that does not inhibit their dignity.

Testing and Validation of Preliminary Designs

Interviews during the testing phase facilitated various changes in the design. The sliding cap was confusing to some. Part of the problem might have been that there was a stop built in the side of the cuff. It is supposed to stop the cap from falling off, but the tolerance between the cap and the main body of the cuff is small enough that friction will keep it on. Also, the stop had the affordance of a button which invited people to run their thumbs over it to see what

it might activate. And so, the stop was removed so that the cap can be moved wherever.



Figure 4. Early Iteration of Cuff with Stop for Cap

Many believed the prototype to be fragile because it was not made of metal. The prototypes were printed in NinjaFlex, a pliable plastic. The end design would feature a hard-plastic shell to keep the circular shape and prevent warping during strain. Part of the weakness was in the perception of the

connection points being thin compared to the rest of the body. The weakest part of the cuff is the link between the cuff itself and the chains, if those were made of metal, it would eliminate any structural problems during use.

Further Refinement and Development

One of the main issues is to designate the best location the sliding cap should be. The cap is an add-on to mask the shortcomings of the main body's compromises. Moving it to any location as there are many unresolved issues that could be tackled from multiple angles. Users also focus on it way too much, differently than if they were tinkering with a real watch. One direction could be to bring the cuffs closer to the form of a watch so that users are not so focused on the cap. It would also inform them of the language needed to operate the cuff.

User feedback on finish and feel suggests that perhaps the design is a step too far in the evolutionary path of the handcuff. Given that many find it fragile and perhaps not "industrial" enough; meaning that because it is not mass produced, it has not gone through strength testing.

Final Design



Figure 5. Final Handcuffs (Photo Credit: Elizabeth Lamark)

In the final design of the handcuffs I decided to keep with the circular shape. The circle is a shape recognized since childhood. Other than its cross-modal correspondence suggesting it would not hurt when touched, its perfect geometry suggests no function related to flesh the same way an organic shape would. Organic shapes may imply sexuality as seen in the shapes most contemporary vibrators take, such as bunnies, eggs, bullets, or human tongues.

Following the method of avoiding overt sexual symbolism, the inner gel ring is reminiscent of similar soft gels for products such as toothbrushes and other plastic home goods. Like Colgate's toothbrush design efforts, "the proposal was to create a large, soft, compressible gel-like structure that would adapt its shape to the thumb and forefinger

under the pressure encountered during normal brushing.”¹² The iteration in this design of the cuffs would protect the wrist during repetitive motions.

A thick non-metal body circumvents thoughts of thin metal cutting into the wrist. It indicates that it is safe to use, and the thickness gives it a home goods function, similar to the neck of a trigger pump spray bottle. The weight of the cuffs also instills faith that there is strength in the material. User interaction of the clasp mirrors belt loops and wristbands by the sliding of the cap and the snapping mechanism of the straps.

Just about all risk fetishes, such as autassassinophilia, need a way out, a safe word, if the situation becomes uncontrolled. These situations can be paused whenever with a safe word, key, or some type of safety pull switch that allows the players to leave the scene willingly, these safeties are usually embedded into the scene in such a way that aren't obvious, but the players are made well aware of. Though some designs call for features to emphasize the risk and pain of an experience, a singular focus can be dangerous. Risk of the scene versus the safety of play must be balanced by hiding the safety near the core of the fetish, like a safeword.¹³ It does not compromise the scene, as it places the burden of suspending disbelief on the human player. Therefore, the ceremony of carefully looping your partner's wrists reinforce the connection between the individuals involved and the intention behind the fetish object.

Other Possible Refinements

The next steps that can be taken for the proposed design are that the body can be altered to the user's preference, perhaps even mask them as bracelets to wear in public. Handcuffs must maintain their comfortable features even when the user wants it to be similar to police cuffs, with thin, slicing metal edges. Specifically, when changing the design, making sure that the biggest surface area of the material still sits on the wrist rather than not.

The chain that connects the cuffs can be shortened or replaced by another type of connection if desired. I created a modular solution designed specifically to provide flexibility in the environment of use. These differences can change the meaning of the scenario between people. Such as changing the arena of use from bedroom to dinner party or changing the cuffs from a discreet artifact to a tool in a dungeon.

There is potential in expanding the inner gel ring to cover more surface area. The thickness of the ring provides extraordinary comfort but maybe covering a larger surface area will provide the same result.

All these design choices were made to achieve a goal that is subjective to the user in an attempt to utilize Victor Papanek's seductive design: “seductive influence can be very useful in eliciting desired behavior because these phenomena often do not allow for enforcement or explicit arguments.”¹⁴ As the cuffs were designed in the hopes that it bridges fetishists and vanilla people, making an object that both groups can experience, thereby decreasing the

¹² Hohlbein, Douglas J., M. I. Williams, and T. E. Mintel. "Driving toothbrush innovation through a cross-functional development team." *Whole Mouth Clean* 25, no. 10 Suppl 2 (2004): 7.

¹³ Lessons, Slut. "Rape Fantasy: How to Carry It Out Safely," June 12, 2014. <https://slutlessons.wordpress.com/2014/06/12/rape-fantasy-how-to-carry-it-out-safely/>.

¹⁴ Tromp, Nynke, Paul Hekkert, and Peter-Paul Verbeek. "Design for socially responsible behavior: a classification of influence based on intended user experience." *Design Issues* 27, no. 3 (2011): 3-19.

“otherness” that each group may feel for one another. “Otherness” is what makes people hesitant in accepting the ideas and experiences that they may not share, which can translate into not using these cuffs in the first place.¹⁵

Touching on Other Kinks & Fetishes

There are other example fetishes that I have attempted to apply this design thinking to, namely erotic asphyxiation and olfactophilia. These design concepts are in different stages of realization, but they almost have no competition in terms of existing products that address them. The choking collar tries to cover roleplay, erotic asphyxiation, somnophilia and necrophilia. Applying and designing a product across so many fetishes compromises the specificity of the solution. The collar for instance, only goes into roleplay because it cannot reliably test the subjectivity of pain versus testing the physiology of restricting the windpipe. But it also shows that certain extreme fetishes need to be designed for carefully since the risk of injury is quite high. In the case of olfactophilia, the fetish for certain scents, I try to have the user capture a scent of their choosing into a charm-like object. It is up to the user how far they want to move their private sexual lives into their public lives by displaying these charms on their person or sharing the story of how they obtained these scents.

Conclusion

By designing into a space devoid of this style of sexual artifact, I am providing a new form of expression in the sexual sphere in contrast to existing designs. Something new on the shelves may catch the eye of potential users and spark a ripple of curiosity in the population to explore the field. I am bringing a familiar feeling to an unfamiliar territory which makes the product approachable to the user. And by making these products seemingly benign to the regular person, it encourages camaraderie in kinksters and fetishists by allowing them to share these experiences openly as social attitudes toward the activity soften in their favor.

¹⁵ Bauman, Zygmunt. *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Oxford: Wiley, 2013.

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