

Keynote Address by Dr. Chris Haywood



Dr. Chris Haywood is a Reader in Critical Masculinity Studies in the School of Arts and Cultures at Newcastle University, UK. His research explores the intersections of gender, sexuality, and culture, with particular attention to masculinities, intimacy, and sexual politics. He has published widely, including *Sex Clubs* (Palgrave, 2022), *Men, Masculinity and Dating* (Palgrave, 2018), *The Conundrum of Masculinity* (Routledge, 2017), and *A Sociology of Men and Masculinities* (Open University Press, 2003). His recent work investigates the organization of sex clubs, the affective geographies of desire, and the cultural politics of sexual health. Chris is co-editor of *The Journal of Bodies, Sexualities and Masculinities* and *The Journal of Boyhood Studies*. His current research engages with questions of intimacy, gendered empowerment and disobedient methodologies.

Whose Pleasure Matters? AI, Intimacy, and Digital Colonialism

As artificial intelligence becomes woven into our everyday public lives, we are beginning to witness the increasing fusion of AI with some of our most intimate encounters. From smart sex toys to AI companions, the merging of this fast-growing technology with desire opens new spaces for pleasure — and with it, new terrains for the circuits of power. This presentation explores some of these circuits in more detail by first focusing on how AI creates a *politics of representation* through its aesthetics, audio and haptics. Such representations not only guide us on what to do, but also how to feel. Second, circuits of desire travel through a multiplication of formats that continue to point to *hierarchies of desire*. Whilst AI might appear as a space for liberation and sexual freedom, early indications suggest that they are reinforcing forms of objectification. Finally, it is argued that the fusion of AI technologies and sexual intimacy may result in new forms of *digital colonialism*. More specifically, this presentation's final point asks, whose pleasure matters? I am keen to explore what the emergence and circulation of consumer-oriented and market-led AI and intimacy products mean for Sri Lanka and the Global South more broadly. The presentation concludes by arguing that academics, researchers and scholars in the social sciences and humanities have a vital role in monitoring and shaping the impacts on people's lives.

Content Note: This presentation addresses themes of sexuality and intimacy in the context of emerging technologies. It contains mild sexual visuals.

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