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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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CHAPTER TWO

Methodology and ethical considerations: What happens behind the webcam

In this thesis I examine the practices of webcam workers as well as the context, be it a physical space or an online platform, in which they work. I researched workers, intermediaries, platforms and companies, all of which mediate and shape the webcamming labour process. Like other platform work, webcamming is dependent on the platform facilitation of a market between workers and clients (Poell et al., 2021, p. 35). While clients shape work through their requests, expectations, and interactions they do not provide the mediation of labour. Therefore, within this three-pronged market, I have focused only on intermediaries and those workers providing the bulk of the labour. My methodology focused on platforms, performers and other intermediaries, combining an analysis of 50 webcam platforms with in-depth interviews with 67 webcam performers and 13 intermediaries. These methods, in various constellations, inform the chapters that follow. Conducting research on online sex work is challenging and political in nature. Sex workers, including some webcam performers, can be hard to reach. Furthermore, they are justifiably wary of research as in the past, it has contributed to further stigmatisation. Findings about sex work are almost automatically situated within a polarised debate based on a false dichotomy in which sex work is seen either as empowering or unconditionally exploitative. In my thesis, I focus on the nuanced and diverse labour experiences of webcam performers on platforms under capitalism. In this chapter, I outline how my methodology overcame challenges, is politically committed to sex workers' rights and how my various methods were used to underpin this research project as a whole. I also delve into the methodological and ethical considerations that could not be discussed in the upcoming chapters.

STUDYING SEX WORK

My research looks at labour, platforms and strategies, while it is undeniably research into a specific type of sex work. The specificity of sex work research, with its ethical and political consequences, shaped several of my methodological choices. Considerations of ethical sex work research underpin the sampling, interviewing, ethnographic observation and analysis discussed in the remainder of this chapter, so these ethics are discussed as the very first methodological step.

To some degree, the overwhelming response from sex work researchers and activists to questions about researching this line of work is: do not do it (Phipps, 2015; Support Ho(s)e, 2021). If you do proceed, it is crucial to consider whether you are “the right person to do this type of research” (Conrad & McKenna, 2022, p. 37). These warnings and questions should be answered when studying any marginalised and over-researched population. Researchers in many other areas could ask themselves who their work is serving, how and why. This is not to say that generating new insights, knowledge or theories are not valid reasons to engage in research. But such considerations deserve attention, in part due to the harm that some previous research has caused by representing sex workers as a passive and traumatised group (Jeffreys, 2010, p. 6; van der Meulen, 2011, p. 371). I have tried to address these concerns by taking both substantive and practical considerations into account.

Substantively, this research was worth doing because of its novel focus on online sex work in Europe. Due to its methodologies, sample, and focus on online workers, this project can be politically and practically useful. While street-based sex workers are over-researched (Conrad & McKenna, 2022, p. 42; Simpson & Smith, 2020, p. 480), at the start of this project little research had been done in conversation *with* online sex workers, with the exception of Angela Jones’ landmark work on webcamming (2020). Other studies of online sex work at this time often used covert observational methods both on webcamming platforms and discussion forums (e.g., Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018; Weiss, 2018). In-depth nationally comparative research with online sex workers in a European context had not yet been undertaken. Admittedly, the project did not necessarily respond to a “demonstrable need” (Phipps, 2015) from the communities involved at the outset. Had needs been identified in consultation with online sex workers beforehand, research results could have been more directly useful. I believe that relatively novel academic research also has the potential to identify new needs, especially when conducted in conversation with impacted communities. Pre-discussed community needs can help to ensure that research is impactful and useful, but it is still possible to have a positive impact by working carefully. Practical needs and outcomes based on preliminary results were identified over the course of the research as I became more deeply embedded in communities. Participants said that they wanted stronger communities for webcam workers, more and more accurate media representation of webcamming, resources for taxation, practical guides to platforms’ terms of service, and payment-related tips and tricks. To this end, I have actively engaged with national and international media, policymakers and platforms to spread accurate representations of this work and these workers’ wishes. I am also producing an accessible report with colleagues and facilitating opportunities for workers to come together. By doing so,

in line with best practices in sex work research, I hope to offer “tangible benefits” (van der Meulen, 2011, p. 378) that “help the research participants in some tangible way” (Bloomquist, n.d.).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical best practices had a significant impact on the actual research process. This project received institutional ethics approval from the Amsterdam Institute of Social Science Research (2021-AISSR-13723). However, as ethics committees primarily serve to protect institutions rather than participants (Huysamen & Sanders, 2021), I integrated more extensive ethical practices from research guides on sex work. Based on such guidelines (e.g., *Beyond the Gaze*, 2016; Bloomquist, n.d.; van der Meulen, 2011) three experienced webcam performers were asked to serve as consultants on the entire project in paid roles. These three workers had decades of experience on different platforms, engaged in various types of sex work and were based in the Netherlands and UK. Unfortunately, although I met and consulted with a sex worker activist in Romania, I was unable to appoint anyone in a consultation role there. This was both due to my limited connections and the absence of a strong sex worker movement in this country. Obviously, this limits how effectively the actual research and its results could approach Romanian experiences. At the same time, I recognise that while this advisory board offers important insights, for instance on how some platforms I was unfamiliar with functioned, sex workers are not a homogenous group (Shaver, 2005, p. 306) and these three workers only offered their own experiences and perspectives. The three advisory members provided guidance by piloting interview guides, providing feedback on outreach materials, discussing results, thinking about practical uses for results, and engaging in general consultation and conversation on the project.

Drawing on both general best practices in sex work research and consultation with workers in advisory roles, it was possible to develop the practical considerations of ethical practices. Special attention was paid to ethics in sex work research precisely because sex work organisations have started to take issue with exploitative research. These special considerations might seem to imply that sex workers are especially vulnerable to research injustices. I think, however, that they primarily show that sex worker communities are acutely aware that how they are represented matters and they have been engaging agentically with these representations (e.g., Holt et al., 2021). Some practical choices made in this project reflect community-guided best practices, which I argue should be applied in research beyond sex work too. They include:

- Information that would identify interviewees was (when possible) not known to me, and if known, never stored (Bloomquist, n.d.).

- Voice recordings, as the most identifiable piece of data collected during interviews, were anonymously transcribed and deleted within two weeks.
- Interview transcripts and contact/demographic information were stored separately, to minimise the risk of harmful data leaks (Conrad & McKenna, 2022, p. 41).
- Consent for interviews, sound recordings and data use was registered on paper, but was also verbally confirmed before and during the interview as a continuous process.
- To boost the representativeness of the sample and ensure that it included people who could not afford to take time away from work, and as a token of appreciation for the knowledge shared, the interviews were remunerated (Bloomquist, n.d.). While not a large sum, participants received 30 euros/pounds or 600 lei for a one-hour interview.
- To improve collaboration in the research process (van der Meulen, 2011, p. 378), I presented results to participants in accessible and flexible multiple online sessions over the summer of 2023. 13 out of the 67 invited performers attended these sessions and provided feedback on the results. Responding in anonymous surveys, they all indicated that they felt that these results were accurate, representative and important.

These decisions concerning the practicality of conducting interviews, data protection and meaningful participation all contributed to an ethical research practice.

PLATFORM ANALYSIS: STUDYING UP

The bulk of my methodological decisions and research time for this thesis focused on interviews and ethnographic observations with webcam performers and other industry workers. However, my analysis also concerns webcam platforms as workspaces. The very first empirical work within this project focused on these platforms. These online workspaces were investigated through a range of methods akin to a type of 'digital ethnography', where platforms are the field site (Murthy, 2008, p. 4).

I refer to my examinations of webcamming platforms as 'platform analysis'. Drawing inspiration from 'technical walkthroughs' (Light et al., 2018, p. 891) and 'interface analysis' (e.g., MacLeod & McArthur, 2019), this platform analysis examined platform design decisions. Platform analysis is a covert method: I did not engage with platforms or tell them that I was researching them (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Murthy, 2008). Therefore I explicitly used this analysis to only study the actual platforms, never the performers on them. I am explicitly stating this choice here because some previous work has covertly observed individual performers on platforms (e.g.,

Bleakley, 2014; Weiss, 2018). Covert methods can limit demands on workers who are often approached with requests for interviews and surveys, but these methods should not, I believe, focus on individual workers' performances as these workers are unable to give their consent. Covert methodologies raise all sorts of ethical issues concerning consent (e.g., Gerrard, 2020). I justify studying platforms covertly as a type of studying 'up'. This builds on the idea that "platform owners hold a significant degree of power in establishing the institutional conditions of influencers' labour within platforms" (Cotter, 2019, p. 901). Because of this power imbalance and with careful considerations, platform structures, as reflected, for example, in how they rank workers, can be studied ethically. In this thesis, the webcam platform elements studied in this way were Terms of Service (ToS) documents, due to the lack of research on impactful adult platform moderation (Blunt et al., 2020) and webcam platform categories, due to their strong constructive role (e.g., Hacking, 1986) and prominence in pornography industries (Saunders, 2020). These platform analyses support findings on the ways in which adult platforms shape worker representations as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. Moreover, they helped me to obtain a broader understanding of webcamming by closely examining a range of platforms, which later helped me to be a better-informed researcher.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Sampling

When selecting platforms I paid little mind to geography. The 50 selected platforms were found using English search terms, so obviously they were limited linguistically. For the interviews, I sampled workers in the Netherlands, Romania and the UK. These countries were selected for academic and substantial reasons, but practical considerations and preferences also informed this decision. Selecting the Netherlands and Romania was a rather straightforward choice. Not only am I located in the Netherlands, little research on camming as a type of sex work has been undertaken in this context. There has been slightly more scrutiny of the camming industry in Romania (Jones, 2020; Vlase & Preoteasa, 2021). However, this case remains relevant due to the prominence of webcamming studios, Romania's role as an industry 'hub', and the sparse existing empirical work with performers in these contexts (Vlase & Preoteasa, 2021, p. 7). To also better understand the dominance of the English language in webcamming (Jones, 2020, p. 76), it felt important to include an English-speaking case. I eventually settled on the UK for the final case study, partly due to its proximity to the Netherlands and also because the most extensive study of camming labour to date primarily concerned North America (Jones, 2020). The UK regulatory landscape is also marked by a push for Nordic model regulation as well as a strong sex worker activist community. As such, the three selected cases present different contexts in terms of attitudes towards and legislation of sex work, the economic

context, and labour markets. They also share many similarities in terms of their broad organisation of life and labour in Europe.

These three similar yet ‘most different’ cases were approached through relational comparison (Ward 2010; Hardy and Gillespie 2020). While I at times highlight national differences, this type of comparison recognises regions’ “territorial and the relational histories and geographies that are behind their production and (re) production” (Ward, 2010, p. 480). Essentially, what this means for my research is that I present these three countries as separate cases, while acknowledging that these three national contexts are related and connected. These three countries are not entirely separate from one another. For example, in this platform-mediated industry, part of the audiences for Romanian performers are located in the Netherlands and the UK. Through their EU membership, webcam labour in the Netherlands and Romania faces similar regulations (or the absence thereof). However, a nationally relational comparative approach to camming highlights the relevance of location. It complements research, which so far has focused primarily on the digital space (e.g., Jones, 2016a; Stuart, 2022; Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018), and given rise to the idea that webcamming is global and deterritorialised. Research into these three European countries extends the scope of online sex work research, which is yet to include the extensive perspectives of performers in the Netherlands and Romania. So far, these performers have featured as single survey or interview participants rather than entire samples (Jones, 2020, pp. 264-65) and most focus has been on the role of the internet in the mediation of in-person work in the UK (e.g., Sanders et al., 2018).

In all three countries, my only parameters for sampling were that participants should be above the age of 18, recently or still engaged in webcam work, and currently living in these countries. However, in reality, sampling was impacted by the ‘hard to reach’ (Shaver, 2005) and online nature of webcam performers. Recruiting participants, as in previous research with performers, required a great deal of work (Jones, 2020). At the same time, once the ball got rolling and trust was established I was also often surprised at how quickly I could suddenly find participants. In the next section, I detail the specifics of the recruitment tactics and samples established in each country. My own position and the specifics of online sex work in the Netherlands, Romania and the UK are all different, and therefore recruitment accounted for these differences.

Recruitment

Work to collect interviews started in the Netherlands in July 2021. I posted recruitment Image 1 on Twitter and started DMing Dutch performer profiles on the same platform.

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WEBCAM PERFORMER 18+ & WONEND IN NEDERLAND?

IK DOE ONDERZOEK
NAAR ONLINE WERK
& WIL GRAAG
VAN JE HOREN

CONTACT: H.M.STEGEMAN@UVA.NL OF @HANNEMARLEEN

Image 1: Recruitment image for the Netherlands posted 20 July, 2021

At the same time, five interviews were immediately established through existing contacts. The recruitment image resulted in two interviewees reaching out and another eight interviewees were found through Twitter DMs. Since I had reached out to many people on Twitter, I went through various phases of being shadowbanned (Cotter, 2021), and my messages often ended up in message requests. Responses dried up after a while, as users were not notified of these message requests. Thankfully, one enthusiastic interviewee persuaded one of the larger Dutch webcamming platforms to post about the project internally. This resulted in the following 19 interviews. Unsurprisingly this meant that a large share of the sample worked on this platform. The 15 performers who had not been recruited through this platform had still often worked on it, at least for a while.

In the spring and summer of 2022, I spent three months in Bucharest to conduct research with Romanian webcam performers. Gatekeepers were essential in this process. I cold-called 25 studios, three of which allowed me to conduct interviews with managers. At industry parties, I met performers, admins and studio managers who would later agree to interviews and help me find participants. Through these various contacts, I established the first 16 interviews in Romania. Notably, only five of these interviews were with experienced performers, the rest were with managers or support staff. The final 12 interviews with performers all came about as a result of my attendance at an industry conference. In total, I conducted interviews with 27 industry insiders in Romania, the breakdown of that sample being as follows:

Table 1: Interviewee industry roles.

| | Interviewee's current role | Experience with roles |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| (former) model | 15 | 17 |
| studio manager | 6 | 8 |
| admin | 3 | 5 |
| other industry member | 3 | 3 |
| total | 27 | 32 |

It's worth noting that workers in the Romanian webcamming industry move around in various roles, so sometimes one individual was interviewed about multiple roles. As is the case for the porn industry, performers can become admins and managers (Berg, 2021, p. 118). Therefore, I also talked to people classified as performers who had been admins and managers in the past, and managers who had been models.

Precisely a year after first starting recruitment in the Netherlands I started recruiting participants in the UK. To lower barriers to entry, I altered my recruitment strategy (Image 2), inspired by the work and help of Vaughn Hamilton and colleagues (2022, p. 5). Now potential participants could immediately access a screening survey and an online scheduling tool (calendly). Existing contacts and sex work organisations shared the call for participants in sex work groups. This resulted in 13 interviews, and five more were set up through snowballing from interviews. Automating the signing up process meant that participants could anonymously ensure that interviews fitted in with their schedule (Bhalerao et al., 2022, p. 547). As Vaughn had warned me beforehand, quite a few people who were not actually online sex workers in the UK tried to sign up to claim the remuneration. Through discrepancies in time zones, obvious use of VPNs or fake addresses and sometimes with a few more questions, more than 100 of these respondents were weeded out. Whenever I rejected an interview on this basis I did so with a friendly message, saying the research was unfortunately at capacity but asking people to reach out if they still wanted to participate, which no one did.

Across the three countries national differences and varying recruitment strategies resulted in samples of workers who worked on different platforms, were involved in activism to varying extents, and who had achieved differing levels of financial success. The demographics outlined in Table 2 give a broad overview of the entire sample of performers. Differing numbers of participants in each country are indicative of challenges in recruitment, but also of the fact that when I was conducting the last set of interviews in the UK, I had reached, however limited as a concept, a level of 'saturation' (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). This situation had also arisen when I had conducted around 25 interviews in the Netherlands, but as I had already scheduled the remaining interviews I kept going. Often, the remaining interviews added more examples but not entirely new findings.

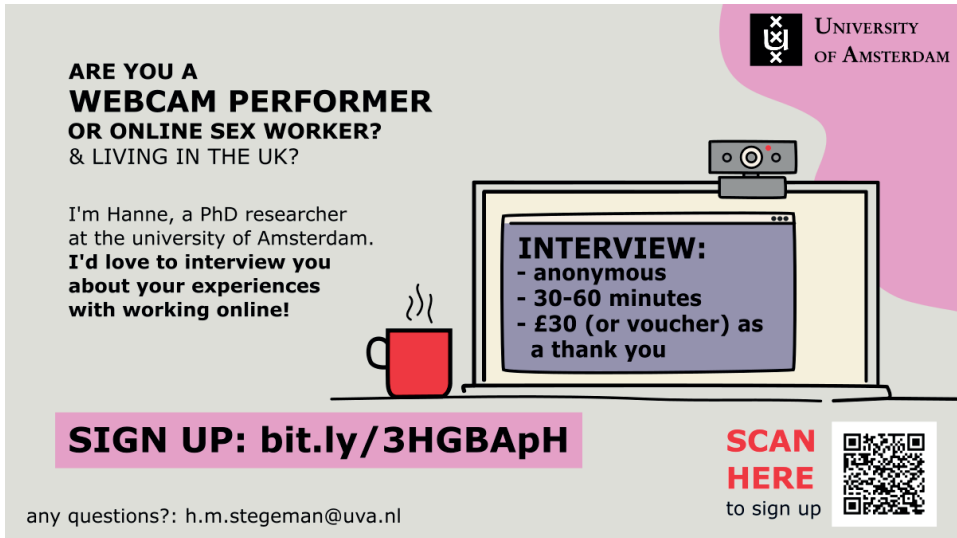


Image 2: Recruitment image for the United Kingdom posted 20 July, 2022

Table 2: Sample performer demographic information

| | Country | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| | The Netherlands | Romania | The United Kingdom |
| Total performers | 34 | 15 | 18 |
| Age (min – max: μ) | 20-61: 35 | 20-40: 31 | 22-42: 30 |
| Gender | 32 Women, 2 Non-binary | 14 Women 1 Man | 16 Women 2 Men |
| Race | 29 white 3 Asian 1 mixed race 1 black | 15 white | 14 white 3 mixed race 1 black |
| Engagement in offline sex work | 11 (32%) | 1 (7%) | 13 (72%) |
| Self-reported monthly income bracket | Min: € 26-50 (1) Max: € 5000+ (1) μ : € 1375 | Min: € 501-1000 (1) Max: € 5000+ (5) μ : € 3375 | Min: € 51-100 (1) Max: € 5000+ (3) μ : € 1830 |
| Average weekly hours in webcamming work | 22 hours per week | 32 hours per week | 19 hours per week |
| Most reported webcamming platforms | Thuis (27) IsLive (15) xCams (7) Streamate (3) Skype (3) | Livejasmin (7) Chaturbate (4) Streamate (4) Skyprivate (4) MyFreeCams (3) | Adultwork (10) MyFreeCams (5) Chaturbate (4) Social Media (4) Cam4 (2) |

This table shows that the samples established in these three countries differ quite a bit, although the majority of the people engaged in webcam work were white European women. This is partly due to my recruitment methodologies. As also discussed in the limitations section below, this seriously limits who my sample can represent. In the Netherlands, most performers work on the platform that shared my call for participants. The Romanian performers are relatively financially successful, potentially because I recruited many of them at an industry event to which they had either been invited or had paid to attend. In the UK sample, performers often also engaged in other types of offline sex work, potentially because the organisations that shared the recruitment image work with a wide variety of sex workers. At the same time, in all of the countries, I also spoke to performers who had been recruited in different ways and often confirmed the overall characteristics of the rest of the sample. Dutch platforms are indeed prominent in the Netherlands, sex workers in the UK often move between different sex industries, and LiveJasmin and studio systems have perpetuated a norm of hard work in Romania which does lead to financial success for many. These samples are skewed, but they also reveal something about the natural skew of the population they were drawn from.

Interview guides

The differing situations in these three countries also meant that the interviews I conducted with the webcam performers and studio workers in Romania, differed as well. The style of interviewing and the interview guides used, however, remained largely the same. The bulk of the data for this project comes from in-depth semi-structured interviews. In-depth interviews help “target the respondents’ perceptions and feelings” (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006, p. 485) and allow for both the interviewee and researcher to respond to each other in a flexible manner (Bryman, 2004, p. 485). To ensure that interviews covered the same topics, these interviews had a semi-structured form through the use of an interview guide (Mason, 2004, p. 1020). This guide helped to shape conversations but was adapted to fit the situation and the information being shared by the interviewee.

This guide was based on the original research question designed for this project, existing research, immersion in sex work communities, and advice from experienced online sex workers. For instance, the risks of capping (recording performers’ content non-consensually) and doxing (sharing information about performers non-consensually) have been well discussed both in the community and existing literature (e.g., Halili & Daly, 2020; Jones, 2015). Therefore, direct questions on these matters were integrated into the guide. I included about 80 questions in total (Appendix A). There was a gradual progression from easier questions to more conceptual and challenging ones. This structure ensured that challenging questions

were only asked once I felt that trust had been established (Galletta, 2013, p. 72). I deliberately included too many questions to have a follow-up question for many issues if they were brought up – from interactions with platform support to the use of sex toys. These questions were never asked in actual interviews. In-between the different interviews, an iterative process took shape. The language I used changed over time and between countries, for instance Dutch performers refer to ‘shows’, while Romanian performers refer to themselves as ‘models’ and webcamming as ‘videochat’, while performers in UK often speak about sex work. The interview guide remained largely the same but contextual differences were incorporated and over time it became easier to establish which questions to skip, and which questions almost always elicited interesting responses (‘Do you ever have bad days when you cam? What do you do on those days?’).

Besides this, I was confronted with a new situation when I started interviewing other workers in Romanian studios. I had not expected to speak to these workers and the literature discussing their role and existence is limited (Vlase & Preoteasa, 2021). Therefore, the interview guides for studio managers and admins were constructed on the spot, based on my growing knowledge of the field and the existing guide for performers. The manager guide focused on the daily ‘operating’ of a studio, how model labour is managed, how the studio generates income, how studios cooperate with platforms and how webcamming fits within Romanian society. In total, this guide was comprised of about 35 questions, yet interviews with managers were often as long as those with performers, ranging from one to two and a half hours. The guide for admins was relatively similar, but instead focused on trainers’ own working circumstances and their relationships with and influence over models.

Interviewing

Interviews with performers took place either in person or online, with some variation across countries. In the Netherlands, I interviewed nine performers in their houses or public spaces and the other 25 over Skype or Zoom. Many contacts with Romanian performers were established just before I was due to leave the country, so I interviewed four models in their houses or cafes, while the remaining 11 interviews were held via Skype, Zoom or WhatsApp. All of the admins were interviewed in person, as were the studio managers and other intermediaries, with one exception. Finally in the UK, all 18 interviews took place online through Skype, Zoom and WhatsApp.

It made sense to conduct part of the interviews with webcam performers online. During the recruitment process, performers often mentioned the ‘ease’ of talking online and preferred this option. Whereas other projects might run the risk of

excluding participants through their 'onlineness' (O'Connor & Madge, 2017, p. 242), webcam performers are de facto already online. In a way, video calling with performers was the closest experience to 'entering the field' in the geographically scattered context of camming (Airoldi, 2018). Decisions and preferences for online interviews were also shaped by the fact that this research took place in 2021 and 2022 within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviews always started off with small talk. When I felt that an interviewee was ready, I would ask if we could 'start officially', and if they agreed I would hand or send them a questionnaire. Besides asking about audio recording in the questionnaire I would also verbally ask their consent to start recording, and after they said 'yes' I would start. The questionnaire usually provided a jump-off point to start talking about camming; many performers, for example, walked me through their calculations of hours' worked or monthly income.

The average length of an interview was about 1.5 hours. I would then start writing fieldnotes immediately and record questionnaire responses in an excel sheet. For online interviews, I'd also make sure that I had sent the remuneration. The field notes consisted of brief descriptions of whatever the performer was wearing, how they were behaving, where they were sitting and whatever else I had noticed. They mainly functioned as mnemonic devices that I could use when re-reading transcripts to conjure up a memory of that specific interview.

ETHNOGRAPHIES

Alongside these interviews, and often in tandem with them, I used a variety of ethnographic methods to further contextualise workers' experiences. Consensual participant observation, while obviously limited in what it senses, might provide insight into what people actually do, rather than what they say they do (Gerard Forsey, 2010, p. 564). This motivated my use of ethnographic methods on multiple levels in this research.

One way of including ethnography was through observation and direct engagement with webcam workers *during* their performances. These observations might be conceptualised as a more traditional, if quite engaged, type of participant observation (Fetterman, 2004, p. 328). Because of the online nature of the work these observations with three Dutch performers sometimes took place in person, sometimes online – but never on webcamming platforms directly. I had established high levels of trust with three performers during our initial interviews and returned to their homes or joined them through Zoom while they were performing. After obtaining their consent, I made audio recordings of my conversations with these

performers while they were working and noted down details of how they interacted with platforms. This followed some elements from ‘user-led walkthroughs’ or ‘media go-alongs’ (e.g., Jørgensen, 2016; Light et al., 2018). A problem that I did not plan well enough for in these observations was that I ended up doing covert observations of clients. The performers knew that I was there, but the clients did not. I could not see them, or their real names since clients tend to use pseudonyms online, nor did I ever take notes on any of their behaviours. Nonetheless, my preoccupation with the safety of performers meant I was rather blind to the care I needed to take with clients. No information about clients is included in my thesis, and writing this methodology section two years later, I can honestly say that I cannot remember anything about them.

A second, more ‘traditional’ element of my fieldwork, namely participant observation in Romania, features in my ethnographic work. For this fieldwork, I entered and embedded myself within this context (Fetterman, 2004, p. 328). The ‘field’ of webcamming is geographically dispersed and primarily online. Yet, with the prevalence of studios and physical events in the Romanian webcamming industry (e.g., Vlase & Preoteasa, 2021), fieldwork is possible here. Practically, this involved three months of living in Romania, visiting studios, webcamming social events and engaging socially with performers, admins, managers and others over extended periods of time.

DATA ANALYSIS

Taken together, the interviews, online and offline observations, and field notes constitute a corpus of more than 2000 typed-out A4 sheets, or about 1 million words. To deal with this wealth of data I primarily turned to thematic analysis.

This is a method of analysis whereby researchers analyse and organise their data by identifying patterns of interest within it (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). It is also relatively methodologically, epistemologically and ontologically flexible (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Through this flexibility, it can fit with the epistemology and ontological assumptions embedded within in-depth interviewing and ethnography. Although individual researchers bring various epistemologies to qualitative interviewing, a certain level of constructionism is often embedded in it (Crotty, 1998, p. 17). This makes sense in this project, which explicitly engages with webcam performers as being the experts on their own lives. Following this, I also adhere to a constructionist ontology which views the social world as the result of constantly changing interactions (Bryman, 2012, p. 33). Here, adhering to performers’ agency in shaping their reality while also acknowledging the constraining social factors and institutional actors, constructionism is maintained ontologically.

This deviation into ontology and epistemology serves to illustrate that these assumptions about reality and the world inform the analysis presented here (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, p. 331). It illustrates, for one, that the approach taken to the analysis here is largely grounded in the experiences described in the data. At the same time, as is also described in the formulation of the interview guide, this study is informed by existing ideas, research, and theories. The analysis as such was not conducted in a 'theoretical vacuum' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81, 2021a, p. 331). Additionally, my political commitments also inevitably inform this process. My work is situated within a sex work activist frame, which sees sex work as work, advocates for the decriminalization of sex work, and highly values sex workers as experts on their own experiences. This might instead also be described as a critical activist epistemology, which engages both as research *for* and *with* sex workers (Nencel, 2017, pp. 72 & 81).

The actual analysis largely followed the six phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87). Data was transcribed while interviews were ongoing, also so that identifiable sound recordings could be deleted as soon as possible. The generation of initial codes can be understood as a form of emergent/open coding (Blair, 2015, p. 16). Nearly every word of the respondents' answers was coded in some way during this process. I developed 248 codes, maintaining a commitment to not overwhelm the analysis with too many codes. As this process took several months I would re-read the existing codes and merge codes when they identified the same thing (e.g., the codes 'support from platform' and 'lack of support from platform' were merged because they both simply described the level of support that performers received from platforms). During this process, I took notes nearly every day to describe my thinking about codes. Once the entire process was complete, the entire set of codes was reviewed. I grouped codes into 48 code categories, with two codes remaining without a category. I then reviewed these code categories by first checking if any code was in the wrong category. Then I checked the coherence of every code category. This resulted in 49 code categories (Appendix B), with only the code 'history of camming' remaining outside any category. Here I looked at the overlap of categories and which code belonged where, as well as by looking at some (not all, but a relatively random sample) of the data extracts associated with each category. Finally, these categories were grouped into nine relatively descriptive folders: benefits, income, labour, platforms, private life, risks, society, third parties, work strategies + two categories and one single code that did not fit. These had to be relatively abstract and descriptive to capture the diversity they discuss. Their function is to make it easier to retrieve relevant data rather than to already describe the interpretation of themes. The 49 categories describe more interesting themes.

LIMITATIONS

Obviously, there were many limitations to this research project. Some of these limitations, such as the overrepresentation of a specific Dutch platform in the sample and the lack of care taken with regard to client data from the outset have already been discussed above. Here I describe some other prominent issues.

The research questions guiding this project could have been established in line with community needs more clearly from the very beginning. As this project was devised to fit grant standards it was not necessarily clear from the very outset what it would actually do for online sex workers. At the same time, the grant awarded for this project meant that money was available for extensive research and for paying participants and advisors. The ways in which the research could serve the community emerged in conversation with the advisory committee and with participants in results presentations. Not all research has to be developed in line with community needs, and I believe that research can sometimes generate unexpected findings that lead to impactful outcomes. However, as I was especially motivated to conduct research that was useful to the communities I was working with, this goal would have been furthered by giving these communities the opportunity to inform the focus of the research.

The sampling of this project has a variety of other limitations in addition to the sample skews discussed in the recruitment section. There is little racial diversity among the participants, who are overwhelmingly white. In Romania, only one Roma participant was interviewed, in the Netherlands 29 out of the 34 performers were white, and in UK this was the case for 14 out of 18 performers. This may be related to my identity as a white middle-class Dutch woman since I can imagine that performers who felt I would not understand their experiences could be less likely to respond to the call for participants. As such, the results presented in this thesis comment on a specific set of experiences. I believe my findings are indicative of trends in relation to visibility and the platformisation of work, but the specific experiences based on the interviews in the following chapters should not be generalised beyond the experiences of white women working in the Netherlands, Romania and the UK. These interviews do identify, as I argue, trends in how platform labour is conducted, and it very well possible that diverse performers across the world have similar experiences. However, to do full justice to those experiences, further research with those performers could help identify if this is the case or where divergence occurs. Chapter 5 details the substantial differences in labour experiences already found between the three relatively similar European countries I examine here. Based on a recognition of these differences it would be shortsighted to think that experiences from these three countries could say something about the whole of Europe, let alone the rest of the world.

My perceptible identity influenced the representativeness of the project by shaping how interviewees related to me. A different researcher would probably have had different conversations with performers and managers than I did, not only because my opinion and experiences shape how I relate to interviewees, but also because the interviewees had opinions on me. This was not always necessarily a limitation. My being a young woman often meant that performers took me under their wing and explained things to me clearly. Whenever I interviewed men in positions of power they seemed to think that I did not know what I was talking about and they gave a lot of information away freely to brag. Not being Romanian also meant that participants in that country felt less judged and more able to talk. It also meant, however, that I had a lesser understanding of the context of their work and was unable to interview people in their mother tongue. In Dutch, on the other hand, I think that my accent, which is associated with middle-classness and my link to academic institutions made me less relatable to some participants. Sometimes they commented on this, saying that they did not expect someone like me to be doing this kind of research. Finally, various aspects of my identity that are not outwardly perceptible impact my position in the research process. When I perceived it to be relevant, safe and positive, I discussed details about myself with interviewees. This increased trust and encouraged participants to share their perspectives. Yet, as this thesis primarily deals with visibility and its risks I am acutely aware these are not all details I want to put into writing here. Unlike my participants, I am not protected through pseudonymity. A researcher's identity certainly impacts methods, results and their interpretations but there might be limits to how this should or can be disclosed (Oswald, 2024). By not discussing these things here I limit some of the interpretations of my work. I also hope to demonstrate that we cannot know everything about researchers and maybe sometimes we should allow that to be the case. Visibility, as argued later on, comes with opportunities for representation but also with risks.

COVID-19 also shaped my research process. It spurred me on to write articles about platforms without participant involvement, even though this is not something I necessarily planned on doing. I was anxious that the pandemic would prevent me from connecting with performers and out of this anxiety I have produced research that I wish I had reflected on more with participants. Additionally, it delayed my visit to Romania and I wonder how different my experience there might have been if I had had more time to settle, attend more industry events and develop more contacts. It also meant that I sometimes felt an uneasiness around participants who were not taking the pandemic seriously. This surely impacted those specific interviews.

Some further issues with this project concern inconsistent data collection in pre-interview surveys. Questions about income, the average hours people work and the platforms they use were interpreted differently by participants. For income data, to maintain comfortability levels, I did not ask for respondents' exact income, but rather let them specify a range. Some people filled this out as post or pre-taxation, some filled out their best month, others their worst. This makes it hard to systematically say anything about the money workers are actually making in this industry. Connected to this, for hours worked on average, some people filled out how many hours they were actually *online* while others included prep time. In interviews, this often led to interesting conversations about what performers saw as their work and how they thought, for instance, about their aesthetic labour. However, it means that this data can be hard to compare across participants.