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Navigating and resisting platform affordances: Online sex work as digital labor

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Abstract

The context in which labor occurs shapes work. In online work, the platform is one site of work and therefore influences the experiences of workers. Current research on affordances considers how these platform features create value for the platform, shape workers' rights and safety, and reinforce existing racial hierarchies through algorithms. This project, researching online sex work practices in the UK, adds to this literature on platform work by analyzing how workers themselves experience and view the role of platform affordances in their work. With sex work as gendered and stigmatized labor, it also provides unique insights into the role of platforms in valuing typically feminized work both economically and culturally. Drawing on 19 interviews with workers on the UK-dominant platform AdultWork and platform observations, we show that platform affordances do create, shape, and maintain the valuation of online labor but in dynamic and relational processes with workers. Structural analysis shows how platform affordances may create competition that decreases the value of labor, but individually sex workers revealed strategies to engage with these affordances to resist devaluation and set boundaries in what appears to be a highly competitive market, thus, highlighting the multidirectional, relational agency, and connectivity between platform affordances and workers. By focusing on the experiences of sex workers, the findings contribute to

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discussions on the role of platforms in valuing feminized online labor.

KEYWORDS

feminized labor, gig work, influencer labor, platform affordances, sex work

1 | INTRODUCTION

Over the last 3 decades, many types of care, service, and creation work have started to be mediated by platforms (Mos, 2021, p.320). As such, a new working environment has emerged alongside the traditional spaces of labor, such as the workplace and home: the platform. The design of these digital workspaces constructs new working conditions for online laborers, guided by these platforms' profit-maximizing incentives (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016, p.3763). As such, the historically precious and undervalued labor gendered as 'feminine' is also increasingly taking place online (Ivancheva & Keating, 2020, p.260). Online types of display labor, caring, and service work are still primarily populated by women, simultaneously offering new options for monetization, while platforms continue to underpay (Vyas, 2020, p. 48). Feminized labor taking place in these online industries shows us how platforms and workers negotiate the value and experiences of work.

Sex work, though engaged in by workers of many genders, is one typically seen as a 'feminine' type of labor that has increasingly moved online (Bernstein, 2007; Jones, 2020; Sanders et al., 2018). Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, more women in general, started online sex work as other jobs fell away, and sex workers moved more of their work onto platforms (Brouwers & Herrmann, 2020; Hamilton, Barakat, & Redmiles, 2022; Martinez Dy & Jayawarna, 2020). Furthermore, the pandemic intensified the trend of individual 'side hustles' to manage economic uncertainty (McMillan Cottom, 2020). Sexual services and content are now often aggregated on various 'Adult Platforms'. These platforms are digital, multi-media, interactive spaces that host exchanges between sex workers and customers (Rand, 2019). Like other platforms, they facilitate and shape the interaction between end-users/customers and content creators/service providers (Poell et al., 2021, p.5). Adult platforms take shares of money paid for sexual services (between 10%– and 65%) or charge for advertising (Jones, 2020, p.48; Rand, 2019, p.81). Adult platforms' services and products can include but are not limited to 'indirect' services, such as live webcam shows, pre-recorded videos, photographs, telephone calls, text messages, and options to set up 'direct' in-person meetings.

This article contributes to the literature on platform labor by considering platform affordances through the experiences of workers. First, worker interviews reveal how platform affordances impact working circumstances and how workers themselves navigate and subvert these. Second, as a specifically gendered type of work (Nayar, 2017, p.477), we draw on feminist theories of labor to analyze the role of affordances in the valuation of labor, providing an illuminating case study to understand gendered platform work more broadly. Finally, using theories of platform affordances that present a nuanced and contested form of agency, we also draw attention to the 'multi-directionality of agency and connectivity' within platform sex work (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p.3). Together, we show how affordances are experienced and impact valuation practices in gendered online work.

2 | SITUATING ONLINE SEX WORK AS DIGITAL LABOR

Platform work is organized in a variety of ways. It includes creator, or 'influencer' labor, which focuses on the sale of, or ad revenue generation through, online content (Vallas & Schor, 2020). More often discussed, it also encompasses gig work—platform mediation between service providers and clients (Wood et al., 2019), for example,

platforms that mediate taxi rides, cleaning, or childcare. Therefore, gig work can be in-person, online, freelance and/or first-come-first-served (Howson et al., 2022; Raval & Pal, 2019; Wood et al., 2019).

Sex work organized on platforms is a form of gig work (Rand, 2019). Gig work is characterized by precarity, shortage of labor protections and rights, and the management of jobs through online platforms. Online sex work shares these factors and should be included in mainstream debates on gig work (Hardy & Barbagallo, 2021, p.44; Rand, 2019, p.535). On adult platforms, as on other gig working platforms, workers are seen as independent contractors (Gregory, 2020, p.4; Stegeman, 2021, p.10), in competition with each other for jobs managed by algorithms (Jones, 2016, p.229; Van Doorn, 2017, p.904).

Digital labor scholarship has paid attention to the organizational, representational, and economic role of these algorithms. Algorithms, for instance, can directly dictate the fee paid for a certain job (Edward, 2020, p.515). The importance of algorithms in labor valuation should be approached keeping in mind that algorithms are biased and have often reproduced systems of inequality (e.g., De Stefano, 2018; Noble, 2018). It is then no surprise that platform work “hinges on the gendered and racialized subordination of low-income workers” (Van Doorn, 2017, p.908).

From a gendered angle, gig work is marked by compounded precarity for women. Both adult and other online labor platforms continue the heteropatriarchal tradition of underpaying feminized work (Jarrett, 2015, p.209; Rand, 2019, p.43). Logics of neoliberal feminism, in which workers are seen as self-sufficient entrepreneurs, where success is constructed to be dependent on effort and hustle, not structural factors, permeate both online sex work and creator, or what is also known as ‘influencer’ work (Jones, 2016, p.250; Shade, 2018, p.37).

Gig work is often set apart from creator, or ‘influencer’ work. This labor relies on the audience-building capacities of cultural producers (Vallas & Schor, 2020, p.275). For instance, a fashion blogger on Instagram, or a YouTube vlogger with millions of followers. As a type of platform work, we categorize online sex work as both gig labor, as explained above, and creator work.

Increasingly, online sex work is centered around relationships with ‘fans’ and the sale of online content and interactions similar to influencers’ work (Hamilton et al., 2022, p.2). Therefore, we think it is fruitful to frame this type of sex work as a form of ‘influencer’ work. Creators and online sex workers both engage in ‘relational labor’, building relationships with fans to secure future work (Baym, 2015; Stardust, 2019; van der Nagel, 2021). Such work also hinges on ‘aspirational’ investments of time and skill, which may or may not lead to future financial compensation (Duffy, 2016, p.443). Both groups of workers also rely on a type of constructed authenticity to connect with customers (Bernstein, 2007; Cotter, 2019; Duffy, 2017; Nayar, 2017), while sharing the compensation of their labor with platforms. Influencers generate income by bringing in audiences for platform ads, as well as occasionally through brand sponsorships (Van Dijck et al., 2018, p.148). Creators on direct compensation platforms, such as Twitch, OnlyFans, and Patreon, receive between 50% and 75% of what audiences have spent on them (Bonifacio & Wohn, 2020, p.222). Online sex workers’ income is similarly directly related to the relationship with the customer as they also receive a share of audience spending.

While some women have found tremendous financial success in ‘influencer’ (Glatt, 2022, p. 5) and sex work (Jones, 2020), feminized work is also still devalued in these industries. As both types of labor are at times constructed within another neoliberal frame of ‘doing what you love’, they are not taken seriously as work (Duffy, 2017, p.2; Rand, 2019, p.43). Women’s expression of pleasure in creating (sexual) content as online labor is represented as frivolous, rather than work (Abidin, 2016, p.2; Berg, 2021, p.27). Yet, as we know from extensive studies with sex workers, emotional labor can be a significant element of the work (e.g., Bernstein, 2007; Chapkis, 1997). Furthermore, in the digital world, feminist scholars have drawn attention to the free emotional labor provided by women in the generation of online content; often provided willingly, but benefitting not just the contributor but primarily the platforms’ profit too (Arcy, 2016; Duffy, 2015; Jarrett, 2014). This paper adds to the discussions of the devaluation of the (emotional) labor provided by online workers.

More so than influencers, online sex workers due to repressive and harmful legislation, financial discrimination, and stigma are especially dependent on the platforms they work on (Easterbrook-Smith, 2022, p.12). Furthermore, in the UK, as has happened with other labor platforms, the ‘network effect’ has consolidated the market dominance of

AdultWork. In this context, it has become challenging to make an income from online sex work without a presence on this platform (Rand, 2019). Therefore, it is important to research the role of affordances of dominant platforms in the creation and valuation of labor online.

3 | PLATFORM AFFORDANCES IN DIGITAL LABOR

On all sorts of platforms, and within all forms of online work, affordances promote certain behaviors and expressions, while discouraging and limiting possibilities for undesirable usage (Nicoll, 2019, p.22). Hutchby (2001, p.444) defines affordances as “functional and relational aspects, which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object”. We adopt this useful theoretical framing because it draws attention to the relational aspect of technology and people, not overemphasizing the role of technology or human agency in platform labor.

Scholarship on the platformization of sex work has shown how the agentic action of affordances frames workers' experiences. Studies; for instance, describe how platform communication affordances can work as potential safety measures (Jones, 2020; Sanders et al., 2016), allowing sex workers to screen clients (Campbell et al., 2019, p.1550) and have physical distance from clients when selling completely online services (Henry & Farvid, 2017, p.120). The technological affordance of physical distance from clients might allow for greater pleasure and less risk (Jones, 2016, p.230). Yet, at the same time, research also suggests that affordances can make workers engage in less enjoyable services (Hardy & Barbagallo, 2021; Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). Through a focus on workers' use of affordances on AdultWork, we add to these discussions, highlighting how workers' interests are enacted and restrained.

Affordances such as ranking algorithms and comparison options serve profit maximization by promoting the highest-earning workers while fostering competition between sex workers (e.g., Hardy & Barbagallo, 2021; Jones, 2015, 2020). Like algorithms more generally, studies show how such affordances uphold white supremacy, which (inadvertently) tends to reinforce white heteropatriarchal beauty standards (Glatt, 2022; Jones, 2015). Research has paid attention to how capitalist companies, such as adult platforms, are shaping and benefitting from some sex workers' move online (Stuart, 2022, p.189). They have a vested interest in maximizing their profits, and their technological designs reflect this, not the needs of workers.

Labor and adult platforms tactically design a visible oversupply of workers as a central aspect of their business models, making workers aware of their fungibility and superfluity (Van Doorn, 2017; Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). As such, workers feel pressured to compete with and undercut other laborers on overcrowded platforms (Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018; Anwar & Graham, 2021, 249). This supply of workers is constructed and maintained through neoliberal discourses of entrepreneurialism. For instance, BBC 3's (2014) documentary *The Truth about Webcam Girls* claimed women were earning “hundreds of pounds a day” and British tabloids report women earn £5632 a month selling worn underwear on adult platforms (The Daily Star, April 10, 2021) with customers paying £90 for a pair of worn knickers (The Sun, March 26, 2019). However, this study and previous studies on online sex markets suggest that these claims are not the norm for most online sex workers (Jones, 2020; Sanders et al., 2018). See; for instance, Table 1 for the lower average weekly income for the online sex workers in this study.

TABLE 1 Sample characteristics, aggregated for anonymity.

Age	Average: 37	Max: 61	Min: 19
Sex work experience	Average: 3 years and 9 months	Max: 10 years	Min: 2 months
Weekly income	Average: £455	Max: £1000	Min: £80
Gender	12 women	6 men	1 genderfluid
Type of sex work	7 online only	12 on- and offline	0 offline only
Role of income	8 main sources of income	11 side hustle	

Our concern here is that the neo-classical economic argument in which an increased supply of workers reduces the value of their labor becomes part of the performance of value. As Callon (1998) argues, economic science, or *homo economicus*, becomes part of the performance of markets. Platform affordances, such as categorization and comparison options on adult platforms, add to this performance of value and availability (Stegeman et al., 2023). Affordances like that construct laborers as comparable and therefore quantifiable, something essential for market transactions (Callon, 2007; Çalışkan & Callon, 2010).

The structural analysis of platform affordances shows how the performance of market competition can decrease the value of labor. We explore how the gendered narratives around online sex work and creator work are also tools of capitalist heteropatriarchy, further devaluing feminized online labor. Yet, sex workers have always resisted platform-driven competition and hierarchization through both 'individual hacks' and collective resistance (Hardy & Barbagallo, 2021, p.543–48; Jones, 2020, p.183). Through the interviews with online sex workers, we explore how workers themselves experience platform affordances. These reveal the multidirectional, relational agency, and connectivity between platform affordances and workers, moving beyond binary understandings of agency/non-agency in sex work and how affordances facilitate agency between platforms and workers. This paper adds discussions of the role of worker resistance to platform affordances by drawing on sex workers' experiences of the affordances of AdultWork. At the same time, it is attentive to the role gender plays in structuring work, thus adding to wider discussions on gender and platform labor and the resistance to platform-driven competition and hierarchization through both 'individual hacks' and collective tactics.

4 | METHODOLOGY

The findings of this paper are based on a wider digital ethnographic research project, conducted by the first author between 2015 and 2019. Digital ethnographies incorporate 'traditional' sociological methods, such as qualitative interviewing, while acknowledging the specificities of online environments, such as the multi-situatedness of communication technologies and the many forms of embodied online and offline experiences (Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Pink et al., 2016). Thus, the researcher used multiple methods to understand digital sex markets with a specific focus on AdultWork.

In the early stages of the research, through initial interviews and online observations, it became apparent that AdultWork is a key online space for sex work in the UK. AdultWork hosts a wide range of online sex work practices from so-called 'indirect' online sex work such as camming and the sale of sexual content to facilitating 'direct' sex work through the advertising and arranging of full-service sex work (Sanders et al., 2018, p.15). The platform charges a 30% commission on every online transaction and additionally has an option for workers to pay if they want to be advertised in more visible spots (Rand, 2019, p.48). We discuss AdultWork's affordances by combining observations of the platform interface itself with experiences from UK-based sex workers collected through interviews.

4.1 | Recruitment and reflexivity

From November 2015 to July 2017, the first author conducted in-depth interviews with 19 sex workers based in the UK. Sex workers could participate in the study if they were over 18 years of age, working online and in the UK. Sex workers are often considered a 'hard to reach' community by social researchers (Benoit et al., 2005). Past extractive research has harmed sex work communities, which has made populations rightfully wary of (some) academics. Because of this, a range of sampling and recruitment techniques were used to reach potential interviewees. Snowball sampling through established contacts in UK sex work communities helped recruit four participants. Establishing trust with interviewees, as well as explaining the practical use and sex work activism of the research played an important role in conducting safer interviews. Three sex workers were recruited through advertisements on online forums. The first author directly emailed 150 sex workers on AdultWork to request participation in the project. The researcher was careful to only email individual sex workers once to not waste their time. This resulted in a convenience sample

of 12 sex worker participants. The decision not to participate in this research may reflect the researcher's 'outsider' status to the sex working community as there may have been mistrust and concerns around misrepresentation (see Neville, 2022 for a discussion on insider researcher and participant recruitment).

Other researchers have noted that it is not possible to generate a sampling frame for sex work populations because the size and boundaries of the population are unknown (Cusick et al., 2009; Sanders et al., 2018). Therefore, we cannot claim that the sample is unbiased. Indeed, those who choose to take part in academic research may not be 'typical' of the population due to the desire for many sex workers to keep their work private because of the stigma associated with selling sexual services (Shaver, 2005). Despite these sample limitations, the interviews with the research participants and the analysis of the AdultWork platform itself provide insight into labor experiences in online sex markets in the UK.

The 19 interviews discussed here cover a range of experiences in platform sex work (see Table 1 for a summary of the sample). Some participants engaged only in online sex work, others combined it with direct, in-person sex work or other work too. Most of the interviewees were women although more men were interviewed than anticipated. Women in the study almost exclusively identified as white British with one participant identifying as mixed heritage Chinese/English. Ages ranged from 19 to 61, and 11 of those who were interviewed were over 35. The demographics of the participants may reflect the identity of the researcher as white, British, middle-class, cis-woman aged over 35.

4.2 | Analysis

The interviews were unstructured qualitative interviews. This form allowed the interviewees to shape the course of the interview (Mason, 2002, p.62); yet at the same time it is important to recognise that the positionality of researcher does give control over the structure and pace of the interview, and ultimately how the interviews are presented to the public (Oakley, 2016). The interviews started with an assurance about confidentiality and how the information may be used in academic papers and conferences. It was made clear that the project's focus was on the digitization of sex markets and what this means for workers. The interview started with broad open questions asking the participants to give a general sketch of their lives—their gender identity, age, social networks, background, work history etc. Most often, this progressed to a directed conversation about selling sexual services online, but if not, the researcher would ask them to share their experiences of selling sexual services. The interviews concluded with asking participants to consider their plans for the future in relation to the experiences they had shared in the interview and thanking them for their time with a gift voucher.

In many ways, the approach taken to the qualitative analysis for this project was a methodological 'mash up' (Braun & Clarke, 2020, p. 336) because of the diverse sources being drawn upon. This article focuses on the interviews with sex workers and observations of platform's affordances; however, this is part of a wider research project that included other data. The first author was influenced by Charmaz's grounded theory approach (2014) and followed her suggestion to make memos as well as transcribe, read, and analyze interviews shortly after they took place, as to inform the next interview. Many of the early memos focused on technology and the platform itself. Throughout this process, the first author was able to make connections across the data sets, including observations from sex worker profiles and other platform affordances. In doing this, the researcher gained consent from those interviewed to observe their profiles, challenging the assumption that because profiles are online and public, researchers can observe and analyze them without consent. No other profiles were analyzed.¹ As noted by others, there are limitations to Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory approach, in particular the practice of reaching saturation point. Not only was this not practically possible due to recruitment and sampling confines, the first author took a more reflexive approach to data collection and analysis on the understanding that research does not reach a defined, fixed end point (see Braun & Clarke, 2021 for a discussion of the problems of saturation point in thematic analysis).

The focus of one of the research questions for this project was the digitization of sex work and how this was informing sex workers' labor practices. It was from this initial inquiry that a detailed thematic analysis was applied across all interviews with sex workers. In this sense, there was an inductive element to the analysis that was applied afterward as a focus had already been established. At the same time, the analysis was still influenced by Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory; line by line coding was carried out across the interviews. Codes were then grouped

together to create subthemes, some of which led to themes that are not discussed in this article but appear in the first authors' other work. One of the overarching themes captured the complexity of the relationship workers have with technological affordances of the platform; and how this shapes their daily lived experiences regarding both limitations and opportunities afforded by the platform. In 2021, the first author presented a paper based on the (de)valuation of labor on platforms and the second author was assigned as the discussant. It was following discussions between the authors that this paper developed, and through a creative and active process, we worked with sub themes developed by the first authors' thematic analysis—platform performance of oversupply, platform affordances of comparability, accounts of valuation, and value extraction. Due to our own situated and reflexive position, we brought a gendered analysis to these subthemes, which led to the two themes presented below. Quotes discussed in the next section were all drawn from sub themes that linked to platform affordances both as opportunities and constraining structures.

5 | RESULTS

In what follows, we outline how online sex workers both experience the limitations of and create opportunities with AdultWork affordances. In line with previous research, adult platforms' affordances create price-suppressing comparability and competition (Hardy & Barbagallo, 2021; Velthuis & Van Doorn, 2020). Based on observations of AdultWork and workers' interactions with these affordances, we further illustrate how competition is constructed in platform sex work while highlighting how this reinforces social inequalities. Secondly, we highlight other affordances that have the potential to suppress prices on AdultWork. In both, we illustrate how certain online sex workers can and do flip this dynamic using these affordances to make their work more valuable and enjoyable.

5.1 | Affording work oversupply and comparability

The interface of AdultWork is a tessellation of small square thumbnails that contain images and information on services and prices. When clicked on, these small squares take users to an individual worker's profile. In this way, the thumbnail is a marketing opportunity for workers to present themselves and their services among many other sex workers offering similar services. The architecture of the platform encourages this comparability of workers, creating a sense of an endless supply of sexual content and services, in which workers have to compete for customer attention. As Sarah (sex worker) explains: "With AdultWork, I looked at other girl's profiles to see how to set mine out". Profiles are created in part by selecting options, characteristics, and services from standardized dropdown menus. Online sex workers are not afforded unlimited creativity, but rather design features of the platform categorize sex workers along predetermined markers. There is some room for individuality in photos and textual descriptions, but gender, age, sexual orientation and ethnicity are, as are the service offered, categories determined by Adultwork. In this way, they 'afford' certain types of valuation over others. Yet, sex workers on AdultWork also utilize this process of valuation to their interest. For example, several participants in the study reported lying about their age and/or sexual orientation, using standardized categorization to their advantage, to attract more customers:

I say I am bi-curious. Men seem to like that. I think a lot of girls write that. I think a lot of guys are intrigued by that and want to hear your experiences with women. So I kind of make stuff up. But it's not true. I am straight. (Sarah, sex worker)

...if you go up an age bracket no one is interested. People are just searching for people in their 20s. I've made myself younger. I made myself two years younger but now I've made myself four years younger (Paula, sex worker).

I do here, a very weird niche in that I deliberately put myself down as male, and obviously, I can't change it—I know I can't change it over to trans. (Joe, sex worker)

These quotes illustrate how workers make use of platform affordances to align themselves more closely to social constructions of desirability. Workers are aware of normative ideals and through their self-identification on the platform are able to use these to attract customers even when they do not necessarily actually identify in the ways they list online. Sex workers do not have to be truthful on profiles as also shown by others (Holt, 2021; Jones, 2020, p.169). This also further underpins that researchers' observations of these data should not be interpreted as reflecting demographics without involving workers themselves (Holt et al., 2021). Substantively, this tactical use of categories highlights the dynamism of affordances and the multidirectional relationship between workers and the platform. The technological feature may be static but how it is used by platform workers is reactive, highlighting the relational nature of platform affordances.

As the interviews show, sex workers are aware of their comparability with other workers on the platform and thus find ways to differentiate themselves and their services. Workers on AdultWork set a price for the services they offer within the limits of the market, 'for the price of any particular transaction is always calculated on the basis of other prices' (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010, p.17). Competition, or at least the appearance of it, does play a strong role here, as Rachel, a sex worker offering webcam and escort services, explains:

You have a look, and you see how much other people are charging for their services, and then you work out where you fit in. So, you might look through and go, "Oh, there's this person, a professional dom [dominatrix] and they're charging x...If I price myself as a dom, then people could even be put off if they were just into normal stuff.

Rachel's experience of valuing her services reflects the concern put forward by Hardy and Barbagallo (2021) that the visible oversupply of workers on sex work platforms devalues certain types of sexual labor. Although Rachel knows she can charge more for services that are considered 'kinky', she also does not want to price herself out of the market by charging too much, thus reducing the value of her 'dom' services. She compares herself with other sex workers to value the services she offers and is aware that customers can easily compare her too.

The visible oversupply of workers on adult and other gig platforms makes workers aware of their position in relation to other workers, and value their services in this competitive environment. In this research and elsewhere, it has been found that some sex workers sometimes point toward other sex workers for driving down the economic value (van Doorn & Velthuis, 2020). This can encourage racialized and classed distinctions between sex workers. For instance, Penelope, a webcammer, states:

On AdultWork just any time, depending on the time of day there can be between 300 and 800 service providers. I think that although the non-English, non-native English speaking or Eastern Europeans girls have very cheap prices per minute. They're never so busy.

Penelope outlines how Eastern European workers on the platform might charge less, but still may not make as much money or receive as many customers. Penelope has found that there is an economic value in developing a 'brand' that promotes a certain 'Englishness', presenting herself as the "posh upper market MILF" (in her own words). Simply setting the lowest price, as Penelope observes, is not the only aspect of constructing valuation here. While the comparability of workers through AdultWork's affordances does potentially drive prices down, as Penelope shows, it does not do this for every worker in the same way. The 'top earners' in this study either provided full service, direct sex work, or were young, white, middle class, typically attractive, and committed full time to making an income out of online sex work across multiple platforms. These workers primarily fit, in part through extensive esthetic labor (e.g., Mears, 2014), with normative conceptions of attractiveness and desirability. When they deviate from these standards, this impacts their income, as Rachel who had recently had a baby describes the relation between changes to her body and impacts her income:

From the sex work point of view, I know that I make more money when I look good. For me, looking good is being a size eight and being well-groomed. Whereas now, at the moment, I'm a size 10/12 and I'm not as well-groomed. I'm a bit scruffy. It's not like I'm uncomfortable in my skin, it's just I'm not done up for that world.

Affordances create competition, but also poignantly illustrate how social hierarchies underpin possibilities of valuation.

Similarly, Anita, aged 52, recognizes how a young age may give an advantage in this competitive space, making her—like Penelope—question the solidarity between workers.

I had one young girl wanting to know how the Amazon wish list worked. And then she started copying the style of my photos. What is that film called? Single, white female. You have to be careful with the girls. You have to remember they are there for the money.

Solidarity between online sex workers is obstructed, though never impossible, by platforms like AdultWork that prioritize customers' choice (and money) over workers' stability of income and work. In this study, workers do team up with other women to increase the value of their work, to share what rewards are available, and to guide each other to make the platform affordances work in their favor. For example, Megan describes working with a friend in cam shows because they can "*literally double it. So, we can split it [the payment]*". When talking about other women who do cam work, she states: "*It is not like I see them as competition as there is so much competition. There are so many girls out there anyway, so one more is not going to hurt.*" Thus, she shares contacts and gives advice and recommendations to friends she has met through sex work. Furthermore, platforms have afforded growth in online communities for sex workers that have a global reach (e.g., Jones, 2020). Sex workers access these forums for support and advice.

...the forum sites are really handy as well. I have asked advice before. It has been really helpful - the [community] site and the AW forum (Sarah, sex worker).

Workers have and will continue to make the platforms on which they work and fit their needs the best they can.

5.2 | Making and maintaining the value of gendered labor

In general, women remain at an economic and social disadvantage regarding pay and labor opportunities and are the majority of those working precarious, informal, and 'gig' economy jobs (Phipps, 2020, p.19). Often in this study, online sex work acted as a buffer against poverty, managing economic uncertainty with a precarious income. For instance, Sarah, a single mother, was working as a hairdresser and broke her wrist and quickly needed a replacement income. Anita was financially dependent on her husband and with no formal qualifications wanted a way to make money while still having the time to care for her children. Kristy had not long left school and after numerous low-paid feminized jobs (care, retail, and administration) found online sex work to be more lucrative and glamorous.

These experiences highlight how AdultWork's affordances present an opportunity for accessing (extra) income, even if the labor can be demanding. However, the process is both raced and classed and is not available to all despite appearances. To sign up and work, a person needs a Wi-Fi connection, a smartphone and a laptop/computer, a relatively permanent address, a bank account, and a photo ID (this process is much simpler if a British passport holder). However, if these conditions are met, workers can withdraw money from the platform within days once they have made £100.00. AdultWork itself benefits from a social imagination of online sex work as easy work, the sign-up page for new workers re-stating a level of ease: "*The tools and features that are available for escorts far outweigh those offered by the next best website. When you advertise yourself with us you do not need a personal website*".

Besides highlighting unequal competition, our findings suggest that other affordances have the potential to devalue online sex work too. Affordances on AdultWork that seem less directly related to comparability and competition, shape opportunities to make money too. A notable example is the pricing decisions the platform itself embeds in its design, which decide the economic non-value of certain types of work. In the case of *AdultWork*, there is email interactions between workers and customers. *AdultWork* has determined that email exchanges with a sex worker will not incur a cost to the customer.

Emails are generally considered by workers as a communication tool to arrange sessions and develop a 'connection' with potential paying customers. Customers, however, may experience sexual arousal and enjoyment from those exchanges (Rand, 2022; Robinson & Moskowitz, 2013). As Anita states:

They message me, but I discourage it as a lot of them are getting a jolly just from messages from me. They don't have to pay for that. I am just trying to get them to phone me.

In this case study, the affordances of AdultWork invite sex workers to freely give their labor to attract customers, which in turn provides sexual benefits for customers, which simultaneously creates, maintains, and amplifies the market position of the platform.

The emotional labor employed to manage interactions with customers extends to dealing with unwanted requests and advances. As Megan, a webcam performer describes:

A man sent an email. "I want you to be a 12-year-old friend of my 12-year-old daughter". The whole thing is really detailed as well. This is way too detailed. My friend said instantly report it. You show it to AdultWork.

Reporting these instances to AdultWork appeared to result in customers being banned from the platform with AdultWork being 'very supportive' (Rhona, online sex worker). Generally, sex workers in this study expressed an ability to 'shrug off' unwanted attention and requests in emails and other interactions with customers. Megan asserts, 'How badly can someone insult you if they are paying to insult you', yet at times, managing these unwanted advances from customers was not compensated. Lucy, who had previously worked as an escort, and through webcam and phone, had decided to just provide text sexual services. Part of her reasoning was the emotional toll of dealing with customers.

... if you hear somebody maybe calling you a derogatory name and you just go along with it, it probably robs you more of something. It is such hard work.

Harassment by customers through AdultWork certainly took a toll on some workers. At the same time, the platform does provide these workers with some recourse as they can report accounts. An option not usually available to sex workers because of police violence and the illegality of co-working (Platt et al., 2018). At the same time, these reporting options responsabilize workers for their safety. AdultWork could, but does not, take pre-emptive measures to filter out abusive clients. While workers need to pass extensive checks to work on the platform, clients are allowed anonymity and are welcomed onto the site more easily (Waring, 2021). In this way, the platform devalues the emotional and relational labor of the workers, the labor they must engage with to manage the 'derogatory insults' and their overall well-being.

Workers are still motivated to engage in email dialog because it may lead to financial remuneration. As Kristy, a webcam performer, states,

I don't work much. I work like, I do obsess over, like, checking my emails. So you could say I am working around the clock. But I am in front of the computer, working properly about four hours a day, if that, on webcam.

The contradiction in her perception of what is work shows the devaluation of email exchanges. On one hand, it is an essential part of her daily work, but on the other hand, it is not seen as work because of the lack of immediate financial reward. Yet, Kristy's recognition that she obsesses over emails does suggest the work involved is more than labor easily given. Furthermore, since customers can be sexually aroused from browsing free online content and interacting via email with sex workers, they end up not paying workers for their services (Rand, 2022; Robinson & Moskowitz, 2013).

AdultWork incentivizes this free aspirational labor as more freely available content and hundreds of profiles mean more customers will value the platform as the 'go to place' for all adult services. As Sarah notes,

It's a really, really big platform. It is the biggest and best well-known. If you are looking for that kind of work, phone chat, webcam, escorting. That's the place to go and find it.

On AdultWork sex workers can upload paid-for content but are also encouraged to upload material that can be accessed without pay. For instance, Anita an online sex worker who sold products such as knickers, and services such as texts and telephone calls stated:

I put a lot of pictures up cause the pictures go up for free. If you put your picture up into your gallery, the main gallery, it puts your profile up. You get a lot of guys just going on there to look at the pictures. So that is free advertising. That is why I put a lot of pictures up.

Positioning her pictures in the 'main gallery' means she is not getting paid by customers to view these pictures, but hopes this investment will lead to an income. It is only by putting images and videos in a 'private view' gallery that customers are asked by the platform to pay a price set by the worker.

On account of this, sex workers maintain the value of their images by revealing more "suggestive" (Megan) images in the private gallery and Megan's "profile that is open to everyone" only has three photos that are "girl next door" and "one a bit cheekier". This is a negotiation regarding what elements of their physical appeal they can afford to provide freely, and which aspects of their work, should be compensated. As Sarah states, referring to her webcamming work, "To see me strip they will have to take me into a private room, and pay more". These examples show the relational nature of the platform affordances. On the one hand, the platform allows clients non-payment options before, or even instead of, the options that actually compensate workers. Yet, on the other hand, workers find ways to employ the platform to enforce boundaries against unwanted requests and advances and to create and maintain value in their work according to the limits they set themselves.

6 | NEGOTIATING AFFORDANCES IN GENDERED LABOR

This article has set out to understand the dynamic relationship between sex workers and platforms to elaborate on the gendered processes of valuation in online work. Platforms like AdultWork very clearly shape the ways in which work can be conducted through the design of their affordances. At the same time, workers can and do also make use of affordances in unexpected and subversive ways to promote their interests. As such, we show that agency in platform sex work is not uncomplicatedly unidirectional, rather platforms affordances and their use shape work only in negotiation with the worker.

The findings from this study also highlight how heteropatriarchal neoliberalism is embedded in platform affordances. The performance of meritocratic competition, which in reality is far from equal, results in individualized pursuits to earn an income from a limited pool of customers. Yet at the very same time, the findings reveal the resistance and strategies of workers to navigate the economic performance of oversupply and a saturated market. Workers in this study evaluate what they are willing to provide 'freely' based on their limits, work together with others even

if AdultWork pits them against each other, use their emotional labor in emails to deal with unwanted customers and draw on the affordances of the platform to manage customers, resulting in customers (when needed) being banned from the platform.

As highlighted by this research, platform affordances, such as functions of comparability, pre-determined non-payment for services and the performance of over-supply shape online sex workers' workspace. Limited and enabled by these affordances predominantly women attempt to attract predominantly men as customers to make money. Platform affordances, created within the scaffolding of heteropatriarchy, construct competition amongst women along a variety of structures such as class, nationality, and race. It is the concern of platform sex workers to gain the small portion of the market available to them through their assets, associated with their esthetic and physical abilities. Consistent with the literature, this is not an equal playing field, as gender intersects with age, race, ability and sexuality.

Online sex work, with the increasing popularity of platforms, such as OnlyFans, culturally shift sex work into a space of 'influencer'/content producer (Easterbrook-Smith, 2022), distancing online sex work from direct, in-person sex work through the platforms' governance frameworks (Stegeman, 2021). In this context, media reports of 'easy' and 'excessive' incomes from online, indirect sex work become an attractive option for many. However, this study suggests that the labor is neither easy nor is the value of the labor excessive. Furthermore, the value is given to some types of workers, whereas others are less valued.

The affordances of the platform draw attention to the competition between workers, as observed in this study, resulting in workers engaging in neoliberal strategies of individualized entrepreneurialism to create value for their work. Competition underpins the ideology of heteropatriarchal capitalism and exists within and beyond the economic affordances of the market. The promise of life-changing incomes in the mainstream media provides the environment for an 'I could be doing better' ethic, as well as competition amongst women for the attention of the paying customer (McRobbie, 2015, p.16). Neoliberal (or so-called 'girlboss') feminist narratives also underpin online creator work. At the same time, like previous research (Berg, 2022; Hardy & Barbagallo, 2021), we show that workers find ways to cooperate and be in solidarity. In the highly competitive 'influencer' industry, creators are encouraged to survive in a system stacked against women and minorities through 'side hustles' and individual grind (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 5; Nayar, 2021, p.163). Online content industries such as online sex work and influencing increasingly encourage (often) women to make ends meet through personal branding and production. The individualized logic of AdultWork through the design of its affordances is an example of how platforms perpetuate this system.

7 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Since conducting this research, online sex markets have adapted to the changing social, legal, and economic context. There has been a rise in the popularity of OnlyFans and other content-only platforms; changes in legal frameworks such as the United States government's enactment of FOSTA (Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act) and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act that prohibit advertising the sale of sexual services online and not least the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although it is not new for women to need to find ways to work at home, arguably the COVID-19 pandemic has hastened a cultural shift to increasingly working from home using digital technology (Brouwers & Herrmann, 2020; Hamilton, et al., 2022). In addition to this, seeking another source of income to manage low wages in relation to rising living expenses is increasingly becoming the norm (McMillan Cottom, 2020). The neoliberal economic approach means risk is increasingly transferred onto individuals. For many women, as argued by McMillan Cottom (2020), 'hustling', that is finding ways to make money in the informal economy, is a necessary and smart strategy for managing economic uncertainty, and indeed, the pandemic has further proven this for many. Within this new context, we discuss online sex work as creator and gig labor and

highlight how platform affordances shape working experiences in new ways; yet within this novelty, we also see much older and persistent structures shaping work, such as race, class, and gender.

We set out in this article to complicate the binaries of agency/non-agency in sex work and online work in general arguing; affordances facilitate negotiated agency between platforms and platform workers to both shape and resist working conditions. Within these circumstances, neoliberal heteropatriarchal structures underpin platform structures that seek to undervalue feminized labor, while workers both subvert and adopt neoliberal strategies to create income and solidarities.

This article has added to discussions on platform labor through a case study of AdultWork, helping us to understand how platforms from YouTube to UberEats to OnlyFans shape working experiences in new ways. Going forward, we see the importance of developing methodologies with sex workers to further analyze platform affordances and consider the relational dimensions of technology, building on the expertise of workers in evaluating platform affordances.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The thesis that support the findings will be available in Essex Open Access Research Repository at <http://repository.essex.ac.uk/id/eprint/27353> following an embargo from the date of publication to allow for commercialization of research findings.

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ENDNOTE

¹ In accordance with the ethical standards of the University of Essex and the British Sociological Association, informed consent was granted by all participants. Their identity has remained anonymous and anonymized records of the interviews are stored in a password-protected file accessible only to the researcher. In this article, all participants are referred using pseudonyms.

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