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Behind the webcam

Contested visibility in online sex work in the Netherlands, Romania and the United Kingdom

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INTRODUCTION

Behind the webcam: Contested visibility in online sex work in the Netherlands, Romania and the UK

The webcam on the coffee table is pointed at Nina. At her long blonde hair falling over her shoulders, at her body strategically placed on the couch. Nina works from her living room in the suburban house she, as she proudly tells me, would not have been able to buy and renovate without her income from webcamming. The blinds facing the street are half shut. Nina can look out to check whether anyone is approaching, but her neighbours cannot peek in to see her at work. That takes care of the risk of being seen. To deal with sounds, Nina uses her second laptop to play music. This drowns out any sounds of Nina at work, while preventing audiences from hearing any domestic noises. Neighbours can be loud, the walls are thin, and Nina's teenage son has just come home from school. While she usually streams when he's out at his part-time job she doesn't worry too much about him intruding: like most teenagers, he spends most of his time at home in his bedroom with his headphones on. In a cot next to the couch, out of sight of the webcam, Nina's baby girl is asleep.

Nina has set up her online workspace meticulously. She works on over 10 different sexual webcamming platforms, usually several at a time. Sometimes when she doesn't feel like showing her face, as some platforms require in their terms and conditions, she only uses a couple. On other days, Nina deliberately switches to these platforms. She has been working with a couple of these platforms for over a decade and has reached the top of the BBW¹ category on some of them, bringing in many new and regular clients. She can make good money here. Regardless of which platforms she switches on that day, Nina has to set up a range of hardware and software. You rank higher when your stream quality is good, so Nina plugs in an ethernet cable, starts up streaming software and removes cookies. Nina brings her face into frame, as she has to comply with identity verification regulations before she can fire up some platforms. Sometimes, she has to post a 'thumbnail', a picture taken right there and then, before starting her stream. On other platforms, including her favourite low-effort one, she is not visible to the audience until

1 BBW is a common category on sexual content platforms and stands for Big Beautiful Woman

they pay to enter her 'room'. She sets up bots and tip menus and advertises her streams on Twitter. Only after doing all this is she ready to go live.

Nina's work set-up is meticulous and well thought-out, even though she emphasises its casualness and ease. The webcam is placed just so, both her laptops are connected with multiple cables, and the pillows on the couch are comfy but not too striking or visually distracting. Nina complies with webcam and social media platform rules and shows her face when necessary. At the same time anything connected to Nina's personal life, especially her children, is kept far out of frame.

Nina is not alone in turning to online platforms in an attempt to make money. On platforms like Chaturbate, MyFreeCams, Pornhub or Instagram workers try and make a living online. For Nina and many others, working on these webcam and social media platforms is alluring because it allows them to upload content free from traditional media industry gatekeepers, bosses and schedules (Jones, 2020; Marwick, 2013). Webcamming allows Nina to spend more time with her kids and she loves how in this line of work she is celebrated for her curves. But not all reactions to her online sex work are positive. Like most of the webcam performers I spoke to about their labour experiences, Nina hides her work from almost everyone in her life. Unfortunately, this is not surprising given the pervasive stigmatisation of sex work. She keeps her blinds half-shut and music turned up for a reason. In the small Dutch town where she lives, as in many other places across the world, sex work is not seen as a legitimate form of labour (Nussbaum, 2002; Rubin, 1984).

At the same time, online sex workers cannot shut the world out entirely. Just like other workers in the online attention economy, they need an audience to generate an income. This same audience, however, can also sometimes harass and threaten them. Consequently, Nina and the other performers in my research need to engage in a balancing act, remaining visible enough to secure paying audiences while avoiding surveillance, harassment and stigmatisation.

This balancing act is far from easy: while performers can shape their online presentation to some degree, for example by ensuring that their children's toys stay out of frame, platform workers do not have full control over how they are displayed. They rely on platforms whose main interest is not the well-being of performers but the maximisation of revenue through, for example, algorithmic management and ranking (Stark & Pais, 2020; Velthuis & Van Doorn, 2020). Nina is all too aware of this, as she has to keep adapting her set-up and settings to ever-changing algorithms and regulations.

Nina's careful consideration of how she sets up her physical workspace in her home and her detailed attention to platform settings, regulations, and software illustrate the interplay between workers and their social context and platform structures. In this dissertation, I set out to investigate how webcam performers manage risks and secure rewards within these social and platform structures. Previous research on webcamming has already established that labour performed by webcam performers comes with platformised opportunities for representation, financial remuneration and pleasure, as well as the risk of online harms, precarity and stigmatisation (Jones, 2016, 2020). I identify how platform visibility is central to the distribution of such labour-related risks and opportunities and the ways in which online sex workers navigate these risks and opportunities within their social contexts. Like many other performers in my research, when Nina is visible online to cam she is confronted with the potential for being judged by her direct social environment and of encountering audience members who could inflict harm on her. She also has to deal with rigid platform systems that structure how she is seen. Individually, performers can do little about this. One performer cannot undo the stigmatisation of their work, their national socio-economic circumstances or the influence that webcam platforms have over their earning opportunities and presentation. Individual performers like Nina do, however, make work decisions to minimise social and platformised risks and create positive labour experiences within these structures. Webcam platforms dictate how performers are presented online, but these workers also decide what parts of themselves and their lives they can afford to share with communities and audiences. It is this interplay that takes the foreground in my research. I ask: How do webcam performers in The Netherlands, Romania and the United Kingdom conduct their labour within platform structures? Previous research has thoroughly discussed experiences of webcam performers (e.g., Jones, 2016; Nayar, 2017; Stuart, 2022), the ways in which platforms shape their work (e.g., Hernández, 2019; Jones, 2015; Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018) and has drawn attention to how this labour is articulated in specific locations such as South Korea, the Philippines and Brazil (Caminhas, 2022; Lee, 2021; Mathews, 2017). Angela Jones' seminal book *Camming* identifies globally diverging motivations and options for engaging in webcamming and reveals oppressive and exclusionary platform structures while highlighting performers' experiences of pleasure in their work (2020). In answering my research question I contribute to this existing body of research with a holistic understanding of webcam labour through a novel research design. First of all, this study addresses webcam workers' experiences and perspectives based on 80 qualitative interviews with workers in this industry; secondly, it examines how these experiences are embedded within three different geographic contexts, each with its own social attitudes, economic circumstances, and legislation; and thirdly, it studies 50 popular webcam platforms to understand

how their affordances shape webcam performers' labour and how workers cope with this. At the core of this investigation is a concern about webcam sex work as *work*, the precarity of this labour, and the unequal power relations between performers and platforms. The notion of visibility is central to my investigation of platforms, contexts and performer strategies as it allows me to critically analyse how these different actors interact.

PRECARIOUS LABOUR: GIG, CREATOR AND SEX WORK

On webcam platforms, clients can pay online sex workers for largely erotic interactions and performances. Someone like Nina logs onto a variety of webcam platforms to make money this way. On some of these, referred to as 'premium platforms' (Jokubauskaitė et al., 2023, p. 2), Nina has no or limited interactions with clients unless they pay for private shows in which she shows more of herself. These types of platforms, such as the popular LiveJasmin and Streamate, often do not allow performers to engage in explicit acts outside of these paid shows (Jones, 2020, p. 63). Contrastingly on 'freemium platforms' such as Chaturbate, performers are encouraged to engage in increasingly explicit acts to elicit tips from a share of their audience in public chatrooms (Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018, p. 182). It is becoming increasingly common for platforms to allow combinations of both premium and freemium show types (Jokubauskaitė et al., 2023, p. 5). Performers can also engage in semi-public 'gold shows' to which audiences gain access after tipping a minimum amount, or make money by selling non-live erotic content such as images and videos (Jones, 2016, p. 229; Stuart, 2022, p. 183). No matter what platform though, they all take a cut of what clients spend on performers, usually somewhere between 25% and 65% (Jones, 2020, p. 70). In this sense, adult platforms are no different from other labour platforms (Rand, 2019, p. 48). Webcam performers attempt to generate income online, while the platforms on which they work attempt to extract value in the process.

Given these characteristics, webcamming exists at the intersection of sex work, creator labour and gig work. Like other gig workers, Nina finds clients on platforms and her transactions are mediated by their technologies. Similar to influencers, she creates promotional content for social media and builds relationships with fans. Unlike workers in those other two industries, however, Nina performs sexually explicit acts for fans. To understand how Nina interacts with platforms, promotes herself, creates relationships and does this all within a stigmatized industry, I combine perspectives on gig, creator and sex work drawn from the disciplines of media studies and (labour) sociology. Any one of these accounts highlights some of the specific aspects of webcamming labour, but only together do they paint a complete picture.

Literature focussing on these three areas of labour highlights the various benefits and drawbacks that workers may encounter. Some of these are useful for understanding webcam labour. But especially in combination, they help analyse webcam labour as work that takes place on platforms, relies on audience connections and is heavily stigmatised. Building on the literature discussing gig, creator and sex work I foreground the various types of work that webcam labour requires.

Drawing on media studies perspectives, the unifying feature between gig work, webcamming and creator labour is their mediation through platforms (Vallas & Schor, 2020). Gig work has been most prominently discussed as platform-mediated freelance labour by both media studies and industrial relations scholarship. This type of labour is characterised by the matching of clients and workers by platforms, which take a cut of the money paid by clients for the service provided (De Stefano, 2015). These platforms misclassify workers as ‘independent contractors’, shirk employer responsibilities, and manage workforces through depersonalised algorithms to maximise the revenue they can generate from online workers and minimise their costs (van Doorn, 2017, pp. 902–903). While some gig workers welcome the opportunity to exercise more control over their schedules than they would be able to if working in traditional jobs, gig work also involves low wages, poor labour standards, discrimination, and algorithmic management (Graham et al., 2017; Heeks et al., 2021; Stark & Pais, 2020). The literature on gig work highlights the managerial power that platforms have in shaping what they present as ‘independent’ work. Previous research has already identified that webcam platforms share some of these dynamics (Caminhas, 2022; Jokubauskaitė et al., 2023; Jones, 2020; Rand, 2019; Velthuis & Van Doorn, 2020). Scholarship on gig labour emphasises the structuring power that contemporary platforms, such as webcam platforms, may exert over labour. In this thesis, it will help me to examine the structures framing webcam labour. Studies of gig work often focus on relatively impersonal industries such as ride-hailing or food delivery, where beyond expecting the friendliness customary to service labour, clients are not interested in who actually performs this work. This seems to be quite different from webcam labour in which clients pay for “authentic experiences with ‘real’ people” (Jones, 2020, p. 6).

A second theorisation of webcamming deals with this relational aspect of online work and has its roots in media studies discussions of creator labour. If their audiences grow large enough, creators such as YouTubers and Instagrammers are eventually compensated for their labour, either when platforms share ad revenue with them or when they manage to secure sponsorship deals (Duffy, 2017; Rieder et al., 2023). Since relatively large audiences are required in order to be financially viable, influencers have to engage in intensive interactions which involve “relational labour”

(Baym, 2015, p. 16). Until they reach a large enough audience, creators engage in “aspirational labour” conducted in the hope of securing future rewards that are not often realised (Duffy, 2016). This intensive and often uncompensated labour holds promises of self-representation and community, especially for marginalised creators with limited access to traditional media (Duguay, 2019). Feminist media studies offer a useful perspective on the importance of this as they understand that media representations do not only reflect an existing reality but also construct it (Gill, 2007, p. 12). Creators are not fully in control of these representations as they are faced with platforms that structure their visibility through opaque algorithms and moderation practices, limiting their reach or propelling them to sudden virality (Bishop, 2019; Duffy & Meisner, 2022; Glatt, 2022a). Algorithms and audiences display biases, with successful creators being overwhelmingly white and cisgender, and marginalised creators facing higher levels of harassment (Duffy et al., 2023; Glatt, 2022b). Increasingly, the literature is bridging creator economies and online sex work to showcase their similarities (e.g., Hamilton, Soneji, et al., 2022; Rand & Stegeman, 2023; Ruberg, 2022). As such, perspectives within media studies are revealing the gendered nature of the relational labour engaged in by creators such as webcam performers, and the potential importance of online representation (Baym, 2015; Gill, 2007). Creator studies account for the ways in which platforms and creators might interact in antagonistic ways to secure profitable audiences. In my thesis, this literature helps me to understand how webcam performers strive to find an audience and forge connections with them. But as will become clear, mainstream creators may face harassment, but by and large they are not stigmatised to the same extent as webcam performers. Securing an audience takes on a different dynamic when a member of that audience could, for example, be you or your family.

To understand this interaction with stigma I draw on a third, largely sociological set of theories, which understands webcamming as online *sex work*. Webcamming usually involves livestreaming sexual performances and interactions, and in this sense is a type of sex work (Jones, 2020; Sanders et al., 2018). Sex work is an umbrella term used to describe a type of labour in which workers (who are usually women) sell sexual services, such as dances, blowjobs and pre-recorded jerk-off instructions, to clients (who are usually men) (Leigh, 1997, p. 230). This term thus describes a wide range of work practices, contexts and experiences. Various types of research identify the range of skills and labour necessary for sex work. One component of sex work is, of course, the embodied sexual labour it requires (Cruz, 2013, p. 469). Sex work also often features emotional labour (Bernstein, 2007, p. 50), bodywork (Wolkowitz et al., 2013), and aesthetic labour (Mears, 2014, p. 1333). On top of that sex workers who work independently also engage in large amounts of administrative work to attract clients, schedule appointments and plan performances etc. (Bruckert &

Law, 2013, p. 11). While webcam labour is also embodied, it does not share in the physical interactions of bodywork (Hardy & Barbagallo, 2021, p. 534), however besides this webcam performers engage in many of the same types of labour as other sex workers. These studies aid my research by identifying the types of labour conducted by webcam performers, while I complement these by drawing attention to the influence of platforms in shaping this labour.

However, the most crucial overlap between webcamming and other kinds of sex work is probably the stigmatisation of this line of work. Sex work is stigmatised as transgressing norms around sexual behaviour (Rubin, 1984, p. 153). It is this stigma that gives rise to some of the most prominent risks that sex workers experience in their work, both on and offline (Ham & Gerard, 2014, p. 300). Understandings of the processes, experiences and consequences of stigma as outlined in the literature on sex work (e.g., Koken, 2012; Pheterson, 1993; van Stempvoort & Janssen, 2022), are essential for understanding the labour of webcam workers. Stigma is “a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us who he [the stigmatized individual] meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us” (Goffman, 1986, p. 5). Stigma intersects with how individuals, such as online sex workers, are seen by others and society at large. In the case of sex work, it has meant that sex work is marked as sexual transgression rather than labour. However, gig and creator labour literature also help me to show that webcamming certainly is work. What Nina and most other performers in my research engage in when they meticulously set up their spaces, promote their streams, and interact with clients, is primarily labour.

Webcam labour experiences of precarious income, regulation, competition and status are similar to conditions that exist in other gig, creator, and sex work. To understand webcamming as work that is i. platformised, ii. reliant on audience relations, and iii. stigmatised because of its sexual character, all of these perspectives are necessary. Moving away from these specifics, I argue that these industries and webcamming, as a combination of the three, should also be explicitly understood as labour under contemporary patriarchal capitalism.

MARXIST FEMINISM AND SEX WORK

Precarity and the potential exploitation of labourers are recurring themes in the literature on gig, creator and sex work. To understand how this takes shape in webcam labour, and how performers cope with this, I explicitly draw on – and contribute to – a Marxist-feminist perspective. A Marxist perspective understands that precarity is not inherent to one specific industry, but is, to varying degrees, a feature of all labour-capital relationships (Alberti et al., 2018, p. 449). While academic

discussions of gig labour and sex work have often drawn from Marxist theory, I specifically engage with Marxist-feminist perspectives that recognise sex work as work. This approach identifies problems with labour under patriarchal capitalism in general rather than singling out industries.

While sets of theories on sex work have a long history of incorporating Marxist-feminist approaches, these engagements have focused on the role of sex under patriarchal capitalism, taking sex work as an example (McClanahan & Settell, 2021, p. 494). On the one hand, radical feminists employ Marxist concepts to present sex work as the ultimate oppression of women under patriarchy (e.g., Barry, 1995; MacKinnon, 1989). Because radical feminism has successfully integrated Marxist terminology to construct sex work as violence against women, it is often incorrectly assumed that Marxist feminism in general cannot support sex workers' rights (e.g., Gerassi, 2015, p. 82). Sex-positive feminists, on the other hand, also draw on Marxist perspectives to showcase the value of sex in capitalist societies and how relations of reproductive labour culturally shape the social oppression of women (Rubin, 1975, p. 165). They, however, focus on the potential for pleasure in sex work (Rubin, 1984, p. 156; Vance, 1984, p. 22). Though antithetical to one another, both of these positions overly focus on the role of sex in sex work (Mac & Smith, 2020, p. 11).

The Marxist-feminist understanding that this thesis builds on, exemplified, for instance, in Heather Berg's analysis of porn workers' labour (2021), emphasises the *work* in sex work such as webcamming. In its focus on actual labour processes, value extraction and worker strategies, it shows how a Marxist-feminist perspective can be critical of an industry while supportive of workers' rights within it. Likewise, the analysis which I develop in this thesis is feminist in acknowledging the gendered nature of sex work (Leigh, 1997, p. 230; Rand, 2019, p. 40), the heteronormativity and misogyny underpinning its stigma (Pheterson, 1993; Rubin, 1984), and the male-dominated ownership of platforms in this industry (Stuart, 2016). At the same time, it is Marxist in emphasising the processes of subsumption through which platforms capitalise on webcam labour (Hardy & Barbagallo, 2021, p. 537) and recognising the potential exploitation that platforms enable. Focusing on three different socio-economic contexts, my research seeks to understand how webcam workers cope with these oppressive forces.

The emerging Marxist-feminist understanding which I build on recognises the potential for agentic worker strategies under exploitative labour conditions. It acknowledges that these exploitative conditions exist "because [sex work] is labor under capitalism" not because of "anything unique to sex" (Berg, 2014, p. 694). This does not mean that scholars within this tradition are not critical of sex work.

Marxist sex workers' rights activists sometimes express a desire to abolish sex work, but only subject to much more adequate social provisions or the overthrow of the capitalist system under which all labour is, to a degree, unfree (Smith & Mac, 2020). Marxist feminist perspectives on sex work are and should be critical of exploitation in this industry, but unlike radical feminism, they recognise that exploitation is not unique to sex work; unsurprisingly therefore, the recent Marxist-feminist theorisations that I draw on often take an anti-work perspective and see not just sex work but all work under capitalism as problematic (e.g., Berg, 2021; Colosi, 2010; Hester & Stardust, 2020; Weeks, 2011). In contributing to this work, I hope to offer space both to critique the structures that extract value from webcam performers' labour and to take seriously workers' perspectives when they say they do not feel exploited, or at least not more exploited than in other jobs. Throughout this thesis, I attempt to draw attention to the contradictory forces of worker agency and the structures of patriarchal capitalism.

As such my investigation of webcam labour within platformised and social contexts and workers' labour strategies investigates how "gendered laboring practices are both put to use by, and potentially disruptive of, capitalist and patriarchal social formations" (Weeks, 2011, p. 24). A Marxist-feminist analysis of gendered labour can employ dialectical materialism to recognise that capitalist and patriarchal structures exploit such labour but that sex workers can challenge structures too (Berg, 2021, p. 4). This means that "however much certain actors coerce and exploit workers it is imminently possible, and necessary, for workers to act upon these relations in organising for control over their labour and lives" (Cruz, 2018, p. 69). The webcam platforms that can exploit performers' labour are powerful actors and collective organising is possible yet challenging in a dispersed and diverse industry (Jones, 2020, p. 145). To this end, webcam performers' labour strategies, as discussed in this thesis, could be characterised as "politics for the meantime" which rather than challenging the very structures that create exploitative labour conditions finds ways of existing and pushback within them (Berg, 2021, p. 9).

When it comes to online sex work and sexual content creation, such resistance has been theorised through "cracks", small individual acts that do not dismantle capitalism as a whole (Holloway, 2010). As Angela Jones argues, webcam workers create such cracks by finding pleasure in their work and challenging alienation (2020, 91). Porn workers, by becoming bosses themselves or blurring the lines between labour and personal lives also resist traditional modes of working even though they are unable to exist outside of capitalism (Berg, 2021, p. 7). Sex workers, through creative tactics and adaptations to platforms, can alter the structures within which they work (Hardy & Barbagallo, 2021, p. 543). Marxist feminism, as understood here, thus offers the

tools to simultaneously identify exploitative structures and individual strategies for coping within these structures. My PhD thesis turns a novel lens on such strategies by focusing on workers' engagement with their online visibility.

The research presented here complements existing literature on online sex work which has already raised the important issue of workers' strategies of resistance (Berg, 2021; Hardy & Barbagallo, 2021; Jones, 2019, 2020) and platform structures (Hamilton, Barakat, et al., 2022; Jokubauskaitė et al., 2023; Jones, 2015; Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). I advance these perspectives by combining critical platform analysis and discussions of workers' strategies to showcase both contextually embedded structures of exploitation and workers' ways of dealing with these. My work discusses the specific online and stigmatised nature of webcam work while recognising that as labour in general it is subject to capitalist extraction and geographically embedded. It also acknowledges workers' attempts to work within and against these structures.

WEBCAMMING IN THE NETHERLANDS, ROMANIA AND THE UK

Gig work, creator labour and online sex work provide opportunities for income generation, increased autonomy, self-representation and flexibility. All of this labour, however, is performed within the context of platforms which may both manage and misrepresent workers' labour. Webcam platforms and workers in my research exemplify these simultaneous experiences. I scrutinised 50 popular webcam platforms and interviewed 67 performers and 13 other industry insiders across three countries to examine this dynamic from multiple perspectives. The methodological choices made in this project shape my discussion of the webcamming labour process, a more detailed description of and reflection on these is presented in the methodological chapter.

In this project, webcam labour is shaped by the national contexts of the Netherlands, Romania and the United Kingdom. While platforms, to a degree cross borders with ease, performers are situated in geographies. It is these contexts that Nina attempts to manage by shutting her blinds and turning up her music. Location shapes a performer's economic motivation to start camming (Jones, 2020, p. 91) but, as explored more extensively in Chapter 5, it also informs the actual experience of the work of camming. Unlike previous research on webcamming and digital labour in general, which has overly focused on this work taking place online or within one geographic context, I present a comparative geographically situated analysis of webcam labour while also recognising the international character of platforms.

Neither the Netherlands, Romania nor the UK explicitly legislate online sex work, but each country exhibits a different set of circumstances. Webcamming in the

Netherlands and the UK is primarily undertaken from home but in Romania, as in other countries outside Western Europe and the US, many performers work from studios (Jones, 2020, pp. 70–71). In these physical workspaces, performers have access to equipment and support but managers wield a greater influence over their labour and often take an additional share of their income (Vlase & Preoteasa, 2021, p. 12). Studios may be prevalent and popular in Romania due to the lack of decent-paying jobs in this country following the collapse of its communist regime (Vlase & Preoteasa, 2021, p. 7). While sex work is prevalent in Romania, it is not widely accepted or supported within this largely Orthodox Christian country (Vlase & Grasso, 2021, p. 7). This stands in contrast to the Netherlands where sex work was legalised and made acceptable under certain conditions in 2000, although sex workers also still experience stigma here (van Stempvoort & Janssen, 2022, p. 151). Meanwhile, in the UK there is an increasing push to further criminalise the clients of sex workers and a radical feminist narrative that frames sex work as violence against women is gaining ground (Scoular & Carline, 2014, p. 611). Besides stigmatisation, general economic circumstances also impact webcam labour across contexts. In 2015, 60% of unemployed people in the UK received unemployment benefits, compared to 73% in the Netherlands or only 23% in Romania (World Social Protection Report 2017-19, 2017, p. 161). The management of risks and rewards and the influence that platforms can exercise are impacted by such factors. To avoid treating webcamming as a phenomenon existing solely in an unbound ‘cyberspace’, my research is comparative.

Existing research on camming has used forum data (e.g., Jones, 2016; Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018), interviews with performers in primarily North America, Brazil, and the Philippines (e.g., Caminhas, 2022; Jones, 2020; Mathews, 2017) and platform observations (e.g., Hernández, 2019; Weiss, 2018). The interviews, ethnographies and platform analysis underlying this thesis add novel geographical contexts and a combination of platform and interview data. Taken together, attending to both work agency as well as platform structures and national contexts, I explore the role of digital visibility in the creation, distribution and management of risks and rewards in webcam labour.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

After this introduction, a methodological chapter further explains the methodology and sample that underpin the results presented in this thesis. While the subsequent empirical chapters all feature short descriptions of the specific methods and data they build on, this methodological chapter serves two purposes. It facilitates a necessary, and much more thorough, discussion of why certain methods were chosen and allows for a nuanced reflection on research ethics. While subsequent chapters focus on quite different aspects of the webcamming industry, this project

is a unified whole. This methodology chapter shows how this entire research project came to exist and how it fits together.

The following two chapters deal with the structures that webcam platforms provide for online sex workers' labour beyond previously researched algorithms. Both of these chapters illustrate the considerable control that webcamming platforms have over how workers are presented to audiences. In Chapter 3, I discuss the terms of service documents used by three popular webcamming platforms. As the title of the chapter suggests, these documents both 'represent and regulate' the labour of webcamming. In doing so, they structure what sexual acts are made invisible in webcam streams, and how webcamming itself is to be viewed as something other than work. Through these documents, platforms influence how performers can conduct their work and present themselves. This influence is further discussed in Chapter 4 on 'hypercategorization and hypersexualization'. Chapter 4, looking at the categorisation regimes created by 50 prominent webcamming platforms, shows how certain types of marginalised performers are displayed. This chapter argues that the categorisation options on webcamming platforms present marginalised identities as being desirable and profitable while reducing performers to singular identity characteristics through derogatory language and fetishisation. Through these language and design choices, webcam platforms construct and distribute visibility in haphazard ways. While this is certainly not the only way in which platforms structure performers' labour, these chapters show the discursive power of platforms in representing webcam performers and their labour. These first two chapters illustrate the online context in which performers work, showing the strong structuring power of webcam platforms in shaping performers' visibility and labour. Chapter 5, 'Locating online labour', moves from the digital to the offline social structures that shape webcamming. As much as this project is a whole, the Netherlands, Romania and the United Kingdom are all quite different contexts for webcamming labour. This chapter demonstrates that the experiences of webcam performers, and platform workers in general, need to be understood as being embedded within their national context. Cultural and institutional attitudes on online sex work vary across nations, as do other socio-economic factors. This chapter introduces the national context for the subsequently discussed labour experiences. It brings into view the infrastructural, institutional and cultural contexts provided by the nation-state, even for online-only labour such as webcamming. The chapter discusses the markedly different labour experiences as explained to me by performers in the Netherlands, Romania and the UK. It serves as an early reminder that the dynamics observed throughout the thesis occur in all three countries while having different articulations in different places. It also shows that we fail to see the whole picture if we restrict our focus to either the power of platforms or the agency

of workers in shaping online labour conditions. Online labour, exemplified through webcamming, exists in specific social contexts.

In Chapter 6 the nationally specific engagement of workers with platform structures takes centre stage. This chapter explores the Romanian context to show how workers engage with webcam platforms in unexpected ways. It does this through a critical examination of the role played by some of the most invisible workers in this industry: admins. Drawing on interviews and ethnographic data collected in Romania, this chapter highlights how the seemingly authentic relational labour in webcamming may sometimes be shared amongst workers with varying levels of visibility. This division of work reveals all the invisible labour conducted to secure profitable streams and shows how even when this work is shared, the risk is largest for the visible webcam performer. As a specific case study, this chapter highlights invisible workers, invisible labour and its visible consequences.

The final empirical chapter, 'Strategic invisibility', zooms in on the responses of webcam performers and other online sexual(ity) content creators to their voluntary and involuntary presentation on a range of platforms. Chapter 7 combines findings from 15 particularly visibility-focused interviews with webcam performers conducted during my research with interviews with sexual(ity) creators across Europe and North America conducted by Dr Carolina Are. By combining these two sets of interviews we show that other online creators and workers share complex attitudes and responses to platform structures with webcam performers. This chapter highlights how these creators often feel hypervisible in harmful ways on platforms, and showcases their strategic engagement with invisibility to minimise those harms. In doing so, it explicitly complicates the understanding of platform visibility as positive and shows how creators deal with their online hyperinvisibility within the constraints set by platforms and social contexts.

This thesis moves through the labour process in webcam work by showing how platforms structure this labour, how experiences of this work are embedded within social contexts and how webcam workers themselves shape their mediated presentation. These three factors unevenly shape webcam workers' online visibility and in turn the distribution of labour risks and rewards. In the conclusion, I outline the relevance of visibility as a conceptual lens through which to explore the positive and negative consequences of both webcamming and labour in the wider attention economy. I examine the contemporary experiences of platformised, social and individual decisions about visibility and discuss how being seen matters so much right now.