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Onlyfans as Gig-Economy Work: A nexus of precarity and stigma

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Abstract:

While online sex work in the form of the creation and sale of pornographic content is not a new phenomenon, the recent prominence of the platform OnlyFans drew additional attention to this sector. This article argues that OnlyFans, and other similar erotic-content platforms, can be understood as forms of platform-mediated gig-economy work, reflecting increased freedoms in some ways, but tempered with heightened financial precarity. Gig-economy work, with its linkages to discourses of entrepreneurialism, is intrinsically linked to neoliberalism, and in the context of online sex work, the division of labor is gendered. Conventional models of pornography production have been critiqued for the way they limit performers' control over their working conditions, and direct-to-consumer marketing of self-shot footage has been offered as a remedy to this. However, creators are still reliant on third parties in the form of platforms and payment processors. The recent threat that OnlyFans might ban explicit content, displacing the online sex workers who depend on the platform for a living, as well as the demonetization of Pornhub and AVNStars, highlights the way that online sex work is made vulnerable by existing at the nexus of sex work stigma, and the precarity inherent in platform-mediated gig-economy work.

1 Introduction

While online sex work has existed for decades, an example *par excellence* rose to prominence over the last few years. OnlyFans made the leap from being a niche site for performers to attract and market directly to their fans, to being part of broader cultural discourses, including being name-dropped by Beyoncé in early 2020 (Holmes 2020; van der Nagel 2021). The site attracted more attention during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, for a combination of reasons. Firstly, some sex workers who usually worked doing face-to-face appointments switched to offering digital services (Brouwers and Herrmann 2020; Berg 2021, 17; Callander et al. 2022). The site also appealed to people, mostly women, who found themselves un- or under-employed as a result of the pandemic, or who had to

leave full-time work because of increased caregiving responsibilities (Friedman 2021; Harcourt 2021; Berg 2021, 17-18). Anecdotal reports also indicate that the isolation of lockdowns and quarantines, particularly of the early stages of the pandemic, drove an increase in customers on the site (Shane 2021).

OnlyFans' popularity has been attributed in part to the fact that it wasn't exclusively (or at least not officially) a site dedicated to pornography or erotic content – the site would often distance itself in public statements from the adult content producers who were largely responsible for the growth and success of the company, a position criticized by many sex workers (Shane 2021; Harcourt 2021; van der Nagel 2021). Despite this, OnlyFans and other online sex work platforms are vulnerable to the kind of stigma and discrimination which affects sex workers more generally, including affecting their ability to access financial services (McCausland et al. 2020, 11; Berg 2021, 151; Easterbrook-Smith 2022, 15; Callander et al. 2022, 7-8). In August 2021, OnlyFans briefly announced it would be banning all sexually explicit content in response to pressure from banks and financial institutions (Turner 2021), although the company swiftly backtracked on this (Adams 2021). While this was arguably the highest profile example of an adult-content site being affected by banking discrimination, Pornhub also lost the ability to accept credit card payments in late 2020 (Cole 2020b), and in December 2021 AVN announced the demonetization of their subscription and video sales wings, AVN Stars and GayVN Stars, attributing this directly to difficulties in accessing banking services (AVN 2021).

Online sex work can be understood as a form of sex work, but also as a kind of gig- or platform-economy work (Bleakley 2014; Pitcher 2015; Ruberg 2016; Berg 2016; Rand 2019). Online sex work may provide performers with earning opportunities not afforded by studio-produced pornography, particularly those who are discriminated against in the hiring practices and payment models of conventional sex industry businesses, such as performers who are Black and/or transgender (Berg 2021, 57-59; Shane 2021). However, some workers report the structural discriminations which they experience in other forms of sex work persist in online spaces (Jones 2015a; Callander et al. 2022). Meanwhile, gig-economy work carries some benefits for workers, namely flexibility and the assumed ability to supplement other income (Vallas and Schor 2020; Pangrazio, Bishop and Lee 2021), but also places workers in a position of taking on risks and costs which would traditionally have been taken on by an employer (Vallas and Schor 2020; Zwick 2018). Gig-economy work is often carried out by

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people who are already in economically precarious positions (Zwick 2018) or to supplement full time jobs which are poorly paid or are not sufficient to meet living costs (Vallas and Schor 2020, 280; Churchill and Craig 2019, 745-746, 752-753). Research into gig-economy workers outside of the sex industry has found that who does what kind of task tends to be strongly gendered, with men more likely to carry out work that has been traditionally coded as masculine, and women more likely to do work traditionally considered feminine, such as caregiving or cleaning (Churchill and Craig 2019). Online sex work may be done by workers of all genders and sexualities, but some platforms only permit cisgender women to sign up as models (Jones 2016), and like other kinds of sex work, online sex work is more commonly carried out or relied upon for as a main source of income by cis and trans women (Henry and Farvid 2017, 120; Berg 2016, 171) and sometimes by queer or marketing-as-queer cisgender men (Berg 2021, 98), with a noted lack of trasmasculine and nonbinary performers (Jones 2021).

The disruptions to the payment processing and banking of the platforms which host and facilitate these forms of gig-economy work highlight how the stigma and structural discrimination against sex work creates a class of gig-economy workers who are exposed to a significantly heightened degree of precarity. Existing research, particularly from Berg (2021), draws attention to the ways that analytic frameworks of labour and work offer useful insights into the production cultures of pornography. This article aims to contribute to an understanding of how, even within forms of pornography production which offer performers a greater degree of control over their work conditions, they are still made vulnerable in ways best understood through an analysis which considers their work through frames of labour and capital, but specifically mediated and affected by the stigma which affects sex workers generally.

Scoular points out that periods of economic or cultural shift often presage significant legislative change, and prostitution law has frequently been a target of this change, owing to its combined associations with "problematic consumption" and "dangerous identities", which makes it a focus as a site of social change which threatens the hegemonic order (2010, 14-15). For a period throughout the late 20th and early 21st century there was a sustained focus on prostitution law as a means to address "trafficking" and sexual exploitation (Scoular 2010; Doezema 1999). Continued expressions of this concern can be seen in the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA), which led to

the closure of avenues for online advertising for sex workers, and coincided with the seizure and shuttering of Backpage, another popular advertising site (Sanders et al. 2020, 82-84; Bronstein 2021; Cowan and Colosi 2021). The latest restrictions on payment processing for online pornography come in the wake of these Acts, and the associated heightened liability for any company hosting content which facilitated prostitution or sex trafficking (Sanders et al. 2020, 83; Cowan and Colosi 2021; van der Nagel 2021). This paper maps out these latest disruptions to payment processing for platform-based sex work, and theorizes them with reference to existing work on both online sex work and gig-economy work. It offers a detailed overview of key events in the emergent trend of payment processors declining service to online sex work platforms and analyses the way that the power of performers to dictate how they work is limited by platform policies, which, again, are frequently influenced by payment processors. This paper concludes by exploring these points as intrinsically entangled with existing stigmas and legislative controls on prostitution. In doing so, it highlights the intersecting vulnerabilities which online sex workers experience: as precarious gig-economy workers reliant on platforms, but also affected by the precarity engineered and produced through legislative movements which target prostitution, as part of the broader community of sex workers. Given the disproportionate demographic make-up of online sex workers, this vulnerability which occurs at the nexus of precarity and stigma manifests in a way which is highly gendered.

2 Intersections Between Gig-Work and Online Sex Work

2.1 What is the gig-economy?

The term 'gig-economy', also called the 'platform-economy' refers to insecure, often short-term or piecemeal, employment, frequently facilitated by a platform or app, such as Uber, Fiverr or TaskRabbit (Zwick 2018; Levitt 2021). A significant growth in platform-based economies occurred in the wake of the financial crisis of the late '00s, and the expansion of the casualization of work (which had previously been facilitated by temp agencies) is intrinsically linked to the possibilities afford by the internet (Zwick 2018; Vallas and Schor 2020; Levitt 2021). Gig-economy work is typified by workers being employed as independent contractors, not employees, thereby individuating financial risk and precarity, and excluding them from labour protections and benefits (Moisander, Groß and Eräranta 2018; Zwick 2018). Gig-economy workers are frequently those who are already the most

economically vulnerable, including migrants and those belonging to minority populations (Zwick 2018), while Pangrazio et al. identify that the gendered dimensions of who does what kind of piecemeal work, and the particular issues faced by women in the gig-economy, is often ignored in media discourses about the growth of this model (2021, 13).

When the benefits of gig-economy work to workers are discussed, it is typically with reference to opportunities for entrepreneurialism, and for workers to embrace flexible work, or work for themselves (Vallas and Schor 2020; Pangrazio, Bishop and Lee 2021). This, alongside the way that gig- or platform-economies help businesses to further reduce costs through cultivating a workforce who are scalable on an almost instantaneous basis, using what has been referred to as a "just-in-time" model of employment, reveals the ways that the structure and growth of gig-economy work is inherently enmeshed with neoliberalism, enabled largely by the deregulation of labour markets (Ross 2008; De Stefano 2015; Vallas and Schor 2020). Neoliberalism is here used to describe an economic and governmental approach which foregrounds notions of individual responsibility with a concomitant denial of structural determinants of opportunity, where neoliberal policies and discourses result in the "reconfiguration of subjects as economic entrepreneurs" (Davies and Bansel 2007, 248; Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008; Scharff 2016).

Although gig-economy workers experience some benefits from the structure of this style of employment (namely increased flexibility), the work is also precarious and brings with it exposure to various economic vulnerabilities. Cultural discourses about gig-economy work often present it as a supplementary form of labour, or an extra 'hustle' rather than a reliable or main source of income (Vallas and Schor 2020, 280; Pangrazio, Bishop and Lee 2021, 9). Platform-mediated gig-economy workers are also vulnerable because they depend upon access to specific platforms or apps to book jobs and receive payments, with the risk of being 'deactivated' or having their access to platforms revoked, either in response to poor customer ratings or for taking an extended break from a particular platform (Vallas and Schor 2020, 280, 282; Pangrazio, Bishop and Lee 2021, 3-4). They are also forced to take on additional risks and costs which formerly would have been borne at least partly by employers, such as damage to tools, the costs and responsibility for rehabilitating from an injury, and financial security between paid gigs (Vallas and Schor 2020; Zwick 2018).

2.2 WHAT IS ONLINE SEX WORK?

The term 'online sex work' has been used in multiple ways in academic research, including to refer to the ways that face-to-face sex workers use the internet to attract and screen clients, with the new advertising terrain of the internet having "dramatically affected the organization of the sex industries", and many sex workers considering it integral to their business (Pitcher 2015; Jones 2015b; Sanders et al. 2016, 2; Cunningham et al. 2018, 49). In this paper the term 'online sex work' refers to the production and sale of erotic content, either synchronous or asynchronous. Earlier work has focused extensively on live (that is, synchronous) webcam performances, which were arguably initially the dominant mode of engaging in online sex work (Bleakley 2014; Jones 2015a; Jones 2016; Sanders et al. 2016; Henry and Farvid 2017). Online sex work also encompasses "content delivery platforms" which workers can use to sell videos which they have shot and produced (Sanders et al. 2018, 38).

More recently, there has been a proliferation of sites which followed a subscription or membership model, with OnlyFans being the most well-known example of this (van der Nagel 2021). Subscription model sites are often modelled loosely after social media platforms, with subscribers able to 'like' and comment on posts, and to follow multiple performers, whose content is then displayed in a homepage or timeline which mimics the set-up of applications like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. These sites sometimes included the capability to stream live video performances, but communication with fans or subscribers more often takes place through instant messaging features (Sanders et al. 2018, 15). These messaging features also offer an ability to increase earnings beyond what subscription fees generate, with performers able to send messages (containing text and/or visual content) that can be 'unlocked' by paying a specified fee, sometimes known as 'pay-per-view' or PPV. The emphasis on OnlyFans, then, leans towards the production and sale of 'content' over livestreamed webcam performances (van der Nagel 2021, 395).

Online sex work may offer an increased ability for workers who are affected by discriminatory hiring practices in mainstream or studio-produced pornography to control their own image, or to produce and perform in pornography (Berg 2016, 168-169, 171). In particular, transgender and nonbinary sex workers are often limited in which studios will hire them and pay a market rate for scenes (even in 'indie' pornography) but may find they have a higher earning potential through online work (Stardust 2019; Del Rio and Pezzutto 2020; Shane 2021). Similarly, Black pornography performers are often more reliant on

supplementary income from 'satellite' industries like online sex work, as a result of being offered lower per-scene rates (Berg 2016, 163, 170). Online sex work is also often used as a supplementary form of income for mainstream pornography performers (or sometimes as a primary form of income, but secondary identity next to "porn star") (Berg 2016). Similarly, research in the UK has found significant crossover between sectors of the sex industry, with most surveyed independent full service workers who advertised online doing at least one other kind of online sex work as well (Sanders et al. 2018, 17-18). During the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought a new suite of risks to any form of face-to-face work, many sex workers who had previously worked in different sectors expanded into online sex work as well (Brouwers and Herrmann 2020; Berg 2021, 17; Callander et al. 2022). One of the drawcards of self-produced pornography is the appearance of authenticity which it offers to customers, facilitated by the interactivity of webcam performances and the ability to message performers directly (Bleakley 2014; Jones 2016; Berg 2021, 16, 105-106).

2.3 Existing critiques or analyses of online sex work as gig-economy work

In recent years, there has been an increase in analysis of sex work, including online sex work, which explicitly conceptualizes it through the lens of digital labour or gig-economy work (Bleakley 2014; Pitcher 2015; Ruberg 2016; Berg 2016; Rand 2019; Stardust 2019). A limitation to the development of these theorisations has been a tendency to exclude of sex work from broader theories of precarious work, owing partially to the way that sexual labour has been treated as illegitimate (Rand 2019) and by a historic framing of research into sex work which has been "much more about sex than it is about work" (Vanwesenbeeck 2001, 242).

Bleakley's analysis is consistent with analyses of gig-economy work which view it as presenting an opportunity for workers, positioning webcam performances as an opportunity for entrepreneurialism. He argues that the growth of user-produced content placed performers "at the forefront of the industry's evolution", and offered opportunities for economic empowerment (2014, 893). In contrast, Ruberg analyses the proliferation of amateur-created content uploaded to tube sites, offered with little expectation of payment, interrogating how this content could be understood as a kind of digital labour, and calling attention to how the presumed authenticity of desire that this content displayed risked reinforcing existing stigmas about for-profit pornography production (2016). Ruberg points out that reifying "digital DIY porn" perpetuates the notion that sexual content produced for free is more ethical (2016, 156-

157). This position, that material produced or offered for free is more ethical is echoed by "ethical porn" companies who claim that by offering less than the standard market rates for scenes they ensure performers are authentically engaged with the work they do (Berg 2021, 72). This position also functions to undermine the legitimacy of sex work as real labour, which deserves to be adequately compensated. In online sex work, as in most other kinds of gig-economy work, risks – including of criminalization in locations where activities associated with prostitution are still illegal – are transferred to the worker as much as possible (Rand 2019, 46; Brouwers and Herrmann 2020). Workers' choices about which online sex work platforms to use are dictated by which have the best brand recognition, largest customer base, and therefore offer the highest earning potential, in a model which also resembles the dominance which Uber has over gig-economy driver-for-hire work (Rand 2019, 47).

In addition to the ways that platform-mediated online sex work can be understood as a gig-economy, performing in pornography more generally can usefully be framed in this way, because of the nature of the short-term insecure contracts which workers rely upon (Stardust 2019; Berg 2016). Similar to how Uber, TaskRabbit and Fiverr prompt customers to rate individual workers, with the resulting ratings influencing their continued ability to work, sex workers rely upon the positive relationships with production companies for continued work. Sex work more generally has also been discussed in these terms, including by Levitt who argues that the industry "operates according to the logics of the gig economy" pointing specifically to the hallmarks of "multiple sources of income, independent contractor status, low wages, flexibility, and a premium on creativity" (2021, 59).

3 Economic Precarity in Platform Sex Work

Gig-economy workers are placed in an economically precarious position by the structure and norms of the platforms they rely upon for their work. Sex workers, too, are often economically precarious, both because as independent contractors they are unable to rely on consistent or predictable income, but also because of their vulnerability to discrimination from financial institutions. This often plays out on an individual level – workers who have accounts shut down, loan applications declined, or funds seized (Swartz 2020, 76-79; Berg 2021, 151; Easterbrook-Smith 2022, 15; Callander et al. 2022, 7-8) – but the withdrawal of service to platforms used to sell pornographic or erotic content affects a much larger numbers of workers, representing a systemic dismantling and limiting of the digital infrastructure

which workers rely on for their income. The reliance of platform-based online sex work on third-party payment processors places sex workers at the nexus of the economic precarity which typifies gig work, and the stigma which sex work and pornography is subjected to.

While individual content creators are "heavily reliant on their host website to facilitate their business" (Bleakley 2014, 900), the platforms which they use are in turn reliant on financial institutions and payment processors for their business model. Pornography is typically considered a "high risk" business which attracts higher fees from payment processors, because of the increased risk of chargebacks (Swartz 2020, 87-88). In recent years, multiple websites which facilitated the sale or streaming of adult content have been impacted by banking discrimination. In early December 2020, Pornhub made major changes to its business model, announcing only verified content partners and members of its model program would be permitted to upload videos to the site, and deleted all content which had been uploaded by other users (Pornhub 2020; Cole 2020a). The changes occurred following the appearance of an article in the *New York Times* which detailed the publication of child sexual abuse images on the site (Kristoff 2020). Shortly after, credit card companies including Visa, Mastercard and Discover revoked payment processing support for Pornhub, in a move which was criticized for the impact it would have on individual content creators who relied on the site for income derived from selling videos and other content they produced and performed in (Cole 2020b; Fabbri 2021). Despite Visa claiming Pornhub's ability to process payments was being suspended "pending the completion of our ongoing investigation" (Cole 2020b), over a year later the site is still unable to accept credit card payments (although some MindGeek sites which do not host user-created content have had processing reinstated).

Then, in August 2021, subscription site OnlyFans which, while not explicitly an adult content site, has built its brand on erotic and pornographic content, announced what was popularly termed a "porn ban", with the site citing banking restrictions and regulations as the reason for the decision (Turner 2021). Although this decision was later reversed, the changes rattled creators who relied on the site for their income (Adams 2021; Contreras 2021). Most recently (at the time of writing), Adult Video Network (AVN) announced that from 1 January 2022 the monetization features of AVN Stars and GayVN Stars would be discontinued, explicitly in response to banking discrimination (AVN 2021). The emergent trend of online sex work platforms folding as a result of banking discrimination seems likely to continue, with

MasterCard recently introducing extremely stringent new requirements for sites (Patella-Rey 2021; Stryker 2021), and if this occurs online sex workers' options for managing risk through diversification will further diminish.

In addition to the shuttering of platforms, the ability of individual sex workers to transition into even more direct sales to customers has also been impeded by anti-sex work policies from payment processors. Sex workers have argued that recently passed legislation in the U.S.A, typically termed SESTA-FOSTA, has limited their ability to accept payments for online services through other payment applications such as Gift-Rocket, PayPal, and Venmo, noting this made a transition to online work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic more difficult or impractical (Bronstein 2021; Cowen and Colosi 2021, 294; Hacking/Hustling n.d.; Callander et al. 2022). The reliance on platforms cannot be easily or reliably circumvented, even for performers who have a large enough customer base to sustain a living without traffic driven partly through the brand-recognition of platforms like OnlyFans, or the internal traffic of sites with a search or algorithmic suggestion function.

4 Producer Control in Pornography Production

One of the benefits of online sex work is that it gives workers greater control over the content they perform in. This means that they have a higher degree of control over exactly what acts they will perform, what safer-sex precautions they take (or if they will perform in partnered scenes), how they market themselves, as well as meaning in most cases they retain the rights to the content they star in, and reap the financial rewards of scenes or clips which are especially popular[1] (Bleakley 2014; Berg 2021, 10, 16-17, 105). Additionally, the more direct contact with customers, and the appearance or performance of authenticity is a specific selling point, which workers often highlight and utilize as a marketing tactic (Jones 2016; Stardust 2019; Berg 2021, 16-17; van der Nagel 2021). Research into pornography viewers' perceptions of the 'realness' of performances reveals they engage with the material they consume in complex ways, and at least some display an interest and concern in the production conditions of the scenes they watch (Taylor 2022). Producing and selling content online is often framed in terms of its ability to allow performers control over when and how

[1] Exceptions to this may exist in the form of content made for trade with other performers, depending on the agreement about copyright ownership.

they work, similar to how gig-economy platforms such as Uber attempt to attract new employees by promising you will "be your own boss" (Uber 2018).

In the case of content sites, as with Uber, the degree of control which performers have over when and how they work, and their rates of pay, is often not as great as the platforms sometimes claim. Online content platforms have terms of service which dictate what kinds of content can and cannot be sold. Even if particular kinds of content are not outright banned, restrictions on which words can be used may make it difficult to accurately describe what a particular video depicts, or bans and limitations may be enforced inconsistently (Hall 2021). OnlyFans, for example, bans the words 'fisting' and 'pegging' (Hall 2021) – and these content bans or limitations are sometimes also linked to the regulations enforced by payment processors (IWantClips n.d.; Patella-Rey 2021). Social networking sites moderate content and suspend accounts in ways which disproportionately target Black and transgender people and site users from these groups are aware of this inconsistent moderation, while anecdotal reports indicate that marginalized performers are policed more stringently on content sites, (Haimson et al. 2021; Stryker 2021). Social networking sites frequently delete the posts or accounts of sex workers who use them to attract customers, and the inconsistent way content moderation is carried out means this particularly affects performers who are Black and/or transgender (Bronstein 2021; Akhtar and Mitchell 2021).

While it is not exerted in such a direct manner as pressure from an agent, director or producer to perform in particular kinds of scenes, limitations such as this do produce a degree of economic coercion to create particular kinds of content which are able to be marketed more broadly, or which are less liable to result in content or account deletion on online sex work platforms. Performers report that the impact of content restrictions is often to enforce a kind of self-censorship as a precautionary measure (Hall, 2021). Rates of pay, too, are limited – most content sites have upper and lower limits as to what can be charged for particular kinds of content – Clips4sale.com, for example, links this to the length of videos which are uploaded, in an attempt to enforce some kind of standardization of rates (Clips4sale 2020). In mid-2020 OnlyFans introduced new caps on the maximum which creators could charge for exclusive or pay-per-view content, and on how much subscribers or 'fans' could tip in a single transaction (López 2020). As with other kinds of gig-economy work, performers also take on all the costs associated with producing content, and the associated economic risks. If their content sells well there is the potential that they may earn more from it over the lifetime

of the scene than they would through conventional production models, but it does not have the guaranteed per-scene rate which comes with studio work.

In some senses, performers who sell content through these platforms do have control over their work, in that they choose when and how often to create content, but the role that platforms play bears some similarities to that of managers or bosses. They profit from the labour of the workers – OnlyFans takes a 20% cut of sales through the platform, and other content sites take even higher percentages, with Clips4sale and Manyvids taking 40%, for example, while some live-cam sites take over 50% (Shane 2021; Manyvids n.d.; Clips4sale n.d.; Berg 2021, 105-106). They exert control over what kind of content performers can sell, and decisions to highlight some performers by placing them on the front page of the site, listing them higher in search rankings, or preferentially enforcing content restrictions, mean they influence the earnings of individual contractors too. The gig-economy model is advantageous to content sites in the same way that it is to sites such as Fiverr or Task Rabbit – workers have few rights, typically have no benefits, while sites benefit from offering a greater selection of contractors to customers, for little extra outlay per performer in the form of server space. Similar to complaints that an over-saturation of Uber drivers limited the ability of workers to earn the promised livable wages (Peticca-Harris, deGama and Ravishankar 2020, 51-52), and that operators in brothels or dungeons tend to overstate potential earnings and over-staff their shifts (Levitt 2021, 62-63), while OnlyFans attracted media attention through profiles of a few atypically high-earning models, the majority of performers earned much less, finding the market highly saturated and competitive, and the hours required draining (Rand 2019; Shane 2021; van der Nagel 2021, 400-401; Callander et al. 2022, 7).

5 Conclusion: sex work stigma and the gig-economy

Sex workers have historically been a marginalized population, whose income is often very precarious. The ability of sex workers to dictate their work conditions are often limited, and this applies particularly to sex workers who do full-service sex work in locations where prostitution is still criminalized. The criminalization of prostitution and associated activities, as well as increased restrictions on advertising options and, in practice, on online safety resources which came with SESTA-FOSTA, make sex workers less safe, and give them less discretion about how they work (Scoular 2010; Platt et al. 2018; Sanders et al. 2020, 51-52;

Bronstein 2021; Cowen and Colosi 2021). Models of regulating prostitution vary: these include full and partial criminalization; the 'Nordic' or 'Swedish' model which criminalizes the purchase of sex; regulation or legalization models; and decriminalization (Scoular 2010; Abel 2014; Platt et al. 2018; Cowen and Colosi 2021).

As indicated in the introduction to this article, one justification for restrictive prostitution law is that it prevents trafficking or exploitation, however in these arguments trafficking is frequently conflated with voluntary sex work, and laws which aim to prevent trafficking may paradoxically place migrant sex workers at greater risk (Doezema 1999; Armstrong 2017). Similarly, the 'Nordic model' notionally aims to stop the exploitation of sex workers, but in practice it makes them more vulnerable, pushing the industry underground, and in some places has "shifted the power relationship in favour of clients" (Kingston and Thomas 2019, 429). Sex work legalization which places additional regulatory burdens on the sex industry, over and above those which apply to other comparable businesses, tends to create a two-tier system, in which some people can comply with the relevant regulations, and others continue to be criminalized (Scoular 2010; Platt et al. 2018). Additionally, in practice the enforcement of the law can be very similar under criminalization and legalization, in that the most visible and frequently most vulnerable sectors of the industry are targeted for policing (Scoular 2010).

In contrast, the model of decriminalization treats sex work as a form of labour: brothels must abide by health and safety policies as other workplaces do, and sex workers have protection from employment law (although this is sometimes limited by their independent contractor status) (Abel 2014; Easterbrook-Smith 2022). New Zealand is one of the few places to have decriminalized sex work, passing the Prostitution Reform Act (PRA) in 2003. The approach of the PRA foregrounds the human rights and occupational health and safety of sex workers, and although it has not eradicated the stigma about the industry, sex workers have reported that the protection of decriminalization has made them more confident in asserting and enforcing their rights in negotiations with clients and management (Abel, 2014; Armstrong 2017; Abel and Ludeke 2021).

Although this article deals with online sex work, not prostitution, a summary of the operation of different legislative approaches to sex work – and the way that criminalization and heightened scrutiny frequently makes workers more vulnerable - is offered because of the

way that the criminalization of prostitution impacts on online sex work. Cultural discourses about trafficking and exploitation, and how to respond to them, have expanded from focusing primarily on face-to-face sex work into the online sphere, and "the Internet has become a new site for police surveillance of sex work" (Sanders et al. 2018, 123). Restrictive models are policed unequally, reinforcing existing inequalities and placing workers at greater risk, often through forcing them to change how they work. Echoes of this can be seen in the operation and regulation of online sex work platforms, both by payment processors, and in the on-site enforcement of content policies.

Different forms of sex work are stigmatized to different degrees, with various kinds of work or groups of workers arranged in a kind of hierarchy or "whorearchy", including from within the community in the form of horizontal surveillance (Berg 2021, 102-104; Callander et al. 2022, 8-9). Performing in pornography is typically the form of sex work viewed as being most credible – Berg notes some performers make "porn star" their primary work identity in part because of "the greater respectability afforded to a legal industry" (2021, 103). However, in practice the stigma and structural discriminations applied to people involved with prostitution are slippery, affecting the broader sex industry in different ways. Additionally, while performing in pornography and working in full-service sex work are distinct forms of sex work, many pornography performers moonlight by seeing private clients (Berg 2021, 100-101, 106-108), sex workers may work in multiple ways simultaneously (Sanders et al. 2016; Rand 2019; Levitt 2021, 68), and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic led to many sex workers who typically worked face-to-face to switch to online work (Brouwers and Herrmann 2020; Berg 2021, 17; Callander et al. 2022). As seen in the claims from sex workers that the anti-trafficking SESTA-FOSTA legislation impacted their ability to be paid for online services, structural and legislative arrangements which intend to target prostitution have broader consequences for the wider sex industry (Patella-Rey 2021; Berg 2021, 148-151; Callander et al. 2022).

Sex workers have a long history of strong self-advocacy, both in prostitution and pornography (Berg 2021, 174-180; Easterbrook-Smith 2022, 8-11), which attempts to challenge discourses which produce the sex worker as a figure in need of paternalistic protection and rescue. Depictions of management or third parties in sex work have historically flattened them into caricatures which render them as solely as opportunistic or predatory, exploiting workers (the paradigmatic sex worker is typically a woman in these

narratives), and necessitating the intervention of the law (Hannem and Bruckert 2017; Cowen and Colosi 2021, 290). The role which this managerial class plays is more complex, however, both in pornography and in the broader sex industry, with managers and studios offering both a respite from some administrative tasks (such as maintaining a website, or fielding enquiries from clients) and a forum through which to tap into an existing pool of customers (Pitcher 2015, 116-117; Abel and Ludeke 2021; Berg 2021, 108). These sites and services are useful, at least to some workers, then. Legislative attempts to 'protect' sex workers however will often target people in these roles, which can function to limit sex workers' ability to put in place safety measures and engage support or administrative services which independent contractors in other industries might use. Laws which notionally aim to prevent workers from being trafficked or exploited by third parties have also been used to prosecute people who engage with sex workers as their receptionists, drivers, security, or cleaners, or who 'live off the earnings of prostitution' as a dependent relative or spouse (Wijers 2001; Pitcher 2015, 116; Sanders et al. 2018, 107-108).

Attempts to banish sex workers from particular spaces, or the criminalization of their work does not result in the industry disappearing, but rather forces workers into more dangerous working conditions, or limits their choices about where and how to work. Where we see attempts to cut off the cash flow to sites such as PornHub, OnlyFans and AVN Stars as targeting the digital infrastructure used by sex workers, or removing sex work from digital spaces, precedent for this kind of systematic removal of sex work or spaces for sexual contact can be found in the policing of areas known to be used for solicitation, or the targeted removal of porn theatres used for cruising in Times Square (Delany 1999; Scoular 2020; Edelman 2011; Ross 2012). The impacts of dismantling of the formal and informal infrastructure for sex work are borne unequally, affecting primarily women, while also falling more heavily on queer and transgender workers who have fewer other options for places and spaces in which to find clientele.

Gig-economy workers are vulnerable in particular ways, due to the lack of workplace protections and benefits extended to them, and especially because of their reliance on specific platforms to secure work, placing them in a position where platforms have little motivation to offer more attractive packages to their contractors. Sex workers are also made vulnerable both through the social impacts of stigma, but more pertinently for this paper, through the impacts of policies which treat them as vulnerable, and their work as an immoral threat. In

practice, online sex workers experience a compounding precarity, where they are reliant on platforms to an even greater degree than gig-economy workers in other fields, often being unable to accept online payment through other means. This reliance produces heightened economic insecurity owing to the threat of banks and payment processors withdrawing service to the platforms. The specific experiences of structural discrimination and stigma experienced by online sex workers is best understood as a situation created by the interactions between a stigma about sex work and pornography, and the neoliberal stripping of workplace protections and benefits, and social safety nets.

When online sex work platforms have their ability to operate disrupted by cutting off payment processing, we see them being targeted on two levels: both as virtual spaces for sexual commerce, and as a managerial utility viewed as a source of potential exploitation. In this, we see a continuation of the tendency for legislative attempts to protect sex workers to instead make them more vulnerable. During the pandemic, especially, being able to at least partially replace the earnings from face-to-face work with online work has enabled some workers to manage their potential exposure to the virus (Shane 2021; Brouwers and Herrmann 2020; Callander et al. 2022). Under other circumstances, earnings from online work may give workers a financial buffer which allows them to screen clients more selectively, or to take time off to care for their health or recover from injuries. The flexibility which gig-economy work and sex work provides is appreciated by many workers, however in the gig-economy both within and outside of sexual labour, these benefits are undermined when flexibility provides the preconditions for vulnerability.

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