

Webcam Performers Resisting Social Harms: “You're on the Web Masturbating... It's Just about Minimising the Footprint”.

*Rachel Stuart*¹

Abstract

This article will bring together Deleuze and Guattari's theory of Smooth Space and zemiological debates of social harms to respond to the question set by Jane Scoular (2015): does the law matter in sex work? The regulation and policing of performers by hosting sites allow sites to avoid state-level legislation. However, site regulations cause performers to experience harm that traditional concepts of the law cannot address because the law is powerless against the intrinsic injuries done by neo-liberalism. The damages experienced by female performers were not generally criminal but nonetheless harmful to those experiencing them, even though generally no laws were transgressed. When performers did experience crime, the non-territorial nature of the internet prevented action from being taken. This article will explore the irrelevance of the law in the context of webcamming and the potential harms caused by academia's fixed gaze on the customer, preventing consideration of the damages done to webcam performers by other social actors.

Keywords

Webcam performers, social harms, digital sex work, economic mainstream, resistance

Introduction

Hall et al. (2020) describe zemiology as the study of harm, whilst Canning and Tombs (2021) discuss how considering societal issues through a framework of harm rather than crime facilitates a multidimensional understanding that reveals otherwise unseen or under-recognised damages. A recognition of societal harms forces fresh consideration of the macro-level inequalities enacted by powerful societal actors and which most detrimentally and disproportionately affect marginalised individuals and communities. The use of social harms as a framework of critique has been used to highlight the damages done by consumerism

¹ Rachel Stuart, Brunel University. Email: Rachel.stuart@brunel.ac.uk
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(Hall et al. 2020), the service industry (Lloyd, 2018), the criminal justice system (Naughton, 2001; Pantazis, 2006; 2008; Alexander, 2010; Hillyard & Tombs, 2004; 2007; 2017), migration, (Canning, 2018; 2021), poverty (Pemberton, 2016; Pantazis, 2016; Wright et al., 2020) and the harms done to the environment (White, 2018). There has been some engagement with the harms associated with viewing pornography as a criminal justice issue (Dymock, 2018) and the harms done to sex workers by the moral panic around trafficking (Boukli, 2021; forthcoming). This paper will expand the academic understanding of the social harms experienced by women engaged in webcamming, which is perhaps the least legislated form of sex work. Globally, only a handful of countries legislate camming in any way, and only three have criminalised it - The UAE, The Philippines, and Turkey (Henry & Farvid, 2017). For clarity, within this context, the term 'webcamming' will describe sexually arousing performances, conversations, or text via webcam for either direct remuneration or tips.

Deleuze & Guattari (1988: 492) discuss 'smooth spaces' as places 'where capitalism is perfected, and the destiny of human beings is recast.' They (ibid: 479) define smooth space as marked by a lack of striation or regulation, theorising such areas as being situated beyond law and legislation. They situate smooth spaces as often being deliberately constructed and describe how (ibid: 492) multinationals fabricate 'deterritorialised smooth space' to maximise profit unhindered by legislation. This idea is further developed by Hardt & Negri (2000: 31) when they discuss transnational corporations as directly structuring new territories, which produce both commodities and new subjectivities. In these new territories, corporations are not 'confined by the imposition of abstract command,' i.e., legislation asserted by the nation-states (ibid). The creation and structuration of new territories allow capital to reach its 'absolute' speed because they facilitate the transformation of 'striated capital' (capital that is regulated) to 'smooth capital' (unregulated capital) (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988: 492). Although the internet per se does not provide these conditions, spaces within webcam hosting sites arguably create the smooth conditions needed to generate smooth capital.

This article will address how the law is inadequate in protecting performers from the social harms found within camming by introducing several areas of debate that are currently under-discussed within the academic literature. My positionality as a researcher who has previously cammed and has a wide variety of experiences across the spectrum of sexual commerce allowed me access to performers that would have been denied were I not a former sex worker. This positioning contributes to the steadily growing body of work produced by researchers of sexual commerce who have themselves engaged in the exchange of sexual experiences for remuneration (Holt, 2020). I make the case that researchers who have – or are currently - engaged in the same forms of sexual commerce as those they are researching

are better able to reveal areas that lay beyond the remit of researchers who have no sex working experience. Discussing the different types of camming sites and how performers operate within those areas highlights both the sites' punitive nature and the law's limited capacity to address damages that arise from this punitiveness and those that arise from the business models utilised by the hosting sites. Finally, this article will discuss the social harms that performers experience because of their engagement in camming and how they resist those harms without recourse to law.

Although performers are referred to as 'cam girl' and 'model' within the context of the academic literature, I consider these terms inaccurate and inappropriate. The thirty-five women I spoke with did not describe their activities as modelling. The women I interviewed ranged in age from nineteen to late fifties; to refer to them as girls seems pejorative and condescending. References to webcamming will be used variously and interchangeably with cam and camming, and I generally refer to performers.

Camming

Webcamming is an exciting area of study for several reasons. It is mediated and cannot exist without the internet (Jones 2015a; Rand 2019). It has attracted little legislation globally, even though the current era has witnessed increasingly abolitionist legislation towards many forms of sex work (Henry & Farvid 2017). Finally, considerable corporate interest is invested in webcamming (Jones 2020). Angela Jones (2016, p.228) describes performers using 'highly stylised chat rooms' to broadcast a wide variety of sexually arousing performances, including stripping, autoerotic stimulation, and the use of penetrative sex toys (Jones 2015b; Henry & Farvid 2017, p.119). Performers also use chat rooms to tease, flirt, flash, and role-play (Nayar 2017: 477).

Hosting sites fall broadly into two categories: those where performers are mainly remunerated by tipping; and those where income is generated primarily by charging a fee per minute. Sites such as Chaturbate and MyFreeCams (MFC) make revenue utilising the crowdsourcing principle (Bleakley, 2014; Jones, 2020), generating income through individuals donating funds in the form of tips (Brabham, 2008: 77). Streamate, Cams.Com and Adultwork use a slightly different business model that facilitates tipping, but primarily viewers are encouraged to pay per minute to watch performances. Encouraging customers to pay a stipend per minute is achieved by hosting sites restricting nudity and pornographic displays to viewing modes behind paywalls. Performers referred to sites such as MyFreeCams (MFC) and Chaturbate as 'tipping' sites, and others such as Streamate and Adultwork as 'private', so

I utilise these terms also. Within the academic literature, there is a tendency to research performers who broadcast from tipping sites such as Chaturbate (Bleakley, 2014; Jones, 2015b; Weiss, 2017; Jones, 2020; Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018); this work seeks to address that imbalance. Although I interviewed women who worked from both tipping and private sites, the narratives that I use in this article are about women's experiences working on private sites – mainly but not exclusively Streamate because the majority of women I spoke with broadcast from Streamate.

Hosting Sites

Hosting sites generate vast amounts of traffic using affiliate porn sites, with even a medium-sized site like Cam.Com fed by 50,000 affiliates. It is perhaps helpful to think of each affiliate as a door that opens into a model's chatroom. The high volume of internet traffic means there can be hundreds of viewers in a performer's room at any one time. The traffic that the affiliates and hosting sites generate attracts further corporate engagement from the banking system; the banking system processes virtually all transactions that pass through the hosting sites. The banking system's involvement differentiates webcamming from other forms of online sex work such as escorting and porn sites, whose transactions financial institutions such as Visa, JPMorgan, and PayPal have refused to process (Lee & Sullivan, 2016). It was noticeable that in the summer of 2021, when some banking institutions withdrew their services from Only Fans because of its use by sex workers - only to be reinstated in a matter of days - webcamming did not experience the same withdrawal of service. This was something of an anomaly given that the majority share owner of Only Fans - Leonid Radvinsky – also owns MyFreeCams.

In return for generating traffic, handling financial transactions, and providing the platform from which performers broadcast, hosting sites retain 50 to 65 per cent of the income that performers generate (Bleakley, 2014; Jones, 2015a; 2015b; 2020; Henry & Farvid, 2017; Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018; Weiss 2017). Webcam hosting sites have a global reach and tend to be somewhat nebulous in terms of physical location. They impose strict regulations around issues that could place them in conflict with nation-state regulation. For example, the Streamate code of conduct stipulates that:

Performers will not violate any law concerning obscenity. Performer shall not portray depictions of sex involving any person under the age of eighteen (18) years of age, rape, incest, bestiality, fisting, necrophilia, any form of minor

activity, urination and/or defecation. Animals should not appear on camera at any time.²

Similar regulations are applied across all hosting sites, although the wording varies slightly from site to site. The level of policing of performance in the free chat space by the hosting sites varies between tipping and private sites. Private sites are far more restrictive around what is permissible in free space, unsurprising considering their business model.

Hosting sites offer three principal modes of viewing; the first is commonly referred to as free, free space or free chat (Jones, 2020). Entering free chat is the mode of viewing that is automatically triggered by entering a performer's chatroom, and there is no tariff levied. In free chat, customers can tip performers with tokens that they purchase from the hosting site (Bleakley, 2014; Nayar, 2017; Weiss, 2017; Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018; Jones, 2020). Although freely accessible and with no payment required to enter and observe a performer in free chat, there are restrictions on viewers who have not purchased tokens interacting with performers. Performers only communicate with audience members who are either tipping or have the capacity to either tip or pay the stipend charged by the minute for a more sexually explicit performance (Bleakley, 2014; Jones, 2015b; Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). On private sites such as Streamate, the free chat's primary function is to encourage customers to enter fee-paying modes. Restricting what is available in free chat encourages customers to start paying by the minute. On tipping sites, the free space is where women spend much of their time, and it is possible to view penetrative and quite graphically pornographic performances in free chat. They are tipped by the audience members, although the lack of remuneration by all viewers means that this is not the most efficient way of generating income.

Streamate is more private based. You literally just sit there in public chat and wait for a private. On MFC, most things happen in public chat. Like you make most of your money out of tips. There is a higher earning potential on MFC because there are no limits to what people can tip you. On Streamate, it's more steady. I know if I log on, I'm going to make some money. On MFC, I can sit there for 6 hours and make nothing. Token sites are totally different from private sites.

Daisy

² <https://www.streamatemodels.com/conduct.php>

There will be guys who will just sit there, like it's honestly like free chat, and people can log in, but they don't have to have a screen name, so potentially young kids could be watching it. The site that I am on, they bring a lot of traffic and everything, but you can only show tits in free chat, you can only go to nude chat if you have a screen name and you are part of the site, and you have registered, you've shown your ID and all of that stuff. They don't need to see my live sex shows, they need to be 18, signed up, and they need to pay.

Gisele

The second viewing mode available in a performer's chatroom is also public; however, it is accessed either via payment accumulating to a monetary target set by the performer or a customer starting to pay by the minute, thus creating a paywall. Creating a paywall allows for the streaming of more pornographic or specialised performances. When a paid performance starts, those observers who have not tipped or do not have the means to pay per minute find themselves excluded from the chatroom. Many viewers may watch a paid but public performance paying per minute but spending less than is levied for entering the third viewing mode accessible via a performer's chatroom – the private space. The customer pays a premium rate per minute for one-to-one interaction with a performer in this exclusive private area.

Camming and Smooth Space

Creating a paywall places a barrier between a performer's chat room, the wider internet, and possible legislation. The spaces beyond paywalls represent smooth spaces for the hosting sites because they are beyond the gaze of legislation. The free chat spaces are not smooth because they are potentially subject to state regulation, so hosting sites regulate the free chat spaces, with private sites policing the free chat space more rigorously than tipping sites. Passing through a paywall is achieved by using payment methods that need age verification, such as a credit card, to purchase the sites' currency tokens. Beyond the paywall, performances are often highly pornographic and fetishist, and would potentially attract legislation if they were freely accessible. The public but paying viewing mode is the most economically efficient for both the hosting site and the performer. For the customer seeking taboo content such as incest or underage role play, the private space, where the customer and the performer are one-on-one, is the ultimate smooth space - hidden from the legislative gaze. Hosting sites can monetise performative titillation in the free space and pornographic

broadcasting in the paying public group mode. At the same time, the private mode offers the opportunity to monetise types of taboo or fetish-based specialities that generally fall outside the remit of mainstream economic profiteering.

Brents and Sanders (2010: 50) discuss neoliberalism enabling the mainstreaming of commercial sex, resulting in some forms of commercial sex looking and acting like mainstream businesses. However, while the mainstreaming of sexual commerce is conducive to neoliberal policies of deregulation, individual responsibility and entrepreneurialism, governments rarely embrace the mainstreaming of sex work (Brents & Sanders, 2010: 48). A lack of full economic mainstreaming results from the pressure placed on governments by powerful social actors such as radical feminists, right-wing religious organisations, and anti-trafficking lobbies who oppose sex work. Nayar (2017: 477) theorises that webcam hosting sites exist in a space similar to that occupied by strip clubs and lap dancing clubs. She describes hosting sites as 'emergent zones for adult entertainment' occupied 'mostly by women and mostly in their homes.' Indeed, there are similarities with both strip and lap dancing clubs - they are spaces of sexual commerce that primarily serve the commercial interests of the owners of those spaces (Colossi, 2016; 2017). However, although there are similarities with the spaces occupied by stripping and lap dancing and webcamming, these are superficial. Strip and lap dancing clubs are tethered by location and subject to regulation and the whims of state legislation (Sanders & Hardy, 2014; Hubbard & Colosi, 2013; 2015; Colosi, 2016; 2017) and therefore never achieve smooth capital.

Placing a paywall between the private areas of their sites and the wider internet in effect frees hosting sites from the type of legislation that has prevented other forms of sex work from achieving smooth capital. Although camming is legal, private sites, especially Streamate, enforce a strict code of conduct. They penalise performers who infringe their regulations with suspension and deletion of accounts, thus shedding risks to profit associated with state-level legislation. They have also gone some way towards protecting themselves from the copyright theft that has plagued porn production. Darling (2013) describes camming as a necessary evolutionary progression for those in the porn industry wishing to survive the impacts of piracy. She acknowledges that although capping (Jones, 2015; 2015a; 2016; 2020) – taking the image or the stream of a performer without permission and disseminating it across the internet – still occurs, it is less impactful to the profit margins of camming than intellectual property theft has been to pornography. She attributes this to the interactive and experiential nature of camming not lending itself as easily to the type of duplication that has detrimentally impacted the pornographic industry (Darling, 2013).

Methodology and Positionality

To understand how female performers experience the different spaces created by hosting sites, I interviewed thirty-five women who were currently engaged in camming as a form of sexual commerce for an hour. Because I am overt about my own identity as a researcher with a long history of monetary, sexual exchange, I did not feel that I needed to distance myself from more traditional research methods to create a feeling of collaboration (Wahab, 2003: 633). Indeed, qualitative interviewing is perhaps the most traditional form of data gathering. I conducted interviews via webcam using Skype for several reasons. Time spent away from the working environment by the women I wished to interview may have negatively impacted their earning capacity. I conjectured that this research would be deemed less intrusive if time were not wasted by participants getting to and from an interview venue. I was also hopeful that interviewing via webcam in my home office/living room's slightly bohemian setting would encourage greater openness and intimacy. Oakley (1981: 41) describes the most successful interviews are achieved when 'the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own identity in the relationship', arguing there can be no 'intimacy without reciprocity' (ibid: 47). However, at the outset of this research, I automatically hit a brick wall when I attempted to sample participants from a webcamming forum without initially revealing my sex working identity; the response I got was instantaneous.

We are so tired and overwhelmed with the consistent request by various sources for cam model information here on xxxxxxxxx. If you really want to know what it's like, then please plug in your webcam and get started. If this comes off as harsh, it's because, as I've said, there are way too many wanting to "educate" the masses on what we do. Please do not make any more offers in xxxxxxxxx or contacts its members with your solicitations. If you want to become a camgirl and join our community, then you are most certainly welcomed. Have a nice day.

Private Message Forum Moderator

As the possibility that this research would not get off the ground became apparent, I decided to reveal my identity as a former sex worker to the moderator. I had already decided that I would be open about my status with the women I interviewed but had not considered that I would need to be open with gatekeepers.

Black feminist writer Patricia Hill Collins (1986: 15) considers researchers who belong to the same marginalised population they wish to study more likely to reveal aspects of reality that are not visible to researchers who do not belong to that community. I have sold sex periodically during my life, on the street as a teenager, escorting and domming in my twenties, selling phone sex and webcamming in my thirties. My entry into street-level prostitution in my teens resulted from sexual exploitation by an older and very violent man. Even though my experience of sex work was initially both coercive and abusive, my later experiences of sex work were far more positive. Once I could escape my abuser, I worked for several years as an escort, generating an income that would likely have been denied me within mainstream employment given my criminal record and lack of qualification. I enjoyed the affordances that sex work allows, such as relatively short working hours, flexibility, and high earning potential. Zatz (1997: 291) largely echoes my own experience when he theorises that it is ‘the cultural and legal production of victimised, degraded prostitution that ensures its oppressive characteristics’ rather than the work itself. I resonate with the narrative that sex work is a logical choice for women who often have limited options available to them to support themselves and their families in a world shaped by unequal relations of power (Kempadoo, 2005a; 2005b; 2012; Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998; Doezema, 2000; 2001; 2005).

I revealed to the moderator that although I was an academic, I was also a former sex worker. Indicating my status as a former sex worker paid off, and the moderator allowed me to repost my participant call after sending the following message.

You may get some negativity, but I am sure you can handle that. But then it could turn into something positive because this is the angle that many of us have been wanting for a while. So, give it a shot. Let’s see what happens...’

Private Message Forum Moderator

A few minutes after posting my participant call, I received the first disparaging response questioning my motives. Indeed, the first few posts were extremely discouraging, but I replied openly and honestly when people challenged me. At one point, the moderator stepped in to confirm my status as a former sex worker, which seemed to alter the thread’s tone.

The OP posted earlier today looking for contributors, and my first reaction was Oh Hell! No, not another one. So, I deleted the post and sent her a semi-aggressive message. But then she and I went back and forth, and I was able to verify that she is an actual sex worker and has experience as a webcam model. It’s not every day that we get someone who’s done what we all

do and can articulate it correctly. I'm not saying that you shouldn't challenge her. I just wanted to give you something to think about.

Forum Moderator.

As an academic who had performed on cam and is open about that involvement, I occupy a privileged position. Being honest about my sex working past is an option available to me. However, it may not be possible for other academics who have or still do sell sexual services because of the stigma involved in such openness. I constantly encounter stigma in the job market because of my more marginalised pre-existing identity as a convicted prostitute. Convictions gained as a sexually exploited teenager necessitated my openness about my sex work past to repossess and overcome that past. My marginalisation was an advantage when studying a relatively new form of sex work because it gave me an unusual angle to gain perspective. The women I spoke with repaid my openness with their own. I was granted amazingly rich insights into their experiences of webcamming and have shared part of their narratives here.

Before discussing the findings that performers shared with me, I want to clarify why I decided only to sample and interview cis women; I did this out of deference to trans and male performers and their narratives. Berenstain (2016: 570) describes epistemic exploitation as someone in a privileged position compelling members of marginalised communities to educate them about the nature of the oppression they face. She describes epistemic exploitation as ubiquitous in research, often masquerading as a necessary and even epistemically virtuous form of intellectual engagement. I experienced my narrative being unintentionally silenced by well-meaning academic researchers when they used the time spent interviewing me to educate themselves about the type of insights that sex workers implicitly know. Therefore, they were potentially damaging the field because they were not advancing the existing knowledge of sex workers experiences in ways that may have been beneficial to sex workers. At best, the need to assist academics with getting up to speed slows down the advancement of knowledge and, at worst, causes it to stagnate. I did not want to be in a similar position whereby a trans or male performer would have to spend time educating me on issues familiar to their community but not to me as a heterosexual cis woman. I believe that exploring how camming is experienced by trans folk and men is better suited to other researchers whose positionality enables the field's advancement. Therefore, because I decided to interview only ciswomen, performers are referred to with the feminine pronoun.

Camming and Harmful Practices of Hosting Sites

Hosting sites may have created a smooth space for themselves to maximise their profits, but performers described experiencing the hosting site as striated – regulated and often in harmful ways. Hannah, when sharing her experiences of hosting sites, explained how she viewed their positioning:

... themselves as a business partner, but from the cam girls' side, there is no way to negotiate the contract, and so because there is no contract negotiation involved, what they are actually in effect is a kind of hands-off boss.

Hannah

Hosting sites have effectively divested themselves of any obligation to their workforce, with no labour costs and a self-sustaining workforce with no employment rights and no recourse against the suspension or deletion of accounts. Danielle described her account being suspended and her inability to earn money for three days as harmful. Like most participants I interviewed, Danielle had started camming because of the failure to secure well-remunerated employment despite over fifty per cent of the cohort being educated to degree level and above.

I got a three-day suspension that pissed me off, and it pissed me off more that they won't respond when you email to question it. I got suspended for doing underage/incest play, which is against the rules. I don't do underage play, and I lose a lot of money because I won't do underage play. Someone emailed and said thank you, mommy; they suspended me for an email I received. I tried emailing them numerous times they didn't even respond.

Danielle.

Webcamming represents an evolution in capitalism and pornography in not automatically apparent ways. The hosting sites own the intellectual property rights of the stream created in a performer's chat room, in the same way a porn production company owns a pornographic clip or video. When performers join Streamate,³ they sign a contract that stipulates:

³ https://streamates-models.com/m/terms_and_conditions.html

By submitting Content to any “public area” of Streamate, you grant Streamate and its affiliates the royalty-free, perpetual, irrevocable, non-exclusive right (including any moral rights) and license to use, reproduce, modify, adapt, publish, translate, create derivative works from, distribute, communicate to the public, perform and display the Content (in whole or in part) worldwide and/or to incorporate it in other works in any form, media or technology now known or later developed, for the full term of any rights that may exist in such Content.

A similar condition is part of all hosting sites terms and conditions. Unlike porn, where the commodity produced is the video or clip, webcamming manufactures two commodities. The initial commodity is immaterial and is the interaction between the performer and her audience; the second commodity is synchronous, the stream or the interaction’s recording.

Performers are paid when they perform, but they cease being remunerated once the performance has ended. The hosting site’s ownership of the intellectual property of the stream means that the hosting sites can continue to profit long after the performance has finished. Webcam hosting sites feed the stream generated in performers chatrooms to a network of affiliates and white label porn sites to drive traffic back to performers’ chat rooms. White label porn sites are franchised porn sites to whom a parent company supplies content. In a similar fashion to affiliates, they drive traffic to the hosting sites using promotional media provided by the parent company, such as performers’ avatars and streamlining from the performer’s chatrooms. Having the stream of oneself performing a sex act available across the wider internet can be problematic and a source of harm for some performers. Bella describes the severe impact on her life when a former friend found out she was camming after coming across her image on a porn site.

We had been friends for years, like 6 or 7 years. But he found out about it, and he freaked out. He lost his god damn mind, and he went, and he messaged my relatives. He outed me to a lot of people, turns out most of them didn’t really care, but he flamed my cam room, he blew up my Twitter, he found out all this stuff, and he actually went undercover as a cam customer and had me do a show, he recorded it and put it on the internet. He put me on blast. He took screenshots posted them on social media sites tagging me. I eventually blocked him from everything, but that does not stop

him. He posted screenshots and videos of me everywhere with dildos in my mouth. I got harassed for months, and I couldn't do anything about it.

Bella

Katie described how when she was working on Cam4, she came to realise 'they were recording everything I was doing in the free chat, and they were putting it on another site'. She was unsure whether the site was the responsible party but strongly suspected that this was the case given that 'every girl was on it, so it's got to have something to do with them.' Three weeks after she started camming, Nadia discovered that 'all my shows were recorded. I felt crushed. I was like, "oh my god, I'm never going to have another job again." I felt like the world was ending.' Like Katie, she was uncertain who was responsible for posting the stream: 'there are dedicated websites who post like every single girl's show, and I think that the bots, the guests in MFC rooms are like the ones that record... some girls think it's the webcam sites that do it.' Gemma describes finding streamed content that she created several years ago, 'I find videos of myself lingering on Pornhub. I don't want my face on those sites, but unfortunately, when you're a webcam girl, you sign up to be recorded.' She was also aware that 'when you click on porn sites, there are a lot of pop-ups that come up, and I've noticed the two sites that show up the most are LiveJasmin and Streamate.' Gemma also discussed how she perceived the pop-ups were being generated, 'I don't know if you know much about Streamate, there's a gold show, those get recorded and put on those ads.'

Gold Shows

Figueira (2015: 79) discusses Gold Shows as a public show which 'resembles a peep show, as performers stipulate in advance what they are going to do, and members pay upfront to join in and watch it'. She expands by detailing that 'interactions are limited during the show' and so because of 'the lack of interaction during the show, gold show dynamics are more focused on the performer's body than her personality.' Jones (2020) theorises the public and explicit nature of the gold shows make them more liable to capping by hackers and others who would illicitly distribute their content across the internet. She describes one strategy that some performers employ to limit capping risk as avoiding doing gold shows. The same technique was used and discussed by several women but not necessarily to prevent capping by hackers or private individuals, but because they understood that the hosting sites record the stream generated in the gold shows to disperse to the affiliate sites and generate traffic to send back to the hosting sites.

I have never done a gold show, and I never will cos they record your gold show and sell 'em and then don't give you any money on them. So, thank God, I've never done that cos they didn't outright say that shit.

Marie

Insight into how hosting sites profit not just from performance but also from the ownership of the stream varied considerably across the thirty-five women I interviewed. Most participants (n = 29) mentioned that they were aware of the stream being used across the wider internet, and twenty-five were aware that their stream had been used on other sites. Some performers were aware of hosting sites owning the stream's copyright and what that ownership meant in terms of potential harm. Hannah assumes that 'everything is recorded because it's in the terms and conditions when you sign up.' She discussed webcam hosting sites uploading streams to 'tube sites like Pornhub as a way to drive traffic to the site.' Adele describes a 'bunch of clauses that you sign when you sign on to Streamate, which basically lets them use the content for whatever the fuck they want.' For Adele, the emphasis of researching the contract and familiarising themselves with issues of copyright is the performer's responsibility, 'if you don't know about it, that's your own bad; if you do know about it, you just need to figure out a way to be OK with it.' Marie described how she 'googled my name, and I stopped at like eight search pages, and it just kept going, like I was on all these other sites ...like hundreds, and they all belong to Streamate.'

Performers' response to their stream being used by hosting sites complex marketing process was influenced according to how comfortable they were with their image or stream being widely distributed across the internet. Sharon avoided taking part in gold shows and opted out of her stream being used for promotional purposes in any capacity. She discussed how 'hosting sites record your shows and they are available to affiliates, but they don't make it obvious how to opt-out.' She described how she had 'opted out of white label promotion by emailing Streamate, but that means I don't get displayed on thousands of white labels, so I get a lot less traffic.' Eleven participants mentioned performing in gold shows to varying degrees. Hattie was aware that Streamate 'publish the gold shows, so I don't do gold shows often; I mostly do privates and exclusives.' Even though she took the precaution of avoiding gold shows as much as possible, she had still found five of her videos on other porn sites. She took a pragmatic approach, 'You're on the web masturbating, so you are going to have some type of footprint. It's just about minimising the footprint.' Even though she felt her exposure was minimal, 'I haven't really had to deal with it very much, but the point is I'm aware of it.' Paula has been involved in the porn industry for some years and has a considerable internet

presence as a consequence. She views the use of her stream to generate traffic as somewhat beneficial.

It doesn't really bother me because there was a giant banner ad of me on Pornhub for like a year of me getting banged from behind. In comparison to that, having me in a cam as a pop-up ad on Hamster or something is really not a big deal. It would bother me if I didn't exist anywhere else on the internet, but that is very much not the case. When people are like, I clicked on the ad and got you, I'm like, "cool, you wanna show?"

Paula

Daisy, who broadcasts from Streamate, chose to perform gold shows because it influences her placement on the site, which she describes as being based on 'the quality of your stream, hours on-site and ratings and (means) I normally sit on the 10th, 11th row (but) during that show you are at the top spot, literally first row, first place.' Daisy's experience suggests that placement and earning potential can be improved by performers who knowingly or unwittingly become part of the traffic churn – the continuous use of footage from performers chatrooms to drive traffic back to the hosting site – by taking part in a gold show.

Daisy's willingness to participate in gold shows comes at a price, which is an inability to control where her image is posted, 'I'm all over the place. I would go on sites like XHamster and find them usually with my username. On Pornhub, I will show up as a blonde doing whatever'. Other performers have found ways to monetise the gold shows. Olga discussed how she had 'recorded some of my gold shows and privates.' While performing in gold shows, she would tell customers, 'you can also get videos, and I would record the gold show.' Vanessa has a considerable internet presence as both a porn producer and actor because a video she made went viral. She detailed that 'all of my stuff is watermarked and so even if someone is taking it and posting it somewhere else, my name is still on it, and it's kind of free advertising for me.' Watermarking her image means that to her knowledge, she does not have 'any videos up on any other sites I know of; if I do, it is like one or two little clips.' However, despite performer's adaptivity, the continuing capitalist evolution necessary to ensure that new markets can be explored and exploited is still evolving in ways that negatively impact performers.

Developing Markets – Evolving Harms

Several performers mentioned that they perceived performers whom they considered less heteronormatively attractive or who did not offer heteronormative performances as less likely to be used as promotional material on the affiliate sites. Hannah theorised 'that in order to drive traffic, you need to put up something appealing, whereas if it's a show of me telling a man to put a bag on his head, there is a limit to how much traffic that's going to get.' Bella discussed that not only had she discovered her stream being sold as a video clip on an affiliate site but the content had been filmed while she was in a private show:

A guy came on the other day saying, like "oh my god, I can't believe you are online. I can't believe I am talking to you right now." He's like, "you're a porn star, right?" and I was like ", no, I just do this," and he was like, "I've seen your videos like, I am just a big fan of yours. I've seen your videos." He described one of my shows in pretty good detail, and it was a pretty specific one too, and I was like, fuck, that bothers me. I understand that I'm going to be recorded. I understand that, and I'm OK with it. I knew it was going to happen, but it was in a private show. I don't do shit in free chat. It definitely wasn't a free thing; it was definitely a private show. I started to freak out cos I don't want my image out there if I'm not being paid for it like I'm cool with it being somewhere else as long as I'm getting money. I know it's in the contract that they can do what they want with my image, but I still wish that I could profit off of it. Like they are selling my videos on Slut Load Live for like 3 dollars. I want some of that 3 dollars even if it's only 30%. I understand that they are trying to get traffic through the other sites and using my image and stuff, and that's OK, but it's just the videos that I'm not into. Where is my money, you know?

Bella

Wilkinson (2017: 983) has described cyberspace as enabling a 'diverse array of pornographies', with the consequence that it is 'increasingly difficult to portray the porn industry as a monolithic entity' (ibid: 984). Women's experiences of generating income from the niche performances and physical attributes that 'Big Porn Inc' overlooked testify to this array of different sexualities. However, the theorisation of Miller-Young (2010: 220) that 'hierarchies of value organise the production, distribution, and consumption of pornography media' in such a way that 'some bodies are worth more than others' because these bodies are 'evaluated and

commodified through the lens of race, gender, class, and sexuality' was still deemed relevant by Emma.

Something I find interesting with webcamming is that there is a market for everyone. It's a lot easier online to find a market for like myself as a BBW. But I find that because of that, people are resistant to the idea that it's still the same type of people who are doing well. It's the girls who look closest to mainstream porn stars that are doing well. I find it frustrating that's kind of ignored in a sense. One thing I found interesting is that there is kind of this idea that BBW models should charge less. I find that the guys on this specific site were very much upholding that even though there on that site because that's their fetish. So like you want to see me naked over this little blonde girl, but you expect me to charge less because you, even though this is what you like, still have this idea that it is inherently less valuable.

Emma

It appears that the hosting sites are exploring ways to use performers streams to generate traffic and penetrate niche markets. Danielle and Bella both describe themselves as providing specialised and niche content, and both identity as BBWs. As such, they would likely have struggled to enter mainstream porn in the past. Hosting sites posting clips of their shows means they have been unwittingly and unwillingly incorporated into the porn industry, given the lack of remuneration. In the situation that Danielle described, there was no pretence of promotion or marketing, just exposure that benefits the hosting site but with no benefit to the performer:

I was looking at my profile (to see) how others see it, and all of a sudden, there is this section called my videos. Streamate will record a section of your paid show and then sell it as a clip. I emailed them and said this is bullshit, and I told them; you need to show me where in the agreement it says this, and it does, but I think you could probably fight it legally because that's not how it's described. What pisses me off is that I don't get a cut of what they sell, they sell a video for 4 dollars, but I don't get my 35%.

Danielle.

Bella and Danielle's experiences of Streamate using the stream to create fetish video clips indicates that hosting sites are monetising niche markets. Diversification into niche markets

increases their ability to generate income. Still, performers who make niche content are liable to a greater risk of exposure and stigma while depriving them of revenue.

Beloso's call (2012: 50) to consider 'the metamorphosis of the commodity' provides the opportunity to reflect on the evolution of webcamming. Berg (2016) describes online pornography as more or less functioning as a marketing tool. Rather than porn being a primary source of income for performers, she situates it as allowing workers to gain higher revenue via other forms of sexual commerce because of the social capital associated with shooting porn within the sex working industry. Bodies that have always been assigned the most value in the porn industry, 'young, white, conventionally attractive, cis gendered women who perform in straight scenes' (ibid: 170), are working in porn as a way to advertise themselves in other areas of their sex working lives and because of this trade-off, they are underpaid. Therefore, it is a small wonder that bodies traditionally undervalued by the porn industry and the broader capitalist system fail to receive any payment and lose autonomy over their creative labour - removed from the worker by the hosting site because of its ownership of the stream copyright. Berg's (2016: 172) argument that the symbiotic relationship between porn and satellite industries, such as webcamming, both sustain workers' precarity and allow them to resist it, needs to be reconsidered in light of Bella and Danielle's experiences.

Berg (ibid) discusses how 'the extent that workers view the exposure and brand-building potential porn presents as supplementary (or primary) payment for their film work,' means that the 'porn industry can count on a willing pool of performers (ibid).' Berg (2016: 165) has positioned the satellite industries of porn, such as webcamming, as getting folded into porn work under the auspices of promotion, exposure, and marketing. Because of their ownership of the stream's copyright, the webcam industry can feed many unwitting performers into the porn market, especially in areas with narrower profit margins, where production costs need to be lessened to yield profits. If porn could not protect its profit from the vagaries of piracy, it can be buoyed up by reducing its overheads as much as possible. In Bella and Danielle's case, the hosting sites creating video footage from their stream exposes them to limited overheads - presumably just the costs of distribution - yields profit from a product they may not have been able to exploit previously.

Discussion

When Danielle realised that Streamate was recording her paid shows and selling them as clips, she acted - 'what I ended up doing was I turned my music up just a little bit, so you could

just hear it in the background, so they won't do video clips because they don't have the rights to any of the music.' A successful act of resistance, 'it's been about a year now since I've turned my music up just so much, and they don't do it. I search my screen name, do image searches periodically through google, and have yet to find myself elsewhere.' Performers negotiate the harm that hosting sites do by utilising the stream they (performers) create to generate traffic in several ways, either by opting out or ensuring that they benefit from the stream, using watermarking to drive traffic back to their personal chat room. Alternatively, like Jane, performers acknowledge that their image will be used on other sites and develop acceptance around that reality, 'I know that my image has been posted on various porn sites. Unfortunately, that happens. It's just one of those things that comes with the job.' Like Danielle, Hannah uses the same copyright law that benefits the hosting sites to protect herself. She described how she would 'play music in the background, and because the music is copyrighted, they (hosting sites) can't put it on the tube sites; otherwise, the music industry will come and eat them'.

The lack of understanding by academia of the role of the stream highlights the gulf between academia and sex workers' knowledge of their working environment. Despite the claims made by Bleakley (2014), webcamming is not a sex working utopia; it is a corporate-owned commercial space and should be considered as a place where the primary role is to generate profits for the corporate owners of that space. Jones (2016; 2020) miscasts the hosting sites when she claims that they are failing to protect the performer's images from being disseminated across the wider internet; they are, in fact, complicit in that dissemination. In failing to recognise hosting sites' role in distributing content, Jones repeats a destructive pattern of feminist analysis of sex work that has dominated discourses around sex work since the mid-nineteenth century – the tunnel-visioned focus on the risk presented by customers. It is not my intention to deny that capping occurs or imply that it is not damaging; however, the dissemination of image and its effects on performers in terms of stigma are far more likely to be generated by the hosting sites themselves.

The law is ineffective in protecting performers because no laws are contravened, but the harm they experience is no less damaging. O'Connell Davidson (1998: 17) has described the relationship between those selling sex and third parties that enable and benefit from sexual commerce as taking place within contexts constrained by legal, social, political, and ideological influence. She posits that the penalisation of most sex work restricts the opportunities available to those who wish to engage in sexual commerce and asserts pressure to enter and remain in a third party-controlled environment even if conditions are exploitative. She theorises these conditions are due to sex work being embedded within social relations that produce a series

of variable and interlocking constraints upon action (ibid: 18). The limitation placed upon performers who would perhaps have entered other forms of sex work is that increased criminalisation of virtually all forms of in-person sex work limits their choice concerning the sale of sexual services.

Despite a lack of job security or any benefits related to secure employment, performers discussed hosting sites affording them opportunities. The level of traffic that the hosting sites generate with their affiliates allows women to earn the type of income that can provide a liveable albeit precarious income and finance life-altering personal investments such as travel, migration, and education. Twenty-seven (77%) of the women interviewed explicitly mentioned precarity influencing their decision to cam. Several women mentioned a specific event influencing their decision to engage in camming. Still, most participants who mentioned precarity discussed it in terms of an insidious aspect of their lives, which meant they could not make ends meet despite being employed. Lana shared how she started camming because she could not survive on her wages despite working two service jobs. She 'used to steal food from the grocery store because I could not afford to eat.' She described how 'camming has allowed me to buy a car, get an apartment, pay my bills and pay off my student loans.'

It is time to put aside notions that the law is in a position to challenge how hosting sites treat performers and look to generate shareable knowledge that can help safeguard performers in practical ways. Sex worker-led research can better access spaces within the sex working landscape where the law does not matter. I argue that non-sex working researchers cannot access those spaces, so the irrelevance of the law in those hard-to-reach spaces is yet to be fully appreciated by academics who do not or have not themselves engaged in the forms of sexual commerce that they wish to research. Someone from the webcamming community allowing me to sample participants has resulted in a new perspective on the ineffectiveness of the law in the context of camming. It reveals that the business model employed causes harm in ways that had not yet been considered by academia but would not have been revealed if I had not been given a chance to conduct research. Sex working academics have a unique perspective, are well-placed to access difficult to reach spaces, and are at less risk of damaging or stagnating the field of research.

Conclusion

It would be easy to respond to the original question – does the law matter in sex work - by pointing out that in the context of camming, performers signing away the copyright of the

stream they create when they initially join a hosting site makes the law irrelevant. But such an answer does not address the potential that legally based knowledge has for arming performers when they enter the corporate spaces webcam hosting sites have created in pursuit of profit. Understanding copyright law allowed several women to protect themselves from potential stigma simply by playing music in the background. Although they had signed away the copyright of the stream they were broadcasting, the creators of the music they were playing had signed no such contract. By positioning one powerful corporate entity against another, performers can limit exposure should they wish. A good understanding of the contract that performers sign would help them to protect themselves from the business model employed by the hosting, so it could be argued the law does matter in the context of camming. However, although helpful, these applications of the law cannot distract from the obvious – corporate interests have placed themselves beyond the reach of state-level legislation by creating a smooth space within the technologies of the internet. Therefore, a more accurate answer would be that the law does matter in terms of sex work because proximity to the law will always limit the potential profit of any form of sex work. The relevance of the law within the context of sex work is one of proximity; the closer a form of sex work or a sex worker is to the law, the greater impact on profits. The further from the law a form of sex work is situated, the greater likelihood of corporate involvement and profiteering; in the case of webcamming, although free access areas within sites never reach the nadir of smooth capital, this is achieved beyond the paywalls. Within the hosting site context, performers protect themselves from and adapt to the use of their image for promotional purposes and the possible stigma that would attract using various techniques. Their resourcefulness is an indicator that lack of recourse to the law does not mean they cannot protect themselves from harm.

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