

For these sextech founders, growing a business means pushing past stigma

The sextech industry is high in demand and ripe for expansion. But for these founders, dealing with taboos around sex is just part of the growth process.

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Caught between high consumer demand and difficult relations with investors and advertisers, the sextech industry is an underfunded but scalable market. The industry, which is now expected to hit \$40B by 2023, is showing no signs of slowing down.

Demand is on the rise for the products and services offered by the industry, which spans sexual wellbeing services, educational platforms, toys and apps. But despite this, startups in the space face huge setbacks and barriers to growth. Founders are often confronted with blanket bans on social media and unwilling investors as a result of “anti-vice” restrictions - the morality clauses that investors must stick to - and persisting taboos around sex.

Maddyness spoke to five founders across the space who aim to educate, empower and normalise conversations about sex, to discover the difficulties they overcame in growing their businesses.

Emma Sayle: Killing Kittens



Emma Sayle launched *Killing Kittens* over 15 years ago to help women explore their sexuality in a safe environment. The startup regularly hosts female-orientated sex parties - and more recently digital events - connecting 160,000 members across the world.

But though the business is close to achieving a £3M investment, the funding process wasn't always so smooth, something Emma attributes to "old fashioned puritanical prudishness" within the investment landscape.

"When the word 'sex' is mentioned, everyone within that sector is banded together by the providers," said Emma. "In the eyes of the big search engines, they put us together with the likes of PornHub and camsites, which is just not what we are about."

The difficulty in securing funding means founders in the sex space often rely on alternatives such as crowdfunding. Killing Kittens raised £1.4M using this method between 2018 and 2020, and recently secured an investment from the UK Government's Future Fund.

On top of events, the startup also offers sex education and chat platforms for consenting adults. But the range of experiences on offer has meant that digital advertising has been "nigh on impossible."

"That's why we decided to build our own social media platform and create our own world that is free from puritanical advertising standards that don't seem to think women should be given the space to have fun and explore their sexuality," said Emma.

Still, Emma admitted that the hardest part about being a founder in the space was other people's opinions, from family and friends warning getting involved in the sex industry was a "bad idea" to Silicon Valley institutions turning the business away.

"For some reason people (men) get very defensive when the subject of

women's sexuality is pushed into the foreground,” said Emma. “If I was working in agritech, gaming or any other tech area, we would have had a lot more support, but the hurdles have made us stronger.”

Soumyadip Rakshit: MysteryVibe



For Soumyadip, fundraising has been a hurdle in growing his startup for sexual health products. *MysteryVibe* brings together engineering and medicine to create medical devices designed to target sexual dysfunctions such as pain, dryness, arousal disorder and erectile dysfunction.

Confronted with a financial sector that he describes as “cautious and conservative,” Soumyadip admitted finding the capital needed for the research, development, test and trial of medical devices difficult.

“If those investors don’t want to be associated with sex, even if it’s proven to be profitable, that limits the options where funding can be found for sextech companies,” he said. “Compounding this problem is the fact that sextech is a nascent field with few big companies and even fewer unicorns.”

Though sexual health issues are one of the most common conditions people face every day – with around 75% never seeking medical help – Soumyadip says that sextech companies like MysteryVibe aiming to target these issues still find it hard to grow their reach on social media. According to him, this is because any type of sex content, regardless of nature, is deemed “inappropriate.”

He added: “Most social media companies choose to blanket ban all things sex instead of taking a nuanced look at it.”

Marie Comacle: Puissante



Determined to break taboos associated with female sexuality and masturbation, Marie Comacle said the hardest part about being a founder in the space was the “global vision of sextech.”

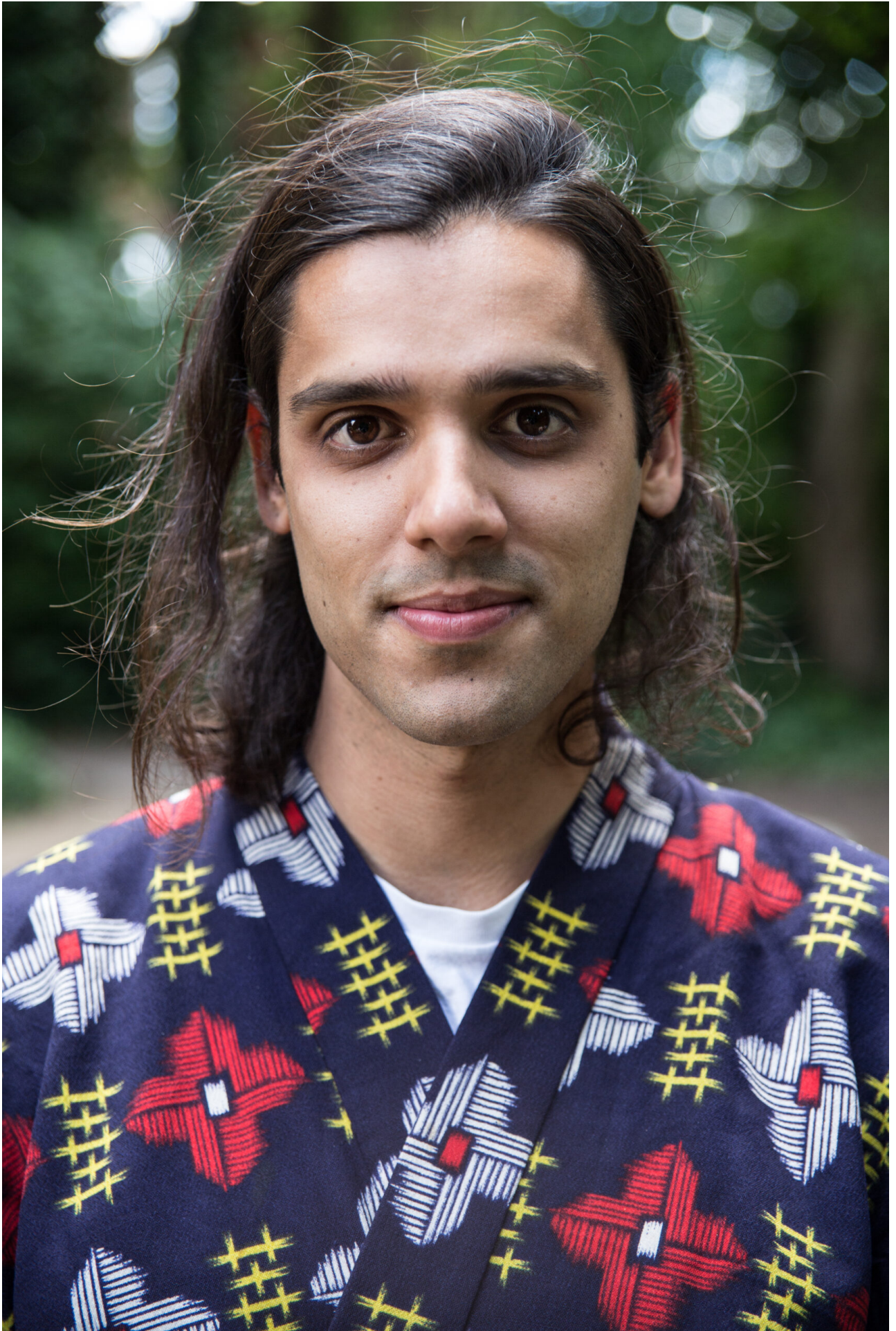
Growing her startup Puissante – meaning “powerful” – in France has been particularly difficult because “it’s still a major taboo, so everyone is really fearful of the area,” she said, adding that one investor had turned her away because they didn’t want the “image” of associating with sexual wellness products and vibrators.

“They know a lot about foodtech or whatever, but concerning sextech there's a real lack of knowledge and it doesn't help, especially when we're talking about women’s sexuality,” she said.

Having also turned to other means of advertising – such as sponsoring podcasts – after facing shadowbans on Facebook, Marie said that mentality needs to change.

“You still have ads for men which are allowed. That's really annoying and frustrating, but that's the game with people who can't understand that a breast is a good thing.”

Sachin Raoul: Blueheart



Blueheart's Sachin Raoul also spoke of investor blindness to the scalability and demand for sexual health products.

"Time after time we speak to investors who say, 'relationship problems, that's a pretty niche problem', despite the fact that they've seen how the ED market exploded when Pfizer launched Viagra," he said. "These aren't niche issues, they're enormous, but it's challenging to paint a future of the world that looks so different from today."

After experiencing issues which sex took on his own mental health, Sachin created *Blueheart* - a digital therapeutic platform - to "tear down accessibility barriers" attached to pricey sex therapy.

Asked whether he faced any particular challenges in advertising his startup, Sachin said the biggest barrier was the "grey area" attached to sex.

"On the one hand, they don't want anyone advertising anything that resembles sex. On the other hand, every company in the world is selling sex in some form, from perfume ads to pop music, they are all hyper-sexualised. So, they can't have blanket rules against things that are 'sexual'" he explained.

Sachin said that the unwillingness to speak about sex openly is what steers conversation and attention away from the sex industry. Although young people are much better at discussing sex and emotions freely, he said that those who have the power to invest still belong to the "old guard."

"That results in having young people very excited by what you're doing, to have it shot down by their superiors higher up the food chain," he added.

Chloe Macintosh: Kama



Chloe Macintosh knew she wanted to innovate in the sex industry after realising there was no brand to help her understand what was happening to her body while pregnant with her son.

After realising that it was “impossible” to raise money in the space, Chloe said she didn’t feel ready to launch until that changed.

Kama, the sex education platform designed to help people better understand and connect with their bodies and relationships, launched only last year.

So far, the startup has relied predominantly on US-based investors. “European investors come from traditional finance and they’re usually quite privileged, middle class, white male... which gives you a bit of an insight in how they would make decisions,” she said.

Chloe said the hardest part about fundraising in the sex space – what she calls a “disruptive” industry” – is the tendency for founders to “ease it towards people (investors) so they don’t get scared of what it might be.”

She added: “We need to see investors as advocates and not just see money, because in our sector, that’s what will make things change.”

As a founder in the sex space, Chloe also revealed the added responsibility she felt to “look after people and give them an environment that’s safe and feels good.”

“This industry needs the right kind of attention,” she added. “Sexuality has been corrupted, used and abused, and we need to bring it back to market in a way that will really help people.”

