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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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### Publication date

2024

[Link to publication](#)

### Citation for published version (APA):

Stegeman, H. M. (2024). *Behind the webcam: Contested visibility in online sex work in the Netherlands, Romania and the United Kingdom*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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## CONCLUSION

Judging from the recent spike in tabloid reporting on online sex work, this job is sexy, adventurous, slightly scandalous, and highly lucrative. There has been a spate of articles featuring women who have quit their 'regular' jobs as nurses<sup>8</sup>, or waitresses<sup>9</sup> or opted out of office work<sup>10</sup> to make extreme amounts of money on OnlyFans. Such popular media reports present online sex work as an alternative to the hard work and low pay facing so many workers. Friends, students, and online posts echo this narrative when they half-jokingly say 'I'll just quit my job and start an OnlyFans'. Online sex work – or at least the idealised version of it – offers a hypothetical escape from the drudgery of contemporary work. Expressing a similar rejection of traditional careers, one of the most popular jobs among young people nowadays is that of 'influencer' (Shabahang et al., 2022). As a successful influencer or online sex worker, fans either want you or want to be you. Platforms enable you to capitalize on these desires – presuming that you work hard, you're lucky, and the right people see your work. Previous research on such industries has already challenged the image of meritocracy presented in these narratives. Both webcam and creator platforms reproduce dominant social hierarchies, and marginalised workers are seen less often and also less favourably (Caminhas, 2022; Glatt, 2023; Jones, 2015). Presenting yourself online to make money, it turns out, is hard work too.

My research has further complicated this glamourised image of online sex work. It confirms that becoming visible as a webcam performer is hard work but also further complicating the notion of visibility. Based on a unique empirically grounded approach, which covered three different countries, encompassed the experiences of online sex workers, scrutinised the platforms they work on, and examined the socio-economic contexts of their lives, I have demonstrated that webcam work is fraught with contradictions and complexities. My analysis of both how webcam platforms present workers and how performers experience and deal with this within their social contexts, shows that capitalising on online visibility is not straightforward. While my research focused specifically on webcam performers, the discussion of visibility presented in my research may contribute to the understanding of other gig, creator and sex work economies too.

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8 <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/uk-world-news/couple-quit-nhs-jobs-start-29993074>

9 <https://www.examinerlive.co.uk/news/real-life/i-quit-waitressing-job-onlyfans-26512619>

10 <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/22021635/quit-toxic-office-job-onlyfans-rock-bottom/>

In these precarious industries, workers such as webcam performers can work in relatively flexible and autonomous ways, sometimes making decent money in the process. On the flip side, the platforms they work on maintain considerable control over the labour process, while social norms and contexts further structure the stigmatised sex work industry. To make sense of these conflicting processes I foreground their relation to the notion of visibility. Webcam performers within the contexts of the Netherlands, Romania and the United Kingdom managed their labour by engaging with platforms' visibility structures and within these attempt to secure a level of visibility that generates income and limits harm.

On the one hand, webcam performers need visibility to reap any of the potential rewards of their work. Previous accounts have already pointed out the importance of visibility on webcam platforms for representation and community formation (e.g., Jones, 2020; Mia, 2020). It is impossible to generate any income on a webcam platform without some level of visibility. After all, performers cannot make money if clients cannot see them. Visibility and subsequent income are structured by platforms, for example through their discriminatory ranking algorithms (e.g., Caminhas, 2022; Jones, 2015). Platform visibility is vital to financial success, whether it is achieved through these algorithms, self-promotion, avoiding bans, receiving help from others and/or attempts to make use of webcam platform categories.

On the other hand, this thesis has also demonstrated that visibility entails more than just emancipation and revenue. Online sex work comes with its own set of problems, rarely featured in the glamorous success stories featured in the tabloids. Visibility is necessary for success, but it also creates risks. While any job has its downsides, the stigmatisation of sex work has meant that being visible as a sex worker entails all sorts of negative consequences. It has been shown that once it becomes known that a person is engaging in sex work, they face discrimination from financial services, platforms, health services, law enforcement, and their direct social environments (e.g., Beebe, 2022; McCausland et al., 2022; Stardust et al., 2021; Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). Sex workers working in offline contexts, such as strip clubs or brothels, deal with some of these harms by limiting their visibility (e.g., Ham & Gerard, 2014). Performers on webcam platforms, however, are dependent on their online visibility in order to make money. This experience was aptly expressed by UK-based performer Lucy in Chapter 7: "At least when I'm escorting it's private, whereas as soon as you're online, people can see you". Being a webcam performer means you need to be visible online, and being seen by others as a webcam performer means facing stigma. As stigma is a social process, the negative impacts of visibility also depend in part on socio-economic contexts, as my research has shown.

The distribution of visibility and its potentially harmful or advantageous impacts is certainly not just in performers' hands. When camming first emerged as an individualised voyeuristic project in the late nineties it enabled autonomous self-representation (Hernández, 2019, p. 3). The very first camstars shared real-time snapshots of their authentic domestic lives on their own websites, which included, but were not limited to, nudity and sex (Jones, 2020, p. 64; Senft, 2008, p. 16). Theorisations of contemporary influencers echo such understandings of these camstars as types of proto-influencers using 'microcelebrity' as a route towards more autonomous representation (Chan & Gray, 2020; Crystal & Rob, 2018; Duguay, 2019; Senft, 2008, p. 5). Of course, what has changed since the heyday of the camstars is that performers these days do not work on websites they have coded themselves. Instead, their representation is bound by the discourses, terms and conditions employed by webcam platforms.

The first chapter of this thesis illustrates this well, as in it I have demonstrated how webcam platforms' rules and regulations explicitly prohibit the display of sexual acts that are too transgressive of heteronormative standards. Through their terms of service, these platforms quite literally dictate what may and may not be made visible. What is more, these documents also construct their own presentation of webcam performers in which they should not be considered as workers and certainly not as sex workers. This misclassification of webcam performers denies their realities, reduces their opportunities to represent themselves in authentic or profitable ways, and ultimately limits their potential income.

Platforms also control the visibility and desirability of webcam performers through their categorisation regimes, which can render marginalised performers more visible, but in fetishistic and stereotyping ways, as I have shown together with my co-authors in Chapter 4. Performers are constructed as being potentially desirable and more visible through the categories webcam platforms create for them, but these very categories also reduce performers to stereotypes. For example, the transphobic and orientalist language used by platforms makes trans and Black performers more visible but in a manner that may be uncomfortable for them and could well be furthering their marginalisation. The language used by webcam platforms to construct the people who work on them is largely beyond the control of these workers.

Platforms are not the only parties structuring performers' visibility. Chapters 5 and 6 have revealed that third parties and the social contexts in which they are embedded can also have a considerable impact on performers' visibility. Chapter 5 has outlined the diverging labour processes I encountered performers engaging

in across the Netherlands, Romania and the UK. The nature of webcam labour varies across these countries, encompassing differences in workspaces, the roles played by intermediaries, and performers' efforts to become visible to audiences in different locations and with different expectations. All this occurs within the context of varying legal and socio-economic regimes. This impacts visibility as workers across these contexts are faced with different reasons for and consequences of being seen online. From the influence of agencies in the UK, to the role of studios in Romania and the prevalence of Dutch audiences in the Netherlands, workers face different constraints and opportunities for control over their visibility. For example, workers in Romania work more, more visibly, and make more money than performers in the Netherlands, who have opportunities to prioritise their anonymity instead.

Focusing on the role of admins in Romanian webcam studios, the control that others may exert on how performers present themselves was made particularly clear in Chapter 6. Admins, who in their invisible roles are not subject to the negative consequences of stigmatisation, make decisions that impact what performers are seen to be doing. Admins can instruct performers on aspects of their presentation, telling them how to act, which way to sit, what niches to work in, and even what colour to dye their hair. I emphasised the fact that webcam performers receive assistance from admins, who share the burden of relational labour and audience harassment. At the same time, I highlighted that admins communicating under the guise of models in 'distributed affective labour' also have far-reaching control over performers' work.

Finally, in Chapter 7, my co-authors and I took an in-depth look at the fraught relationship that performers and other sexual(ity) content creators have with platformised visibility. Returning to the context of platforms, this chapter shows that performers and creators experience involuntary hypervisibility to surveillance, moderation and harmful audiences. At the same time, we emphasised that these sexual(ity) creators voluntarily engage with strategic invisibility in an attempt to mitigate some of the harms resulting from their visibility. This chapter illustrates that performers have limited control over their visibility and can be exposed in ways that harm them, but that they also find ways of coping within these structures. It underscores that visibility is not always a positive experience for creators such as webcam performers.

Thinking about the ways in which visibility shapes experiences of labour risk and reward challenges techno-optimistic ideas about online opportunities for self-representation. My research has shown that visibility is something that both platforms and performers engage with as an aspect of their labour, income

generation and risk-management strategies. The terms of service used by platforms, most likely tailored to satisfy payment providers, and the ways in which performers present themselves fit strategically with social norms and audience expectations. Visibility, as a feature of labour that both performers and platforms deal with within specific social contexts, highlights under-researched areas that are shaping success in platform labour, namely: i. The role of platform structures beyond algorithms; ii. The localised articulation of labour risks and rewards, in this case at national level; iii. The social harm of visibility as a necessary condition for success; and iv. Workers' strategic limiting of visibility.

From a Marxist feminist perspective, many of the structures the performers in my research encounter are highly problematic. Building on feminist understandings of gender norms, the systems that create and stigmatise performers' visibility are patriarchal heteronormative standards. The categorisation systems and terms of service employed by platforms uphold a narrow vision of acceptable sexuality, which aligns closely with what Gayle Rubin calls the 'charmed circle', which describes the sexual behaviour that is socially perceived as most acceptable (1984). Through their categorisation regimes in particular, these platforms uphold racist and transphobic structures, showing how the intersection of identities reshapes and deepens these experiences of heteronormativity (Crenshaw, 1990). Moreover, the social contexts in which webcam performers experience stigmatisation and its negative consequences reflect these same normative conceptions of gender and sexuality.

From a Marxist perspective, it is clear that platforms can extract value from workers through the subsumption of what, in its early heyday, was a more independent process (Hardy & Barbagallo, 2021, p. 536). Webcam platforms organise visibility to maximise their profits, not taking into account the negative effects that performers experience when they are either ignored or too visible. A similar dynamic can be observed in relation to the studio managers and admins who control how some Romanian performers become visible, with little consideration of the possible social ramifications of their choices. As has been noted for other online sex work (Easterbrook-Smith, 2022), the gendered systems of stigmatisation and platform capitalist models of value extraction compound the precarity experienced in webcam labour. Not sex work itself but its stigmatisation and exploitation under patriarchal capitalist structures create the difficulties that webcam performers experience with their visibility.

However, my research has also made clear that webcam performers are not passive victims within these systems. As previously described for a variety of online sex

workers, porn creators and webcam performers, workers find ‘hacks’ and ‘cracks’ in attempts to improve their circumstances (Berg, 2021; Hardy & Barbagallo, 2021; Jones, 2020). My research has confirmed this, but also adds a unique insight into how performers find strategies to cope by specifically engaging with and managing visibility. Webcam performers in my research tried to restrain, reshape or increase their online and social visibility for safety, financial or representational reasons. Many webcam performers outlined how they tactically make use of a very limited type of visibility to make money. Eline, a performer from the Netherlands, exemplified this tactic by not being on platforms often: “I try not to be online too much, so that when they [clients] log on and I’m on there, they do feel like ‘oh she won’t be here the whole day, I have to watch now! Now!’” In a saturated market, performers can attempt to create an artificial scarcity of their availability, their bodies and information. Performers certainly do not have full control over how platforms structure their visibility online nor how their social environments might react to it, but this does not mean that they do not engage with visibility in ways that can be productive for them.

Thus, in this thesis, I present an understanding of visibility as central to webcam labour processes under contemporary capitalism. This contribution to current Marxist-feminist work shows that, like many other labour conditions, visibility is largely controlled by commercial companies such as platforms and structured by social hierarchies. Despite this, workers find ways to navigate these systems. Examining visibility reveals a site of unequal struggle within capitalist and misogynist social structures.

## **VISIBILITY AS A LENS ON CONTEMPORARY LABOUR**

Webcam labour has its particularities, most notably through its high level of stigmatisation. My theorisation of visibility as a necessary but potentially harmful condition of platform labour is based on my research on this specific industry. As shown throughout this thesis, webcam labour also shares similarities with work in many other industries. Below I outline how the visibility created by platforms and engaged in by workers within specific contexts, with its potential for risks and rewards, could also expand our understanding of other types of labour in today’s attention economy.

### ***Online sex work***

Visibility as a lens illuminates the ways in which the specificity of online sex work can be understood as well as offering a novel insight into the distribution of risks and rewards in sex work in general. This thesis comments on webcam work as a particularly salient example of platform and creator labour, while remaining a

specific type of sex work. So far, webcam labour has been distinguished from other types of sex work due to the lack of physical interaction with clients (Campbell et al., 2019; Henry & Farvid, 2017; Jones, 2020; Reece, 2015). Specific risks and strategies of this work come into view when we focus on visibility as a specificity of online sex work such as webcamsing.

In-person sex work, such as street-based sex work, stripping, and brothel work, share a certain level of limited visibility, in which sex workers can productively engage with invisibility to manage risks (Ham & Gerard, 2014). In principle, the only people who can identify the people working in these spaces as sex workers are those who are also in attendance, either as colleagues, other third parties or clients. This assumption of limited and spatially-bound visibility is exemplified by the no-photos/recording policies in Amsterdam's Red Light District and upheld in most strip clubs. As I argue above, in online sex work visibility is both a prerequisite for success and for risk. Therefore, online sex workers have a unique relationship to their visibility as sex workers. Analysis of online sex work should be cognisant of the unique position this work occupies. Although it is relatively safe, with avenues for pleasure and large profits, it is also a highly visible type of work.

Visibility can also, for this reason, be a useful lens for studies of offline sex work. Visibility is a precondition for risks and rewards in webcam labour, but this also holds true for other types of sex work. Other sex workers also need to be visible to some extent, albeit in much more limited ways, to secure paying clients. This visibility entails the risk of stigmatisation too. There is also increasing overlap between online and offline sex work, with workers increasingly advertising or turning to platforms (e.g., Hamilton et al., 2022; Sanders et al., 2018). How do these workers, who still primarily work offline but engage with platforms to secure clients, experience and cope with their platformised visibility? Visibility can help us see how risks and rewards are distributed and navigated in sex work in a variety of contexts.

### ***Platform labour***

Visibility can also be a useful lens on labour beyond webcamsing. Here I show how various types of platform labour and their risks and rewards can also be examined through the lens of visibility. The work of gig workers and creators working on platforms is sometimes theorised through the notion of 'invisible labour' (Duffy & Sawey, 2022, p. 78; Hatton, 2017; Ticona & Mateescu, 2018, p. 4387). The labour performed by these workers is not recognised as work, either because creator labour is seen as 'fun', the workers themselves are erased from view, or their legal rights are disregarded (Duffy, 2017; Gruszka & Böhm, 2022; Hatton, 2017). Gig workers are rendered "invisible to customers, to each other, and



even to themselves”, while simultaneously being reminded of their replicability by masses of other invisible workers (van Doorn, 2017, p. 904). These workers lack institutional and legal visibility (Doorn, 2020, p. 50; Ticona & Mateescu, 2018, p. 4394). The misclassification of gig workers as independent contractors means these workers are not seen as employees and lack access to rights and benefits (Berg, 2020, p. 1162). Creators, especially those with multiple marginalised identities, see their work being devalued and underacknowledged (Bishop & Duffy, 2022, p. 482; Duffy, 2017, p. 38). In short, what my visibility framework reveals is that workers on platforms experience invisibility in many significant ways.

To secure gigs and income, these workers depend on being displayed to customers in ways that are structured by labour platforms. In some ways, working on gig platforms increases their visibility (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018, p. 4398). The visibility regimes set out by labour platforms standardise worker information and presentation, making it easy to compare individuals competing for the same work (Rand & Stegeman, 2023, p. 2108; Ticona & Mateescu, 2018, p. 4394). It is becoming increasingly common for creators to make elements of their personal lives visible online (Bishop & Duffy, 2022, p. 470). They deploy a wide range of tactics with varying levels of success in their efforts to gain attention on social media platforms (Bishop, 2019; Cotter, 2019; Duffy & Hund, 2019). Online workers are visible, whether on social media or gig platforms, and this may entail both harmful and positive consequences as outlined for webcam performers above.

My exploration of the ways in which webcam performers and platforms engage with visibility helps to explain the phenomenon of platform workers experiencing both visibility and invisibility simultaneously. This thesis, especially through its theorisation of webcam performers’ hyper(in)visibility, demonstrates that creators may experience various types of harm due to both visibility and invisibility. The same holds for positive experiences, which also reside in both the spaces of invisibility and visibility. Viewing platform labour through the lens of visibility has sufficient scope to encompass the simultaneous legal, institutional, and representational visibility and invisibility of workers on platforms because this approach recognises that diverse experiences of visibility collectively shape labour risks and rewards. Whether visibility in a space is a negative or positive force for workers depends not on their actual visibility, but on how much agency they have in choosing their particular level of visibility. Webcam performers who, for example, wish to conceal their identity as parents online or maintain a small audience may, if able to decide on these limits themselves, use strategic invisibility to make money and protect themselves. Conversely, when a performer feels that platform structures are erasing them as a person to present a stereotype instead or are hindering them

from finding a monetisable audience, limited visibility can constitute a harm. The same holds for experiences of visibility, where some performers are in a position to deal with stigmatisation and therefore follow a straightforward path to and attempt to maximise their audiences in order to increase their income, while for others a large audience is not a choice and being suddenly propelled to the top of a page can be a daunting experience.

On other platforms, experiences with visibility may similarly generate labour risks and rewards. These outcomes themselves likely vary in other industries. Different platforms structure visibility differently and most platform labour is not stigmatised to the same extent as sex work. For example, visibility is also a requisite aspect of the work performed by delivery drivers on a platform like Deliveroo, but this platform matches workers and clients much more directly, reducing the importance of a rider's presentation and accentuating other ways of engaging with this matching algorithm. Visibility is still a useful lens for exploring this context, however, as it facilitates discussions of how platforms structure the presentation of workers and to whom they are presented in addition to the limited strategies these workers employ to navigate this system. Even in industries where stigma is not a concern, such as the market for aspiring artists, platforms may still generate rewards and harms when they are used to create visibility for their work. One would imagine that securing a large audience would mean positive outcomes for an artist's status and income, but artists are not immune to audience harassment and their online visibility creates a space in which audiences can express hostility. As is the case for webcam performers, platforms also construct the visibility of these workers, and not just through algorithms. How does the language used on platforms like Instagram or Pinterest position artists' content? Is an artist taken seriously by peers or industry gatekeepers within these terms? While an artist might aim for platform visibility more unidirectionally than a webcam performer, they are also not in full control of their platformised visibility and employing this lens helps us to uncover how platforms shape their labour.

While noting that they do not have full control over how they are seen, examining the experiences of platform workers through the lens of visibility also reveals the importance of workers' agency when engaging with platforms. The whole issue with experiences of visibility and invisibility for platform workers arises when their agency is overridden by platform and social structures. This certainly occurs as platforms are powerful actors. Through the lens of visibility, these moments can be identified, and rather than focusing on whether or not visibility in itself is good or bad, it shows that what matters is control over visibility. Visibility, drawing on Marxist feminism's focus on resistance, can be an opportunity for autonomy and subversion. But, as

Marxist feminism also recognises, it is obvious that companies such as platforms are a structuring force in terms of labour conditions. I show that this understanding also applies to visibility which is a labour condition rather than just a site of (re) presentation. As discussed in the previous chapter, I emphasise that creators do not work solely to achieve visibility nor do they always experience harm when this is limited through platform structures. Conceptualisations of algorithmic gossip, content demotion, ranking systems and visibility games (Are & Briggs, 2023; Bishop, 2019; Cotter, 2019; Velthuis & Van Doorn, 2020) highlight the struggle faced by online workers in this regard, but fail to capture the harms caused by visibility. Conversely, when visibility is acknowledged as a space for vulnerability and harassment (Duffy et al., 2023; Glatt, 2023), strategies to avoid, ignore or accept visibility are overlooked. Webcam performers in this thesis exemplify that there is a broad range of visibility experiences and these experiences are not limited to being purely successful *or* exclusively harmful. There are possibilities for both. We should not limit our focus to whether or not online workers are made too visible or invisible on platforms; rather, we should explore how these workers attempt to create a level of visibility that is productive for their specific content and identity within the constraints of the platforms and makes sense given the social context in which they work.

### ***Visibility and work***

Above I argued that the findings of this thesis present a lens for examining the labour experiences of other sex and platform workers. But visibility might also be an increasingly important angle from which to examine labour in the contemporary attention economy more generally. In this economy “which treats visibility as status” as well as a necessary condition for success (Marwick, 2013, p. 143), visibility is also a necessary condition for the harms experienced by workers in this economy. Visibility underpins both the risks and rewards that workers face.

Webcam performers’ relationship to visibility can be indicative of trends in the attention economy. Sex workers have often been at the forefront of technological innovation, pioneering internet services from image sharing to credit card verification (Cole, 2022). This is still the case. In recent years, for example, sex workers have argued that based on their experiences with moderation by platforms, they are the canary in the coal mine when it comes to the suppression of speech and content online (Garcia, 2021). Sex workers’ position at the fringes of acceptability has created conditions for innovation and creativity and as such is indicative of new trends (Blunt et al., 2021, p. 426). Webcam performers, for example, were some of the very first groups of workers to turn to the Internet to make money (Jones, 2020; Ray, 2007). Some of the performers I spoke to, such as Nina who was shown taking such care to set up her workspace in the introduction, had been working online

for over 17 years at this point. These workers built strategies for online labour before other gig and creator industries moved online after the 2008 financial crash (Vallas & Schor, 2020). Their experiences are grounded in a long history and may be indicative of what is to follow for other workers.

For instance, the rise of the attention economy has meant that workers outside platform industries, such as in academia, art, and journalism, are increasingly expected to embrace online visibility akin to that practiced by influencers (Bishop, 2023; Duffy et al., 2023). Online profiles on networking platforms, such as LinkedIn, personal webpages, social media profiles and followings can now influence how people in other professions conduct their work or when they are hired. Workers might boost their professional success by maintaining and promoting polished online profiles. Yet, these workers also have to deal with negative consequences, such as harassment, when visible online (Duffy et al., 2023, p. 3). Mirroring the experiences of webcam performers, it seems that visibility has become increasingly important in shaping distributions of risks and rewards in a growing number of industries. How do workers deal with the increasing demand to maintain a publicly available record of their work and selves? And how do they deal with the consequences of their visibility when records of their past selves, opinions and lives resurface in unfavourable ways?

Visibility is increasingly necessary to achieve success. My research shows that it is also a prerequisite for many types of harm and harassment. Workers, from webcam performers to Deliveroo riders, Instagram influencers, and other creatives, do not have sole control over how they are seen online or over the effects of their visibility. In this thesis, I have shown that platforms and workers engage with labour processes by shaping visibility and that the consequences of visibility are situated within specific socio-economic contexts.

### **PRACTICAL AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PERFORMERS' VISIBILITY**

Finally, I will discuss the practical implications of my research and propose, proposing ways to mitigate the adverse effects of visibility might be reduced and how control over it. One of the goals throughout my research has been to produce findings that have both practical and political uses. These are some of the 'tangible benefits' (Bloomquist, n.d.; van der Meulen, 2011) that were identified as being important for impactful research in the methodology chapter. Potential and actual ways to achieve some of these benefits are discussed here.

Media representations of online sex work are an important target for reframing the visibility and stigmatisation of this industry. Better and more nuanced media

representation can contribute to destigmatisation (e.g., Weitzer, 2018). My research highlights that, as on platforms, sex workers can be harmed by both inclusion and exclusion from media narratives. As with the tabloid stories above, webcam performers, such as Kate, a performer from the UK, recognise the skewed narrative this offers: “they are glorifying it and they’re glamourising it”. These media representations do not help workers confront the very real problematic conditions that platforms create for them. At the same time, webcam performers are not the passive victims that are sometimes depicted in the media either (e.g., Mac & Smith, 2020). Media producers should be aware of the narrative they present when they write about sex workers, and consider that it might not be helpful to write about sex work in the first place. Is the only reason to include a story about online sex work its ‘sensational’ factor? Resources for journalists, such as the ‘Reimagining sex work Mediagids’<sup>11</sup> in the Netherlands or Support Ho(s)e guide for Journalism Professionals<sup>12</sup>, as well as NZPC best practice guidance for journalists<sup>13</sup> already offer much practical direction on how these considerations can be made. While these guides are focused on broad categories of sex work, my work on online sex work prompts journalists to consider what visibility they are affording to performers and how they might allow them to exercise some agency over this.

Of course, webcam and social media platforms are also important institutions with the power to improve webcam performers’ working conditions and representation. It will not be an easy task, but both these types of platforms need to devise routes for greater agency over online visibility in consultation with performers. Performers in my research made all sorts of suggestions for measures that could be adopted by the webcam platforms they were working on, including fairer and more random ranking, anti-screenshot design, and stricter bans for abusive clients. The availability of webcam platform support staff, which could deal with individual issues and provide assistance where necessary, was also central for many performers. Such staff is currently hard to reach on many platforms. Performers in my research indicated that the webcam platforms they stuck with were those that provided them with effective support, even though these platforms were often smaller and provided lower pay-out percentages. As webcam platforms compete to attract and retain performers, giving performers increased support and more control over how they are presented might also prove beneficial for these platforms.

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11 <https://reimaginingsexwork.nl/de-reimagining-sex-work-mediagids/>

12 <https://sxhxcollective.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/SxHx-media-guide-final.pdf>

13 <https://www.nzpc.org.nz/Best-practice-guidance-for-journalists>

Performers often use other social media platforms to promote their work. But as we know, these platforms are very intolerant of sex workers (e.g., Blunt et al., 2021). Losing their social media accounts was devastating for many of the performers I spoke to. While content moderation for platforms accessed by numerous users in many different regions, age groups and with different interests is an incredibly difficult issue, webcam performers need more clarity and options for recourse in this regard. Additionally, as highlighted in Chapter 7 and this conclusion, since visibility is a prerequisite for harm, a broad range of platforms should consider the importance of allowing users to limit their visibility and to delete, erase, or demarcate their online presence how they see fit.

Platforms, as large companies, are unlikely to implement such changes without pressure. This is where policymakers come in. Some of the provisions presented in the EU's Digital Services Act on content moderation and avenues for contestation might address some of the issues mentioned above. At the same time, it is clear such policies are not designed with online sex workers in mind as the act will probably lead to increased moderation of their content (Tiidenberg, 2021). Policymakers, especially when already intending to increase platform legislation through the EU's DSA and Platform Work Directive, or the UK's Online Safety Bill, for example, should consider how sex workers' perspectives can be brought into the equation.

Involving policymakers in the improvement of webcam performers' labour circumstances can present quite a challenge. Webcam performers were often extremely wary when I asked them directly about what policy changes they would like to see. Sex workers are aware that increased legislation of their labour may be parallel to increased surveillance and policing. Many webcam performers in this study emphasised that they preferred the fact that webcamming currently exists in the relatively unregulated space of platform labour over getting governments, which often take a carceral approach to sex work in general, involved. Many of these workers had strong critiques of their working conditions and the power of platforms, but as sex workers, they were also justifiably wary of whether government intervention could actually fix this. In advocacy for online sex work it is worth considering this perspective, which holds that invisibility, even legal invisibility, might be a safer option.

It is clear from previous research and was reiterated by participants in my research, such as Antonella in Romania, that "decriminalisation will help all types of sex workers". Beyond this, however, it is a challenge to clearly formulate policy goals based on my research. Involving sex workers and sex work organisations in policy processes is a good starting point to ensure that policies align with these workers'

actual experiences. In this, policymakers need to be mindful that certain types of legal visibility might harm sex workers' by subjecting them to further regulation or criminalisation. At the same time, many of the things that webcam performers need, such as fair working conditions, control over their online presentation, decent social provisions and ways to deal with abuse are also required by many other online workers and by internet users in general. If these goals can be achieved without pushing sex work further offline, webcam performers could certainly benefit.

As my work has clearly argued that the effects of visibility are socially embedded, it follows that the lives of webcam performers, and I imagine those of many other contemporary workers, could be improved if there were more inroads for control over their representation, at least online. Full destigmatisation of sex work would of course effect the most change in how webcam performers are seen. But this is a slow process and we can never have control over how others see us. As more employment shifts to platforms, however, increased influence over our online representations would allow for more positive experiences of both invisibility and visibility, whichever we desire.