

Case Study

# Aspect

**Empowering women to  
improve their sexual  
wellbeing**

2021





### **Venture**

Ferly



### **Aspect Members**

Zinc



### **Social science discipline**

Sociology, Psychology  
or Anthropology and  
Development Studies



### **Sector**

Healthcare



### **Route-to-market**

Start-up

# A female tech start-up is supporting women to improve their sexual health and wellbeing via the development of a sexual self-care and therapeutic app

Most women have symptoms of a sexual problem at one time or another (Cigna, 2020). Every woman is different, and problems can be due to emotional and/or physical causes. Generally, sexual health and wellbeing hasn't been prioritised as much as other areas of health, and people commonly link it with STIs, contraception, periods, fertility issues and menopause. Improving women's sexual health can improve overall wellbeing, however this issue is often overlooked and there is a lack of therapeutic support available, leaving women suffering in silence.





Ferly is a digital health platform that uses cognitive behavioural therapy, mindfulness techniques and physiology to help users with sexual difficulties, desire, empowerment and curiosity, creating a space where people can discover what sex means to them. Co-founders Dr Anna Hushlak and Billie Quinlan met through the Zinc programme. Prior to starting Ferly, Anna was 1 of 55 accepted to Zinc's Mission 1 venture-builder, which sought to create tech-enabled ventures that improved the mental and emotional health of women and girls. Following a series of expert talks on mental health topics it became clear that the link between women's sexual difficulties and mental health was missing.

The business idea for the app was sparked. Ferly's mission is to:

- Connect sexual health as a third pillar between mental and physical wellbeing.
- Radically transform women's relationship with sex.
- Change how users think about sex and how they have it.
- Challenge the taboo of female sexuality.

With both co-founders individually experiencing sexual assaults, they have personal connections to their social mission and an unwavering commitment to solve this fundamental problem. They feel they have both an ethical and moral duty to help women. Social sciences and social impact are in the DNA of the start-up – everything they do starts with user research, experiences and stories and is a fundamental part of what the start-up is. Anna's academic background has enabled her to implement social sciences research skills into Ferly's development. Her

passion for human centric design, mindful tech and empathy journey approaches is instilled in the app, and the user experience is at the heart of the start-up. Qualitative measures are used during the user research and product testing process and drawing on this user feedback, they can test what does/doesn't work for individuals, translating responses into an evidence based, digestible product.



# The impact

- Following the launch of the app in July 2019, there have been over 100,000 users across 61 countries, including developing countries. The global impact is significant, particularly when 90% of the app's growth has been organic.
- Health Practitioners are endorsing and proactively promoting the app to patients, further building confidence and awareness in the brand.
- There has been significant positive feedback from the user community with hundreds of messages from users describing how the app has changed their lives. Test results from a mock trial delivered in early 2020, with a group of women ranging from 21-60 years old who used the app, saw an increase in confidence, sexual desire and a decrease in their negative thinking.
- The tech start-up has already raised over £1.5m in funding – statistically less than 2% of funding goes to female start-up founders, which highlights the success of this venture in the tech start-up space further. Raising money as female founders plus on a subject considered taboo is testament to the start-up's achievements – Anna and Billie were included in the 'Top 100 women in Femtech and Health Tech in 2019'.
- The company is growing its team, already increased from 3 to 9 over the last year – the co-founders are building a 'tribe' that 100% supports the company's social mission and wants to be part of the movement, even if that means working for less money/perks than in other companies.

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**Ferly has really been a life saver for me and empowered me to be excited about sex and relationships in a way that I haven't felt before**

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Ferly App User

# The start-up journey: key learnings

Zinc was instrumental in supporting the company to slingshot ahead to the next stage of its development. From support with marketing, strategic planning and financial support, the programme has provided the infrastructure needed to develop the company. It has also been pivotal in helping the co-founders access the relationships needed to help the company further.

Moving from academia to start-up, Anna credits the support of Zinc: “I’ve realised how transferrable my academic skills are to business. I struggled slightly with the pace of the start-up world initially, no longer having

the longer timeframes associated with academic research, and getting used to working with much shorter deadlines. Rachel Carey, Chief Scientist at Zinc, has been a huge support and has helped me to translate academic language into business/commercial models.”

Anna has loved the autonomy of entrepreneurship, the pace, the uncertainty, the culture and the types of people who gravitate towards it – and the sense that they can directly see the results of what they’re doing, the ability to effect change; the social impact is tangible, real and immediate.

Building the company has been empowering and changed her mindset from seeking internal validation of her ideas, rather than external. There have been some casualties along the journey in terms of relationships breaking down, but this made the co-founders build a filtering system and they know the relationships that have lasted are with people who are 100% supportive of what they want to achieve.



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**Ferly are a great example of how social science, creativity, technology and entrepreneurship can be combined in a user-centred product. Anna and Billie are passionate about tackling a hugely neglected and underserved problem, and are committed to doing this in a way that is research and evidence-led.**

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Rachel Carey, Chief Scientist, Zinc

### Some key advice:

- Imposter syndrome is so prevalent – particularly with women – when considering making the leap into the start-up world. Make building your confidence in yourself a project – do your research into other's stories, research the skills you need.
- Build knowledge of the new domain you want to enter and treat it as a literature review, develop a baseline understanding of what is going on, identify key trends and common processes.
- Just start 'doing' and don't get caught up in the 'what ifs' or 'could we'. You can learn from a bad decision, but no decision at all puts you in limbo. Test an idea out the cheapest/freest way you can rather than wait for it to be better/affordable to test in more expensive ways – getting it done and out there/tested is better than perfect and never tested.
- Entrepreneurship loneliness can be hard, tapping into networks of other entrepreneurs is important.



# What's next



The start-up has undertaken a shift in its strategy, with the app seeing a massive update in usage following the global pandemic. COVID-19 has highlighted the impact of social isolation, lack of human connection and contact, leading to relationship breakdowns, divorces and struggles to balance romantic relationships around parenting and working from home. People have found it difficult to balance their new environments with their social wellbeing. Many have been forced to prioritise and to focus on themselves.

Over the next 12-18 months, Ferly will be running effectiveness evaluation studies to examine the impact of the app on key outcomes. This work will enable the co-founders to explore how to evolve the app next. They are keen to explore how they can broaden audience/topics e.g. body image and eating disorders, which can contribute towards poor sexual health and wellbeing.

Given the importance of sexual health and wellbeing for mental health more broadly, the ultimate long-term goal is for the app to become a prescribed digital therapeutic.





# Background Information

## Dr Anna Hushlak



### Role

Co-Founder and  
Chief Product Officer



### Degree

DPhil – Digital, Media and Environment,  
Oxford; MSc Environment  
Management, South Africa; and BSc  
International Relations, Canada

Having completed her PhD at the University of Oxford in 2018, Anna believes in making research and science more accessible. This, combined with her earlier advocacy work in Honduras, Canada, and South Africa where she worked with the non profit-sector on projects on geo-politics, government decisions making on marginalised communities, she developed her passion for using human-centred design and mindful tech to solve problems around gender/sexual inequality.



### Contact

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## Case Study

# Aspect

Transforming Society Through  
Social Science Innovation

Aspect (A Social sciences Platform for Entrepreneurship, Commercialisation and Transformation) is a network for organisations looking to make the most of commercial and business opportunities from social sciences research.

Supported by Research England's Connecting Capability Fund, Aspect members sit at the epicentre of discovery, imagination and progress in the social sciences. We draw together pioneering academics with innovative industry leaders to tackle the most complex societal challenges of our time.



Aspect is funded by Research England's Connecting Capability Fund