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A good hustle: the moral economy of market competition in adult webcam modeling

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine how models working on Chaturbate, one of the world's most popular adult webcam platforms, negotiate and make sense of the dynamic ways in which this platform configures their competitive environment. By combining different perspectives from the field of economic sociology, we demonstrate how competition on Chaturbate is shaped by various market devices whose strategic negotiation informs – and is informed by – the moral economy articulated on web forums where models gather to discuss their work experiences and market strategies. We first introduce Chaturbate and the ways in which it organizes market competition, surveying the environment models have to negotiate. We then zoom in on two controversial strategies for beating the competition, each of which upset the moral economy of Chaturbate's model community. Subsequently, we turn to what models term 'the hustle,' which encompasses a number of competitive strategies and criteria judged to be fair and thus legitimate. The final part of our analysis considers the limitations of the hustle, as well as the meritocratic and entrepreneurial discourse that surround it, in light of what we identify as Chaturbate's 'manufactured uncertainty.'

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Introduction

Over the last few years a phenomenon now widely known as the 'gig economy' has attracted increasing scholarly and popular attention. The term has frequently been associated with the rise of Uber, TaskRabbit, and other digital platforms that orchestrate markets for on-demand service work, although the gig economy vastly extends beyond the parameters of platform-mediated labor. As critics have pointed out, the gradual transformation of employment into (sub)contracted 'gigs' characterized by flexibility, transience, and insecurity has affected a wide range of industries and has been driven by successive waves of economic restructuring and labor market reorganization since the 1970s (Peck and Theodore 2012). As such, the salience of platforms for cleaning, (food) delivery, ride-hailing, home care work should be understood as symptomatic of broader structural changes in how people make a living – increasingly by cobbling together income streams – rather than taking these platforms as engines of this change. Moreover, while the abovementioned forms of generally low-wage gig work have thus far received most consideration, this article focuses on a less visible yet increasingly popular kind of platform-mediated service labor: adult webcam

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modeling. As Angela Jones (2016, p. 229) has argued, webcam models should be seen as sex workers who ‘perform erotic labor in a highly competitive capitalist marketplace,’ which is ‘similar to many other forms of [feminized] service work because it involves providing good customer service’ and ‘often requires managing both one’s own emotions and those of clients.’ This erotic labor generally takes place in public chat rooms, where models engage in conversation as well as various levels of sexual play, and in private rooms to which viewers can gain access by tipping a certain amount of tokens that can be purchased from the site – thereby turning viewers into paying customers.

The recent growth of the adult webcam industry (Song 2016) can be explained by two interconnected developments. First, various kinds of sex workers – from escorts to strippers and porn workers – have over the last two decades intensified their use of networked digital technologies to market their services, in an effort to maximize their earnings and reduce their risk exposure (Jones 2015a). For instance, porn workers who are trying to survive in an increasingly precarious industry hit by the proliferation of online piracy and amateur porn have had to look for other gigs to supplement their income, using social media and webcam platforms to promote their self-produced content and facilitate various ‘direct-to-consumer’ exchanges (Berg 2016). Adult webcam platforms do not only offer a unique customer experience that is both live and interactive, they also reduce transaction costs by efficiently matching supply and demand for sexual services and goods while lowering market entry barriers. Yet, these very advantages to entrepreneurial sex workers also entail a potential drawback, which brings us to the second development. As barriers to market entry are lowered and commercial sex has been culturally and economically mainstreamed (Bretns and Sanders 2010), a rapidly increasing number of newcomers are taking up webcam modeling as an opportunity to supplement their income in today’s gig economy (Song 2016). Similar to the ‘explosion of amateur content’ in pornography, this has resulted in a ‘flooded labour pool’ and intensified market competition for established webcam models whose income at least partly depends on this work (Berg 2016, p. 164). Moreover, given that webcam performances transcend physical boundaries, this market is global and models from Western countries have to compete with models from relatively low-income countries such as Romania, Colombia, and the Philippines, which have become central hubs in the adult webcam industry. These models are more likely to work under contract of specialized studios that provide the needed infrastructure in exchange for a substantial fee, and they are frequently subjected to exploitative working conditions (Davies 2013, Cruz and Sajo 2015). It should therefore be noted that the opportunities and risks of webcam modeling are distributed in highly unequal ways along lines of nationality, geography, gender, race, and class (Jones 2015b).

Beyond such structural inequalities, these opportunities and risks are also contingent on the particular ways in which adult webcam platforms orchestrate competition between models. In this article, we examine how a group of webcam models working on Chaturbate, one of the industry’s most popular platforms, make sense of the dynamic ways in which this platform configures their competitive environment. Our analysis of model narratives on two dedicated web forums draws on two distinct approaches from the field of economic sociology which thus far have rarely been connected, namely the STS-inspired literature on ‘market devices’ (e.g. Muniesa *et al.* 2007) and work on ‘moral economies’ and ‘orders of worth’ (e.g. Prasad 1999, Stark 2009). By bringing a synthesis of these approaches to bear on adult webcam modeling, this study offers an innovative perspective on an increasingly popular mode of digitally mediated sex work, highlighting how the sociotechnical construction of markets and the discursive formation of moral economies – i.e. the production of value and values – are entangled in intimate and situated ways (cf. Pettinger 2013). More specifically, a critical assessment of the ways in which *competition*, rather than *exchange*, on Chaturbate is shaped by various market devices enables us to demonstrate how the strategic negotiation of such devices informs – and is informed by – webcam models’ articulation of a dominant moral discourse that legitimates market competition insofar as all competitors adhere to an ethic of ‘fair play,’ ostensibly safeguarded by the platform. Beyond shedding light on a type of digital labor that has thus far been severely understudied (Jones 2015a), we contribute to a growing body of literature on the

experiences, practices, and motivations of sex workers in off- and online contexts (e.g. Sanders 2005, Bradley-Engen and Ulmer 2009, Hardy and Sanders 2015, Berg 2016, Jones 2016, Sanders *et al.* 2016, Nayar 2017a), by investigating how experiences of/strategies for competition between models are affected by what could be called the contemporary ‘platformization’ of sex work.

After a discussion of the study’s methodology in the following section, the third section introduces Chaturbate and details the ways in which this platform organizes market competition, surveying the sociotechnical environment models have to navigate. The fourth and fifth sections then zoom in on two controversial strategies for beating the competition, each of which upset the dominant moral order established on the model forums. In contrast, the sixth section examines what models term ‘the hustle,’ encompassing a number of competitive strategies and techniques judged to be fair and thus legitimate. The seventh section considers the practical limitations of the hustle as well as the meritocratic and entrepreneurial discourse that subtends it, in light of what we identify as Chaturbate’s ‘manufactured uncertainty.’ Finally, the eighth section briefly summarizes our findings and argument before offering a conclusion.

Methodology

As Angela Jones (2016, p. 233) has noted, ‘[t]he migration of sex work to an online platform also necessitates that scholars incorporate web-based methodological strategies into their research.’ Our study is based on an inductive, iterative content analysis of textual exchanges on two popular web forums where adult webcam models (and other sex workers) discuss the platform-orchestrated markets they compete in, develop an understanding of their operational logics, and exchange strategies to master them in the face of structural information scarcity. Studying such forums is a ‘felicitous methodological strategy for observing the social interactions of a group’ insofar as ‘researchers can observe conversations among community members without intruding in the process’ (Jones 2016, p. 233), which makes these online spaces an exemplary source of naturally occurring data (Silverman 2011, Pettinger 2013). We first used Google to search for forums and discussion boards that featured posts about models’ experiences with Chaturbate, by using combinations of keywords such as ‘Chaturbate,’ ‘adult webcams,’ ‘webcam models,’ and ‘camming.’ These queries led us to two forums where Chaturbate was a regular topic of discussion: the Stripperweb forum, which is part of an online community that has over 10,000 members who are (semi-)professionally active in both traditional strip clubs and in the adult webcam industry¹; and Ambercutie’s Forum (ACF), which has close to 30,000 members – including customers – and was created in 2010 ‘to provide a helpful community for cam girls to interact with one another, as well as discuss anything and everything with their fans and members.’²

Given that both forums feature an abundance of threads whose content exceeds the scope of our research, our analysis used a purposive sampling technique that focused on the main thread dedicated to Chaturbate on each forum (cf. Jones 2016). On Stripperweb, ‘The Chaturbate thread’ was started in the spring of 2013 and is ongoing, having accumulated over 2,500 posts at the time of writing. With 255 posts, ‘A Public Chaturbate Thread’ on Ambercutie is much shorter, but the contributions are generally more elaborate and detailed than on Stripperweb. The posts from both threads were first analyzed using an open coding scheme that generated inductive codes – such as ‘fairness,’ ‘experimentation,’ and ‘hustle’ – which were then thematically grouped and re-grouped by applying the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 2006, cf. Nayar 2017b). This resulted in the identification of two competing orders of worth (premised on meritocracy and freedom, respectively), as well as the four themes we discuss in sections four to seven: ‘Race to the bottom’; ‘Using bots to get to the top’; ‘The hustle’; and ‘Running on empty.’ We subsequently selected a small number of posts that represented these themes most accurately and evocatively, in order to illustrate our main argument (cf. Pettinger 2013). With regard to research ethics, all posts used in this study were collected from the public sections of the two web forums and were authored by models using pseudonyms. We have further anonymized the quotations from these posts by abbreviating the model

pseudonyms and by slightly altering the structure of the quotations in a way that does not change their meaning or character, in order to prohibit or at least limit their online searchability.³

It is important to note here that the selection of these forums comes with biases and limitations. One limitation pertains to what can be said on the basis of forum data: to what extent can we determine the veracity of the accounts provided? It should thus be noted here that, following Pettinger (2013, p. 186), our focus is ‘on the account of the experience, not the truth of the story.’ We are interested in *how* models share their experiences of market competition on Chaturbate, recognizing that ‘[h]ow the story is produced in a particular form reveals something of what matters to the storyteller’ (2013, p. 187). A more pertinent limitation has to do with language: because the lingua franca on both forums is English, models who do not sufficiently master the English language are less likely to participate. Furthermore, the posts suggest that the models who contribute to these threads tend to work on Chaturbate (and other platforms) regularly and at least partly depend on this work for their income. Models who have a more casual relationship to cam work are thus underrepresented, as they will generally be less inclined to discuss their work with peers – if they even understand what they do as ‘work’ in the first place. Finally, although models on both forums had profiles, these usually contained little (reliable) information on their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, or location. Based on our analysis of the threads, these appear to be largely dominated by white, cisgender women from the US and Northern Europe, although a few transgender women and one cisgender man also participated occasionally. This obviously limits the scope of experiences (of discrimination, for instance) included in this study and thus the generalizability of its findings.

The technical and moral construction of competition on Chaturbate

Chaturbate is a relative newcomer on the scene, having been founded in 2011. At the time of writing, the web traffic analytics company Alexa ranks Chaturbate at #167 on its list of most trafficked sites globally.⁴ Moreover, it is ranked 3rd on Alexa’s list of adult websites, behind Xvideos (a ‘tube site’ featuring free pornographic videos) and Livejasmin (the most popular adult webcam site).⁵ Most of the site’s visitors are based in the US (20.5%), followed by Germany (8.5%), Japan (6.8%), the UK (6.2%) and China (4.7%). Other than this basic information, it is impossible to accurately determine the number of registered or active users on Chaturbate – or the demographic composition of this user base – given that the company does not publicly disclose this information.

Technically, Chaturbate is a platform in the sense that it provides a computational infrastructure allowing third parties to develop, adjust, and run various kinds of applications via its Application Programming Interface (API). This platformization of markets for sexual services is also what distinguishes Chaturbate from its competitors.⁶ The company encourages tech-savvy members of its user base to code their apps and bots in javascript, which, after a testing phase, are made freely available to any cam model looking to enhance her/his show and can also be customized.⁷ For instance, one app identifies the biggest tipper during a webcam show and puts a gif image of a crown in front of this viewer’s screen name whenever he – most viewers appear to be male – sends a chat message. One of the most popular apps links the sound that accompanies a received tip to a sound-sensitive sex toy, which vibrates inside the model’s genitals for a time span that corresponds to the tip’s size. To be able to tip, customers can buy tokens from Chaturbate for 10 dollar cents per token – depending on the purchased quantity. After receiving tokens, models can convert them back into cash for 5 cents per token. The difference is retained by Chaturbate, which means that the company takes a hefty cut of at least 50% of the income generated by its models. The main objective of a webcam model is to accumulate as many tokens as possible during a show, which positions each model in a competitive relation with others. Chaturbate actively stimulates this market competition: following Callon and Muniesa (2005), the platform can be understood as an ‘algorithmic configuration’ that circumscribes a group of calculative agencies and organizes online encounters between providers and consumers of sexual services in highly specific ways. In doing so, the platform not only establishes protocols that govern the ways in which these encounters unfold, but also configures how

competition between providers takes shape. The proliferation of user-generated apps and bots suggests, however, that this algorithmic configuration is far from an immutable, super-imposed structure. As Callon and Muniesa (2005, p. 1243) write about market platforms more generally: '[a]gencies are often engaged to varying degrees in the design and negotiation of architectures that organize market encounters.'

So how does Chaturbate organize market competition on its platform, and how do models negotiate the sociotechnical opportunities and constraints configured by the platform architecture? With respect to market exchange, Vatin (2013, p. 38) has noted the importance of 'the study of the ensemble of prerequisite mechanisms which make exchange possible: goods and workers arrive on the market already calibrated, classified, and measured in many ways.' Indeed, Chaturbate formats its models as well as their shows through a set of 'market devices,' or objects and techniques that enable the organization of markets (Muniesa *et al.* 2007), which transform highly diverse bodies and performances into calculable and thus comparable sexual commodities (see also Pettinger 2013). Such market devices include thumbnails containing information about the model's age and the number of viewers watching the show, model profiles, model satisfaction scores,⁸ the chat boxes models can use to communicate with their viewers, and of course the apps and bots that can be deployed during a show. Within this circumscribed architecture, however, models can customize their profiles and auto-categorize their shows by assigning hashtags to them, which viewers can use when searching for specific activities. Moreover, the contents of each show can be customized by mobilizing a particular combination of apps and bots to create a *relatively unique* market experience.

Moving from market exchange to market competition, the most conspicuous and fundamental way in which Chaturbate orchestrates competition between models is through its 'board placement'; a market device that hierarchically orders thumbnails corresponding to a model's live show. This ordinal board placement co-determines a model's earnings: being ranked on Chaturbate's first page, preferably in the top rows, is crucial since these thumbnails are most likely to be noticed by viewers. Assuming that having more viewers increases the chance of receiving tips, which is a widely held assumption on the forums we have examined, achieving a high ranking is thus an important means to succeed as a webcam model. Given that the platform's board placement is updated every 60 seconds, the ranking scheme – and thus the competition between models – is highly dynamic.⁹ Yet board placement does not fully determine the relation between value and visibility on Chaturbate. An alternative model strategy is to develop a dedicated following and thereby cultivate a strong niche visibility. Chaturbate facilitates this strategy by offering a 'follow' button on a model's profile. Viewers who click this button will receive automatic notifications when the model comes online for a show. As will be discussed below, however, it can be difficult to develop a following when nobody can see you in the first place, so many models still regard having a high public ranking as instrumental to their success.

Like other platforms that profit from the ranked organization of information (Hillis *et al.* 2012, Van Doorn 2014), Chaturbate does not disclose details about its ranking algorithm. This consequently renders competition highly uncertain for the models, who can only speculate about the ranking criteria based on the scattered bits of information they gather from fellow models on the forums and on Twitter, sporadically augmented by the occasional update or explanation from Chaturbate. We argue that this orchestrated uncertainty does not only have a paralyzing impact, as dominant streams in economic sociology would argue (Fligstein 2002, Beckert 2009), but is also highly generative, in the sense that it continually opens up opportunities for action (Stark 2009) and operates as a stimulant of market innovation and growth (Knudsen and Swedberg 2009). For instance, models' uncertainty about how to optimize their position vis-à-vis the ranking algorithm fuels the creation, modification, and use of apps, which increases the platform's popularity and market share while also adding value to the sexual services produced and consumed by its users. Every show should in that sense be seen as an *in vivo* experiment, where models come to see themselves as adult webcam *entrepreneurs* who test which strategies produce most revenue for them (Muniesa and Callon 2007).

However, as we will show, such uncertainty-fueled innovation does not always result in a sustainable business and many models eventually give up on (the idea of making a living on) the platform.

Yet how, exactly, do models exploit the indeterminate situation they face on Chaturbate? Or, in other words, how do they seize available opportunities for action and engage in what Jane Guyer (2016, p. 125) has termed ‘apportunistic innovation’ within Chaturbate’s competitive platform economy? As will become clear below, models appear to keep open ‘diverse performance criteria’ (Stark 2009, p. 26), in the sense that their conception of what constitutes a good or successful show draws on two contrasting orders of worth – which, for the French conventionalist school of sociology, are ‘the very fabric of calculation, of rationality, of value’ (Stark 2009, p. 22). Apps, bots, and other market devices are enrolled in this adjudication process, to the extent that they do not just allow models to better market their services in order to gain a competitive advantage over others, but also do *moral work*: their affordances generate new competitive ‘opportunities’ that either consolidate or disrupt the moral order articulated on the model forums, whose value judgments feed back into the competitive strategies models deploy on Chaturbate. While market innovation is welcomed on the platform, models embrace its often disruptive qualities only when they do not interfere with their community’s informal yet vigorously enforced code of conduct, whose main tenet is fair play. Fairness, here, is imagined as guaranteeing a level playing field that provides equal access to the platform’s available resources – and thus equal opportunity to get ahead – for all models who are registered, verified, and prepared to work on their ‘hustle.’ As such, this conception of fairness is underwritten by a meritocratic order of worth in which success should be determined by the individual skills and talent of a model, which, as we will discuss, has a number of different measures on Chaturbate.

However, Chaturbate’s algorithmic organization of competition also encourages models to freely experiment with technologies and strategies that could increase their earnings and market share. Yet how free can this ethos of market experimentation be without impeding on the dominant ethos of fairness? This question points to a fundamental antagonism between two orders of worth – one premised on meritocratic values and the other on ideals of market-based freedom – and can be best addressed by having a look at two competitive strategies that generated controversy on the two model forums.¹⁰ Both strategies upset the established moral economy on these forums to the extent that they adopt a ‘get big fast’ approach which, much like the disruptive mentality of a tech startup company, aims to rapidly scale a service/product (in this case a model’s show) by maximizing its public visibility and market share, often involving considerable risk and social costs.

Race to the bottom

The first strategy attempts to lure in more customers by giving more sexually explicit and extreme performances in public. Few models on the forums admit that they (have) engage(d) in such practices, however, and when they do they legitimate their choice by referring to their economic situation:

To be fair, on really slow nights I’ve been known to do crazy shit when there are bills to pay. \$100 to lick an armpit for five minutes or \$75 to eat peanut butter off my toes while naked definitely come to mind. It always brings people to the room too. As long as they’re paying and it isn’t all too gross, I’ll do it. Nose picking or booger eating would probably be a 3000 tokens request though in my book, lol. On the other end of the spectrum, some dude paid me 4000 tokens to read from ‘Cat In The Hat’ topless. I have no regrets :p (CC)

Although this type of ‘crazy shit’ may be rather innocuous and it certainly seems to pay well, other customer-baiting activities performed on Chaturbate are decidedly more intense and risky. As one model claims:

I did see the baseball bat up the ass. Jumper cables hooked up to a girl’s tits! Really!!!

Bananas and a HUGE cucumber, and even piss drinking. There’s no way I could ever go there. These people had been at the bottom of the page, but they had so many viewers tipping the shit out of them! (CG)

To which someone responds:

That seems to be the thing now in camming. The freakier, the better. And they all do it for CHEAP!! Lol, i used to do cum shows for no less than 5000 tks ... now i have had to drop that down to 3600 tks. Which is still pretty good, i guess. But it drives me crazy to know that i used to get more. (BP)

In other words, some models are seeing their rates decline as the platform becomes more popular and competition gets more 'cutthroat.' This makes some of them feel forced to do or show more for fewer tokens, which is something many contributors on the forums experience as a precarious race to the bottom (cf. Sanders and Hardy 2012) – even though it may, at least for a while, attract more viewers and accelerate one's ascent to the top of the ranking. Although 3600 tokens for a 'cum show' may be considered a good price by Chaturbate's standards, this is not a rate that many on the platform are able to charge – *if* they even feel comfortable going that far in their show – and it is not uncommon to see models exposing themselves for five tokens or less. Moreover, the race to the bottom not only evokes economic concerns – i.e. a downward pull on prices and income – but also triggers moral judgements. In order to counter this self-propelling tendency and safeguard 'broadcasting' on Chaturbate as a viable enterprise that can at least partly sustain a livelihood, models urge their peers to properly value their shows and, more importantly, themselves. If you want your customers to appreciate you, they argue, you have to start by appreciating yourself and taking your job seriously. While, drawing on an order of worth premised on market-based freedom, many participants agree that models should be allowed to set their prices as low as they would like, this practice is also seen as suggesting a lack of professionalism and self-appreciation on the model's side (cf. Wherry 2008, Velthuis 2013). This is a seasoned model admonishing a newcomer:

I'm not trying to be mean but i think you may want to consider valuing ur performances more. not caring u got scammed out of a free show 'cause the sex ur hubby gave u during it was good to me seems like ur not valuing urself or taking this business seriously. i have no clue what ur goals are or what u wish to achieve by broadcasting but if u have any intention of using this as a 'main' side job or eventually a full time thing u really need to step ur game and actually start caring about how these guys that watch u are seeing u. this is a business, u get out of it what u get into it and u cannot just be 'la de da' about it which is how i feel ur taking it right now. u teach ppl how u want to be treated in the way you carry and value urself and to me it seems like ur lacking this, if you eventually want to make this something you can live off of. (SS)

Likewise, some models are critical of being rewarded with non-monetary gifts. Gift cards are not considered bad in themselves and many models share their Amazon wish lists, but the consensus on Stripperweb is that any serious cam girl should see them as perks rather than substitutes for tokens that can be exchanged for actual money. When treated as substitutes, gifts contribute to a devaluation of digital sex work, to the extent that they disincentivize the purchase of tokens and thus make viewers less inclined to tip (properly). The level playing field that Chaturbate is supposed to provide and that is central to the forums' meritocratic moral order is threatened by new girls who are ostensibly not seeking to earn money, instead broadcasting just for kicks. These girls can apparently afford to do shows for gift cards or for nothing at all, while models who work on the platform to generate an income have to struggle to maintain their rates. Still, not everyone is worried about a general race to the bottom. Despite their uncertainty regarding the details of Chaturbate's ranking scheme, some models express their faith in its basic functionality, which presumably institutionalizes a measure of meritocratic justice that guarantees fair competition:

Chaturbate is a straightforward kind of site. The models who have the most viewers get the top spots. The thing is, some models can get to the top by doing really freaky shit but that's temporary fame and we all know it only attracts freeloaders. The other way is to build up a fanbase and earn your way to the top spots. [...] CB is, in my opinion, a fair way to get popular as a webcam girl on a token site. (HY)

Using bots to get to the top

Yet HY here omits another way to 'get the top spots,' albeit one whose feasibility is largely based on conjecture and hearsay. This second controversial strategy involves the illicit use of viewbots, or computer programs that simulate human viewers in order to boost a model's board placement,

which at the time was believed to be determined by the total number of viewers in that model's room.¹¹ Despite the fact that a good number of models have expressed their dissatisfaction with this ranking order, which they believed to be detrimental to their chances of making a living on the platform, the use of viewbots as a market device is categorically rejected as an unethical and dishonorable shortcut. This is most emphatically illustrated in a thread on ACF started by SR, who seeks models to test and review his 'Chaturbate Promotion Service' that promises to 'deliver 200 to 300 registered views for the following 2-3 days.' As he explains:

As you probably know, most guys just look at the first page, enter a few rooms, and don't get much further than that. They don't scroll down on the first page, let alone look at the second or third page! It's like searching on Google – how often do you move on to the second page? Exactly. To get on the first page you need registered viewers. That's where I come in :)

Even if the viewers I bring do not tip, you'll rank higher so that all these guys browsing the front page for the most popular shows will see you.

As an added benefit, the more guys you are exposed to (pun intended!) the more of them will follow you and come back in the future. etc. Sort of a snowball effect to help jump start things. (SR)

It quickly becomes clear that the 'viewers' SR is referring to are actually viewbots, which initially prompts questions concerning the legality of his operation. In response, he notes that viewbots are in fact not (yet) in violation of Chaturbate's Terms of Service, yet instead of appeasing ACF's patrons his 'get big fast' initiative generates an enormous backlash in which the forum's meritocratic order of worth is staunchly defended and a number of objections are raised against the idea of using fake viewer accounts to 'cheat' the system. Some models point out that viewbots only deliver potential short-term value, *if* they indeed to push your ranking and increase your visibility, but that 'the long-term value of such a thing is embarrassing – at best – for anyone who is serious' (PM). 'Serious' models, for whom cam sites constitute a significant source of income, would be embarrassed about using viewbots because it grants them a board placement they know not to have *earned* through hard work, which is the only honorable way to make it on Chaturbate or any other cam site. Furthermore, not every model can reach the top and being positioned on page 2 or 3 may have its reasons, as PM suggests: 'Maybe they are not explicit enough, like me. Maybe they didn't invest the time to acquire regulars.' Either way, tampering with this meritocratic order is seen as disruptive to the community. In response, SR defends the ethics of his exploit not only by drawing on an order of worth premised on market-based freedom but by also questioning the fairness of the platform's rules, which ostensibly impede on free market competition. Answering accusations about how he is encouraging models to cheat, he writes:

Is that because you see this as cheating Chaturbate's system when everyone else is playing by the 'rules'? What does it mean when CB changes these rules arbitrarily, like it just did? Suppose a performer works hard to build a large audience and they pay her mainly in Amazon gifts? She would never rank high in the current system.

The ranking algorithm is arbitrary and the rules are what CB says they are today. Is it ethical to break these rules? I agree that it is unethical to break many rules in life (stealing, or harming people, for instance), I personally do not find it unethical to manipulate some arbitrary algorithms in business. My goal is to help a worthy performer that isn't getting noticed because of that arbitrary algorithm's decision. (SR)

By emphasizing the arbitrariness of Chaturbate's rules as well as the notion that manipulation of these rules is done within a 'business' context, SR positions himself as someone who exploits the opportunities of the free market to oppose unaccountable and capricious platform power by helping a 'worthy performer' who would otherwise be delivered to its whims. Yet his attempt to play a Robin Hood programmer/entrepreneur is to little avail, as the models appear to have internalized the platform's normative order and are extremely concerned about the risk attached to using viewbots on Chaturbate. TG articulates this concern as follows:

If Chaturbate finds out, and they WILL, CB will ban you right away without any warning, will never let you back on their site, and whatever money you made during that period will disappear because you broke the rules. [...] You will lose your job there permanently. CB does not have to spell something out in their Terms of Service either to ban you so do not listen to anyone telling you that you are fine because it's not there in big bold letters. They can ban you for anything at anytime with no reason no matter what the TOS states and using bots is absolutely something they will ban you for. (TG)

The fear of losing an important source of income due to being banned 'for anything at anytime' – which may include the use of bots – is prevalent on the two forums, where models frequently check to see what is and is not allowed on the platform amidst recurrent stories of (temporary) bans. It may therefore be that the imperative to follow the 'rules of the game' is not just rooted in a meritocratic ethos of fairness, but also stems from a collectively cultivated sense of self-preservation among models struggling to navigate the volatile rules enforced by Chaturbate. Viewbots are believed to seriously endanger the durability of their business model as well as the community that has developed around it, which makes this particular type of market device a threatening and illegitimate 'opportunity' that only the most ill-advised would try to exploit. Instead, SR is urged to study the community he supposedly wants to help and to base his innovations on the business needs of its members. TG again:

Immerse yourself in this business and get to know it inside out. Know the RULES and follow them. Figure out something new and innovative that this business lacks and create it. Earn it and the only way to do so is by putting in the time, the effort, and the work yourself. (TG)

To which model DN adds:

You don't have to cheat CB's system to help people out. Models do not *become and stay* successful by using cheap tricks and sleights of hand, they are simply *good* entertainers who are smart, lucky and worked hard enough to build an honest and generous fan base. (DN)

In the moral economy articulated on both model forums, nobody should get big fast because success requires sacrifice; it has to be earned. Models *and* their potential allies need to play by the book and put in the time and effort that it takes to build a sustainable business on the platform, by creating value rather than merely extracting it. Innovation is welcomed but to innovate within the parameters of Chaturbate's dynamic and opaque regulatory framework – which does not necessarily coincide with its Terms of Service – means creating legitimate opportunities that models can *safely* use to expand their market visibility and income stream. That is, it means developing and mobilizing platform-sanctioned market devices such as apps and bots, which can be strategically employed to optimize a model's 'hustle.' The following section discusses this notion in detail, as it encapsulates a range of competitive strategies considered to be fair, legitimate, and worthwhile.

The hustle

To hustle, on this platform,¹² is essentially to exploit opportunities for action while keeping open diverse performance criteria in order to get paid, as long as these endeavors do not interfere with Chaturbate's rules and the attendant meritocratic order of worth that dominates discussions on the two web forums. The hustle is thus about a committed and honest yet cunning form of entrepreneurship that demands certain investments, most notably time. As SG makes clear:

Read the advice on this site: seeing hustles on cam sites is great but not enough. It takes hours and hours to perfect the hustle, it takes countless hours of trial & error. Everyone from a newbie to the top earning cam girl is perfecting her hustle and it is a never ending quest. (SG)

So what performance criteria, indicating what counts as a good or successful hustle, are kept open by models who are committed to turning cam work into a key source of income? First, the criterion of *experimentality*, or a readiness to innovate and try different things out within the parameters of fair play, is widely understood as a factor that determines a model's chances of gaining a measure of

visibility, cultivating a following of regular tippers, and thereby generating ‘long-term value’ on Chaturbate. This pertains especially to how a model approaches the structure of her show and her attendant use of apps. Both forums feature a wealth of questions, advice, suggestions, and discussions about the best way to organize a show and the most optimal combination of apps and bots to keep viewers interested, entertained, and willing to tip. While bots mostly automate control over a model’s room and distribute information about the show at regular intervals, apps enrich this show through modes of gamification that add new playful scenarios. The following excerpts illustrate how fairly intricate considerations about timing, pricing, and the use of apps are all wrapped up into innovative strategies for creating the best and most lucrative (public and private) cam show, which usually revolves around reaching multiple app-generated ‘goals’:

I found that many customers seem to get bored with just setting the ‘goal.’ I play games with them, which seems to help me reach my goal faster and I have made more than \$100 for the day, which comes down to 2,000 tokens. (CG)

I have a handful of apps which I tend to rotate depending on how my room and show is going, and how I’m feeling. I frequently start shows with Sequence Tips With Group Tipping, or Tip Multi-Goal, where I set goals to get my clothes off and start using my toys. Then, honestly the bulk of my show is usually just Tip Counter or Keep It Going. I also use Token Keno pretty often, because it is fun and it tends to help pick up a slower room (I personally prefer to have all winning numbers, where most of them are ‘smaller’ size prizes). I sometimes use CrazyTicket as my night-ending finale if I have enough viewers in my room. (ZS)

For me averaging out my ‘hourly’ pay helps with a lot of calculations, and I treat the Crazy Ticket app as a prized offering. Choose how much you want to earn, realistically, ‘cause you know your worth! (RW)

Within these different strategies and approaches, apps function as one specific kind of market device that – along with bots, tip menus, tipper rankings, hashtags, affiliate links, and a variety of other technologies – organizes and stimulates economic activity on the platform by *formatting* each show into an ordered assemblage of singular yet recognizable products that then become calculable objects of economic transactions. This is accomplished through a dual process of ‘objectification,’ which turns sexual acts (and goods such as tickets to a private show) into discrete things that appear in a tip menu or room topic, and ‘singularization,’ involving the construction of those things’ distinct qualities in a procedure of ‘classification, clustering and sorting that makes products both comparable and different’ by placing them in mutable relations with each other (Callon and Muniesa 2005, p. 1235). When using an app to play a game or sell show tickets, (re)arranging a tip menu made up of priced items/acts, or selecting particular hashtags that raise a show’s visibility and/or searchability, models are engaged in ‘complex operations of qualification, of framing and reframing, of attachment and detachment’ that render their sexual services/goods *marketable* (Muniesa *et al.* 2007, p. 5). Through these experimental practices they ultimately seek to expand their market share in a competitive environment, by attracting viewers and converting them into regular paying customers. This is the core of what it means to hustle for many models.

However, not everyone is focused on the exploitation of such technical market devices, and some models consider apps to be particularly confusing or rather inconsequential to what they see as the actual determining factor of a successful hustle: *personality*. Whereas the performance criterion of experimentality emphasizes technological and strategic innovativeness as the driver of entrepreneurial success, the criterion of personality prioritizes the communicative skills that allow a model to keep viewers entertained and accrue social capital on the platform – which can be measured by her number of followers and fan club members. As such, this criterion values performance and affective labor over technical savviness, even though in daily practice these are often entangled and each involves its own forms of calculation. According to some, having a good personality may even be more important than being good looking, especially if you’re concerned with ‘long-term value’:

It is NOT all about looks in the webcam world. I would say 60% 40%. 60% being about the personality and 40% about the looks. So I don’t want any of these girls reading your response and thinking that they have to have the perfect body or look to be #1 ‘cause they don’t. (BP)

if you are on a token site you need personality. show as much free tits and pussy as you want but without personality nobody cares. sure you might get a small tip here and there but they probably won't come back. (TA)

While some models suggest that being social and entertaining does not cost them much effort, others experience the high premium on a lively and personable performance as labor-intensive and at times exhausting. When CC explains the difference between Chaturbate and Streamate, a competing cam site, she expresses this experience as follows:

You have to keep your room pumping (so really high energy) on Chaturbate in order to attract a crowd and tippers, whereas Streamate is less of a high energy hustle [...] Chaturbate is my bread and butter. I know I can make a couple of hundred per day if I hustle and my internet connection holds. It's also great for getting lots of twitter followers if you're after that at all. I used to make my entire living off of Chaturbate until very recently. I've had to really get into clip sites because of health problems though. The high energy hustle is enormously draining after a few weeks of doing shows. (CC)

Not only can the affective labor of multiple 'high energy' performances be draining after a while, for models who lack certain social or communicative skills it may not altogether be very worthwhile in terms of earnings. While a small number of models, like CC, might be able to leverage their personality – and stable internet connection – to accumulate 'tons' of Twitter followers and earn 'a couple hundred' dollars a day, this is not very common and the majority of models on the forums find it challenging to make a living through cam work. Personality, like experimentality, depends on certain 'calculative powers' – like the ability to gauge the mood of an interlocutor – whose resources are unevenly distributed (Callon and Muniesa 2005).¹³ Moreover, the value of having a 'good' personality is highly contingent on an audience whose judgment can be fickle and unfavorable. All of this becomes clear when reading SS's complaint:

i used to dance around and tease and talk and be really friendly and stuff but it did not make a difference in how many tokens i received so i stopped because I am not a very social person and i cannot stand stupid/rude people. i dont really relate to most people because of the way i view the world and in my experience guys on Chaturbate dont like smart or deep girls, they just want cute/hot girls who have a stripper and party girl mindset and is there to have fun for their sexual thrills and to appease their fratboy style mindset. anything else turns them off. (SS)

As crucial as having a 'personality' may be on Chaturbate, it does not offer every model the same range of opportunities for entrepreneurial action. Besides the fact that the display of normative social skills on the platform is in many ways entangled with a model's technical savviness, which affects her ability and willingness to experiment with market devices that can highlight and augment her personality, another reason is that the valorization of personality is not just dependent on the desires of one's audience – informed by race, gender, age, and class – but on the basic precondition of having an audience at all. In the words of RF, 'my personality can't do nothing if people don't come into my room ...' – which is a comment that should give us pause. What good is having a personality when there is no one around to witness and appreciate it? Or more to the point: what opportunities for action, or modes of competitive self-appreciation (cf. Feher 2009), are left for models who may have the 'right' personality for the job but lack the visibility required to turn it into a valuable asset?

Running on empty

For models committed to the hustle, whose meritocratic order of worth places hard work at the center entrepreneurial success, the only legitimate performance criterion left open when the others have fallen away or have never been available in the first place, is *patience*. As RF remarks: 'What I want to know is whether it's normal to be on page 3 on your first days, if that's the case I will just have to work from there and be patient.' To be patient is not so much an opportunity for action in itself than it is a disposition that opens one up to opportunities that may come in the future. Patience, as one performance criterion constitutive of the hustle, is fundamentally about perseverance and the belief that good things will come to those who wait, work hard, and learn from the success of others. PP's

statement illustrates this attitude well, as she diagnoses the perceived ‘race to the bottom’ addressed earlier:

All those sites have the ‘give it away for free’ mentality because there are just a lot of girls who don’t value themselves or have the patience to make the tokens they need. They give up on a free chat public show in an hour If you have no patience, giving things away for next to free is a way to make SOME dollars, but really, the successful models on CB value themselves and they pay attention to the markets of other girls who are successful. (PP)

Because the ‘give it away for free’ mentality is viewed as showing a lack of self-worth and is ultimately considered unsustainable, the only road to success – according to the meritocratic order of worth – is the high road. Yet because the high road is a lot longer and more difficult to navigate, the optimization of one’s hustle demands not only a capacity to experiment and entertain while regularly assessing one’s relative market position, but also a mental ability to absorb setbacks, be patient, and keep one’s eye on the prize(s) that will eventually arrive. The trouble is that, like experimentality and personality, patience seems to be a virtue whose resources are unequally distributed. One needs *time* to be patient. And while some models, for whom camming is not a major source of income, may find that time is on their side, those who depend on Chaturbate for their livelihood or are trying to make a living on the platform cannot afford to waste a lot of time in a near empty room. So while there is much talk about keeping the hustle going by trying out new ways to structure a show and combining or updating various platform-native market devices, the thread on Stripperweb suggests that some of the most prominent contributors to the forums eventually grew disillusioned with the progress and/or prospects of their hustle and at one point gave up on Chaturbate.¹⁴ These are often ‘serious’ models who claim to have been in the business for multiple years and were dedicated to the idea of making it work on this platform, but who could eventually not avoid growing impatient when their success began to decline – *if* they ever really could claim much success in the first place. The experience described by JW expresses this sense of defeat:

Chaturbate was the reason I quit camming. While I was there making money it was just my regulars I brought over from other sites who would tip me. Eventually they stopped tipping me and just gave me money directly because not only was NOBODY ELSE TIPPING but I was not meeting any of my goals. It didn’t matter what I did, how little or how much I charged, I simply quit meeting my goals. I had this horrible look on my face the whole time because I was irritated, so one day I just logged off and I never went back. Then I deleted my account.

I was tired of all the rude comments, of the beggars, and the people who would tip a token or two and then demand the world in return. Let me throw nickels at you and see what you do, bitch. Ugh, just thinking about it irritates me. (JW)

When, no matter what you do (with respect to the structure, timing, and pricing of your show, or your strategic mobilization of apps and social skills to entertain viewers), the tips just stop coming in, it means that your opportunities for action have been exhausted. The tried and true performance criteria on which the hustle is built can no longer provide an entrepreneurial or moral compass when their truth is belied by the frustrating reality of a dried up income stream. One could attribute this outcome to the shortcomings of a particular model or to an overcrowded labor market, yet we suggest that Chaturbate’s *manufactured uncertainty* also plays a distinct, albeit ambivalent, role here. While the opacity of the platform’s rules and governing logic certainly stimulates economic activity, competition, and innovation on the platform, some models also express that they experience it as hindering the cultivation of a consistent and sustainable hustle. As AA phrases it: ‘I don’t know how to develop a good “hustle” when it’s so all over the place.’ When the rules of the game can never be fully known, accounted for, or acted on with confidence, it becomes difficult to devise a morally legitimate *and* economically robust strategy that mobilizes a set of market devices to optimize one’s competitive position. Furthermore, these models also find it increasingly challenging to subscribe to the meritocratic order of worth that justifies their hustle, as it becomes apparent that its primary value of fairness hinders their success on Chaturbate rather than capacitating it.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the market opportunities introduced by the platformization of online sex work are not only unequally distributed but may in some cases also be outweighed by the challenges addressed here. As we have shown, the Chaturbate platform functions as an ‘algorithmic configuration’ that establishes dynamic protocols for market competition between adult webcam models. The most prominent market device that configures competition is the models’ board placement algorithm, whose secrecy makes competing on Chaturbate a highly uncertain process. We argued that, rather than inhibiting economic activity, this manufactured uncertainty is generative in the sense that it opens opportunities for entrepreneurial action, stimulating market innovation and value creation. Such market innovation, however, is only welcomed insofar it abides by the model community’s dominant ethos of fair play, which is grounded in a meritocratic order of worth. We then discussed two controversial competitive strategies that upset the established moral economy on the model forums we analyzed, to the extent that they adopt a ‘get big fast’ approach which aims to rapidly increase the public visibility and market share of a model’s show, at the potential risk of being banned from the platform. According to the community’s meritocratic order of worth, nobody should take such risk to be successful on Chaturbate, because success rather requires sacrifice; it has to be earned through what models call the hustle. A good hustle exploits opportunities for action by keeping open two legitimate performance criteria: experimentality (i.e. a readiness to innovate and try different things out within the parameters of fair play); and personality (i.e. the skills that allow a model to keep viewers entertained and accrue social capital on the platform). Yet, as we noted, the valorization of personality is contingent on the precondition of having an audience in the first place, which for some models remains out of reach. In this case, the only legitimate performance criterion left available is patience, which essentially constitutes a disposition of openness to future opportunities for action. To be patient is to believe that good things will come to those who wait, work hard, and learn from the success of their peers, but waiting can be exhausting, if not costly, especially in an environment marked by insecurity and ambiguity. We thus conclude that an algorithmically configured state of uncertainty in which the link between the tried and the true is routinely destabilized eventually tends to render the hustle of adult webcam models more precarious, while their value-generating activities continue to be captured, commensurated, and monetized as fungible commodities by Chaturbate. For each model that leaves the platform, ten others have just signed up to give it a try.

Our study has made two significant contributions. First, by integrating two distinct approaches in the field of economic sociology (research on market devices and studies of moral economies), it has elucidated how the sociotechnical construction of markets and the discursive formation of orders of worth – the production of value *and* values – are closely entangled. This has enabled a richer analysis of market competition (rather than market exchange). Second, our synthetic approach was brought to bear on adult webcam modeling, which has offered an innovative perspective on an increasingly popular mode of digitally mediated sex work. We thereby contribute not just to the study of a type of digital labor that has so far been unduly ignored, but also to a growing body of literature on the experiences, practices, and motivations of sex workers – by showing how these are influenced by digital platforms. Future research could build on this study by, for instance, investigating the competitive strategies models use to increase their earnings on different adult webcam platforms. It would also be very useful to examine whether/to what extent/how the manufactured uncertainty we have identified here is salient in other forms of platform-mediated labor (cf. Rosenblat and Stark 2016; Shapiro 2017).

Notes

1. See <https://www.stripplerweb.com/forum/forum.php> (Accessed 27 February 2017).
2. See <https://www.Ambercutie.com/forums/> (Accessed 27 February 2017).

3. We have decided on these measures based on the recommendations and directives provided by the *Journal of Cultural Economy* Editorial Team, three external internet ethics experts consulted by the Editor in Chief, as well as the Ethics Committee of the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR) – consulted separately by the authors.
4. See <http://www.alexacom/siteinfo/Chaturbate.com> (Accessed 27 February 2017).
5. See <http://www.alexacom/topsites/category/Top/Adult> (Accessed 27 February 2017).
6. According to Chaturbate's Chief Operating Officer Shirley Lara, the apps are the main reason why models choose to perform on Chaturbate rather than one of its many rivals (May 2015).
7. See <https://chaturbate.com/apps/> (Accessed 27 February 2017).
8. This score, accompanying the model's thumbnail display, is an aggregate of the 'satisfaction votes' all tipping viewers (having spent a minimum of 25 tokens) can cast. If a model's satisfaction score drops below 65%, subsequent viewers will receive a message warning them about the risk of tipping this model.
9. The platform raises the stakes of its ranking scheme: every hour, those registered models who are ranked first and second earn a bonus of 10 and 5 USD, respectively. See <https://chaturbate.com/contest/details/> (Accessed 27 February 2017).
10. As Bradley-Engen and Ulmer (2009) show in their study of the social organization of strip clubs, divergent orders of worth – which they term 'processual orders' – are organizationally and physically separated to the extent that they are identified with distinct strip clubs where strippers develop specific earning strategies and have different motivations and workplace experiences. In contrast, on Chaturbate such separation does not exist, resulting in a form of 'context collapse' that forces different orders of worth to more directly compete for dominance.
11. When, near the end of 2015, Chaturbate ostensibly adjusted its ranking algorithm to make board placement contingent on the total number of *tokens* held by viewers in a room, this move was largely seen as a measure to deter the use of viewbots whose accounts – it was inferred – cannot carry tokens.
12. The notion of the hustle, or hustling, is common among strippers and frequently has negative connotations which relate it to the act of conning. For instance, according to Bradley-Engen and Ulmer (2009, p. 37), a 'hustle club' promotes techniques of 'manipulation and swindling to encourage customers to spend money'. Beyond the gendered context of stripping, the hustle concept has a distinctly racialized history and is tied to African American vernacular, where it denotes a mode of survival dependent on a variety of (illegal) entrepreneurial practices in informal economies (Valentine 1978). Moreover, Spence (2015, p. 2) notes that the meaning of the hustle in black vernacular has changed over time:

Whereas in the late sixties and early seventies the hustler was someone who consistently sought to get over, the person who tried to do as little work as possible in order to make ends meet [...], the hustler is now someone who consistently works.

13. Callon and Muniesa discuss how the instruments of calculative power are unevenly distributed among calculative agencies, yet they do not address how the skills and knowledge required to properly use these instruments are likewise not equally available to all agencies.
14. From what we could tell based on our observations of the platform, it is not just the forum's more prominent models who give up on Chaturbate and this seems to be a broader phenomenon. In this respect Chaturbate is resembles other gig economy platforms, such as Uber, which also experience a significant amount of so-called 'platform churn' – or user turnover.

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