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## **Abstract**

It has been well documented that online sex workers are increasingly being made invisible in online spaces due to legislation which equates all sex work with sex trafficking (Blunt and Wolf 2020; Musto et al 2021). In turn, this has led to income losses, reduced access to harm-reduction tools and emotional distress for sex workers (Blunt et al 2020). What has been less examined is how being made visible is also a risk (Stegeman et al. 2024). In light of this, I suggest that much of sex workers' labour is spent 'managing visibility', and develop two research questions:

- i) How do online sex workers navigate visibility regimes on platforms?
- ii) How does 'visibility work' affect online sex workers?

This dissertation uses critical phenomenology to analyse how visibility regimes affect online sex workers' experiences of work. I argue that platforms are generally 'oriented away' from sex workers bodies, which risks them being made involuntarily hyper(in)visible. Interviews with online sex workers, however, suggest that sex workers navigate and sometimes subvert these orientations, getting visibility to work *for* them, rather than solely acting *on* them. Additionally, this study looks at the impacts of doing 'visibility labour', suggesting that it is demanding yet can be rewarding.

**Table of Contents**

**Abstract.....1**

**I. Introduction.....3**

**II. Platforming Sex Work .....5**

**III. Digital Gentrification.....8**

**IV. Introducing Phenomenology.....12**

**V. Method.....16**

**VI. Demanding Presence: Physical bodies, digital spaces.....18**

**VII. Managing visibility: Navigations and subversions .....21**

**Conclusion.....26**

**Bibliography.....27**

**Appendices.....32**

## I. Introduction

*Desire built the internet*

*Criminalized labor built the internet*

*Communal innovation built the internet*

*Sex workers built the internet*

(Foldes n.d: n.p.)

The interactive game OnlyBans is a ‘living document’ of sex workers’ experiences of selling sex on the internet. The aim of the game is simple: to create and upload sexual content, and to make a profit by the end of the week. Along the journey, however, players “encounter content moderation, algorithms, shadowbanning, "real name" policies, facial recognition software, and other threats” (OnlyBans, n.d.). Often, this leads to censorship, account deletions, or having your identity revealed or stolen. For many sex workers, this is not a game, but a reality which leads to economic precarity, emotional distress and physical unsafety. Despite being both pioneers and early adapters of the internet (Foldes n.d.<sup>1</sup>), sex workers are increasingly being excluded from digital spaces due an intensified targeting and policing of sexual content.

This dissertation examines how sex workers have been affected by the migration to online spaces. Particularly, it looks at the platformisation of sex work, suggesting in line with Helen Rand (2019) that platforms have made the pursuit of visibility central to sex workers’ labour. In turn, this has required that sex workers ‘hustle’ and ‘hack’ platforms in order to make themselves visible (Hardy and Barbagallo 2021). At the same time, however, I contend that visibility also promotes risk, including heightened privacy concerns and online abuse (Jones 2015; European Sex Workers’ Rights Alliance (ESWA) 2022). This counters claims that online creators should always strive to be more visible (Banet-Weiser 2018). While much research has been developed on the invisibility of sex workers (e.g. Blunt and Wolf 2020; Blunt et al. 2020), fewer have focused on these modes of hypervisibility, and its relationship with invisibility. In light of this, I propose two research questions:

- i) How do online sex workers navigate visibility regimes on platforms?
- ii) How does ‘visibility work’ affect online sex workers?

In order to address these research questions, I put Sara Ahmed’s (2007) and Linda Martín Alcoff’s (2007) phenomenological theories in dialogue with research on online sex work. Using Ahmed’s and Alcoff’s work, I suggest to argue that institutions are ‘oriented around’ normative bodies. According to Ahmed and Alcoff, those who do not conform to these norms are either

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sexworkersbuilttheinter.net/> is a brilliant site created by Livia Foldes, outlining the contributions of sex workers to the internet

made invisible or hypervisible by the institutions they reside within. Here, I consider online spaces such as social media platforms to be institutions which, similar to physical spaces, put some things ‘within reach’ for those that they are oriented around, and marginalise those who do not conform to the norm. This theory is particularly useful in the context of online sex work; firstly, because it emphasises the *experiences* of platforms and visibility alongside the structures of platforms (which in themselves are often vague or hidden); secondly, because it considers how perceptions of one’s physical body affects how one’s digital body can take up space; and thirdly, it follows Stegeman et al. in problematising the dominant idea that creators should always strive to be more visible, instead arguing that “being visible on a public platform is both a resource and a risk” (2024: n.p.).

Academia has historically excluded sex workers from the production of sex work research (Berg 2021a), leading to extraction of knowledge which has contributed to the pathologisation and essentialised narratives about sex work (Mac and Smith 2018). The methodology and research questions of this dissertation have therefore been informed by research frameworks which privilege sex workers’ experiences. This includes formulating research questions which are based on conversations with sex workers and sex worker organisations’ research. I conduct five qualitative interviews to address these research questions, which are semi-structured to allow for interpretations and deviation from the interview questions. Alongside the interviews, I consider secondary sources, such as sex worker blogs, publications, podcasts and academic work. Whenever possible, I acknowledge sex workers as experts on their work and therefore privilege research conducted by and with sex workers themselves<sup>2</sup>.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I define ‘online sex worker’ as anyone who exchanges sex or sexual services for money or goods, and whose work is partially or entirely mediated by the internet (Sanders et al. 2018). This includes (but is not limited to) porn performers, fetish content producers, webcammers, professional dominatrices or submissives, and escorts and full service workers who use listing sites to advertise in-person meets. While this dissertation does mention some platforms and sites, it doesn’t aim to conduct an analysis of a specific platform. Instead, it looks at how these sites together generate current working conditions for sex workers in the UK. In the UK, selling sex is not illegal but solicitation, third-party involvement and advertising of sexual service is, which makes sex work part of the informal and unregulated economy (Scoular et al. 2019).

Finally, a note on the way phenomenology is employed in this study. Recently, some scholars have criticised certain qualitative studies for not being ‘phenomenological’ despite

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to the ‘[Sex Worker Syllabus](#)’, an academic resource curated by Heather Berg, Angela Jones and PJ Patella-Rey, which many of the works cited here are drawn from

claiming that they are, because they fail to draw on the philosophical tradition of phenomenology (van Manen 2017). While Sara Ahmed's and Linda Martín Alcoff's phenomenological theories draw on the philosophical tradition of phenomenology - including the work of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty - it is not my intention to pay attention to these traditions as such. This is firstly because, in line with Heath Williams (2021), I contend that theories of phenomenology do not need to engage these thinkers in order to be considered phenomenology. In Williams's words, phenomenology is etymologically "the study of that which can be experienced" (2021: 368), and while phenomenologists such as Husserl may have a specific idea of what phenomenology is or isn't, we cannot look to "the foundational fathers of a discipline to regulate the meaning of a term and provide a definition of a field of study" (2021: 368). Many studies are thus phenomenological in the sense that they describe experience despite not using Husserl.

Of course, this does not mean that certain theories and methods are not more effective than others. The second reason that I do not draw on these traditions is that I suggest that the analysis I undertake, that is, looking to sex workers' experiences in order to elucidate claims about what it is like to be (in)visible and to do visibility work, would not benefit from engaging with them. Instead, I contend that these research questions are better addressed by an interdisciplinary approach. In Eva Simms and Beata Sawarska's words, "an interdisciplinary feminist phenomenologist brings conceptual resources to bear on the empirical material understood as a phenomenon endowed with meaning, and in need of interpretation" (2013: 8). In light of this, I combine insights from influencer and media studies, platform studies, labour studies, and queer and feminist theory, since they allow me to make meaning of sex workers' experiences.

In the next section (section II), I suggest that the platformisation of sex work has led to an increased reliance on visibility. In section III, I argue that these modes of visibility have been obscured by anti-trafficking legislation which equates all sex work with sex traffic. This then leads me to introduce a theory of phenomenology in section IV, which I purpose can address the ways sex workers and their labour is made (in)visible. Finally, in sections V, VI, VII, I outline my research methodology and the findings from my interviews with sex workers.

## **II. Platforming Sex Work**

*We use Asana, Google Calendar, Zoom, Calenderly, which is a calendar scheduling software. I also use annotation software. I can't remember what it's called, but it will record a meeting if I need it and then like make notes and things like that. Social media platforms, just like the average social media platforms. And I use subscription sites like LoyalFans and OnlyFans and then YouTube. I use Amazon affiliate links. I use a lot of different affiliate links actually, like each company that I work with in a branding*

*space. I use their affiliate links because it's just like an extra few quid, right? And you have to diversify your income, so. - Olivia (she/her)*

Today's labour market is becoming increasingly platformised. The same is true for sex work, with the migration to online spaces meaning that sex workers now use the internet to employ safety strategies, but also to communicate with clients, take payments, and provide content (ESWA 2022; Coombes et al. 2022; Sanders et al. 2020). They also rely on social media platforms, porn sites and ASW's (among others) to market themselves and find clients (Sanders et al. 2018). Despite online platforms positioning themselves as politically neutral actors (Gillespie 2010; 2018), with platforms being "defined primarily as content providers or ad-hosters" (Swords et al. 2023: n.p.), they dictate the working conditions of online sex workers. As Tarleton Gillespie notes, "platforms not only host that content, they organize it, make it searchable, and in some cases even algorithmically select some subset of it to deliver as front-page offerings, news feeds, subscribed channels, or personalized recommendations" (2018: 210). These structures (what platform scholars have labelled 'affordances' (Rand and Stegeman 2023)) have significant implications for platform users, and specifically sex workers. In this section, I outline the ways platform affordances shape sex work, arguing that they make the pursuit of visibility central to sex workers' labour, which in turn has required them to become 'sexual entrepreneurs' (Harvey and Gill 2011).

The 'network effect'<sup>3</sup> has meant that certain ASWs dominate the UK sex industry (Rand 2019), making the market oversaturated. While in theory, the worker is free to use whichever platforms they like, larger platforms draw more clients, and "the worker (...) is [therefore] forced to join the dominant platform" (Rand 2019: 47) in order to find clients. At the same time, similarly to other gig platforms such as Uber and Upwork, ASWs display a visual oversupply of labour in order to create the illusion of an abundance of choice (Hardy and Barbagallo 2021). This induces a conundrum because sex workers are encouraged to work on these platforms to find clients, yet platforms often make sex workers difficult to see. In order to be seen, similar to other creator labours, sex workers thus need to spend significant time, skill and 'hacking' of online platforms to market themselves.

Creating a personal brand means participating in "self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of the self" (Hearn 2008: 198). Ifan Sphepherd (2005) contends that the first step of self-branding is discovering key features of oneself. For sex workers, this requires considering which physical attributes and identities are desirable to clients (Sanders 2005). As Vin Chin Phua and Allison Cars write, "...sex workers write their advertisements strategically, considering their strengths and weaknesses and how these traits will sell in

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<sup>3</sup> The idea that platforms work more effectively the more they are used, and therefore draw more people, making them more effective

the marketplace” (2008: 240). Some features are required to be listed on ASWs and porn sites, including gender (Jones 2020a), ethnicity (Miller-Young 2010), and age (Stegeman et al. 2023), but these can to some extent be manipulated. For example, some sex workers may list their age as younger than it actually is, if they think this is to their benefit (Jones 2020b). Other features are not required, but can be used to their advantage. For example, sex workers may advertise a specific body type - being fat or muscular for example (Sage and Lane 2020). They can also choose to advertise a specific sexuality, for example being bisexual, or a specific nationality, if they think it will help them get clients.

The second step to producing a personal brand is to construct a convincing narrative about these features (Shepherd 2005). For example, in Vin Chin Phua and Allison Cars’ (2008) comparative study of White and Brazilian sex workers, they find that black men more than white men emphasise that they are strong and aggressive in bed. Others may advertise Girlfriend Experiences or BDSM services, in combination with descriptions or content that suggest that they exemplify the perfect partner or that they know how to dominate (McCracken and Brooks-Gordon 2021; Huff 2011). A key part in making the narrative convincing is to make it ‘authentic’ (Berg 2015; Carbonero and Garrido 2018; Jones 2020b; Horn 2022; Sanders 2005). This involves learning to perform pleasure for clients or on screen (Berg 2015, 2021b), sometimes sharing more details about one’s personal life through social media to appear more ‘relatable’ (Sanders et al. 2018, Joshi 2023 et al.), and to enhance certain parts of one’s personality. Sex worker writer and artist Bella Quinn Violet encapsulates this when she writes that being a sex worker is being a Manic Pixie Dream Girl<sup>4</sup>. In Violet’s words,

...she reimagines herself second by second according to someone else's bespoke desires. She's not real, but she's radiant, has superpowers, and is removed from life and trivial minutia (...) she floats effortlessly from one sexual ideal to another (n.d.: n.p.)

In short, the sex worker fashions their narrative in line with what they perceive the clients’ preferences to be, emphasising (or not) parts of their personality or physical features in order to appear desirable.

The third step to a successful personal brand is making sure one is visible. This often involves partaking in what Kelly Cotter terms ‘visibility games’ (2019), that is, using the algorithms and ranking systems on platforms to your advantage in order to make sure your content is seen. For instance, on many ASWs and webcamming sites, the way content and profiles are ranked is by putting the most recently updated profiles at the top (Rand 2019). This encourages sex workers to upload free content consistently to profile ‘galleries’ on ASWs and

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<sup>4</sup> Film critic Nathan Rabin’s term for women characters who “exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures” (2007: n.p.)

webcamming sites in order to make themselves visible (Van Doorn and Velthuis 2018). While some sex workers do produce new content regularly, others may update their profiles by changing a digit on their fee or manipulating content to make it seem like new content even when it is not (Hardy and Barbagallo 2021). Uploading consistently is also important on social media, where users quickly become de-prioritised by algorithms if they don't post often enough (Khamis et al., 2017). Additionally, some sex workers use website data to determine where their clients are coming from and when to post, which lets them optimise their marketing strategies. All platform work is precarious, since "creators are merely hosted by platforms" (Glatt 2022: 386) and not employed by them. In light of this, many sex workers diversify their income streams by posting on multiple platforms (Mashumba 2024) and aim to establish returning customers (Sanders et al. 2017).

In summary, I have suggested that online sex work has become 'visibility labour' (Abidin 2016) as a consequence of its platformisation. This has required that sex workers employ entrepreneurialism to establish a personal brand which draws in and maintains clients. Many of these forms of work are 'aspirational labour', that is, work which "holds the promise of social and economic capital; yet the reward system for these aspirants is highly uneven" (Duffy 2015: 1). In the next section, I suggest that online sex workers are becoming increasingly marginalised as a consequence of discourse which equates sex work with trafficking, making their visibility all the more precarious.

### **III. Digital Gentrification**

*A lot of people think of sex work as being either exclusively like, negative and inherently traumatising and horrific. Or they think that sex workers are all, like, really empowered. They're like, 'oh, there are these abuse victims and then anyone who's not one of those abuse victims, is like, super empowered and loves the job, and like, is getting paid to do things you would have done anyway'. And it's like, it's not really like that at all. - Hugo (he/him)*

Since the late seventies, radical feminists have contended that sex which is paid for is inherently non-consensual and contributes to women's overall oppression. As Carol Pateman writes, "prostitution is part of the exercise of the law of male sex-right, one of the ways in which men are ensured access to women's bodies" (1988: 194). This characterisation of sex work has vastly contributed to casting them as victims. In turn, this has allowed a regulation of sex work(ers) to prevail. As I will suggest, this has led to what sex worker activist Zahra Stardust (2020) labels the 'digital gentrification' of the internet and made the modes of visibility available to sex workers - including the marketing strategies above - more obscured.

Radical feminists build their argument that sex work is non-consensual on the fact that those do sex work do not have any better options for work. If sex workers do not have any other

options available to them, then to undertake sex work cannot be freely chosen. In abolitionist Rhea Jean's words, "consenting to sexual acts defined by patriarchy and by the market is more of a survival strategy than any real sexual agency in which women can choose the terms of their sexual encounter" (2015: 54). Of course, intersectionally marginalised sex workers are particularly susceptible to this characterisation. This is because they are more likely to be unable to take part in 'regular' forms of work (due to e.g. caring commitments or disabilities), be discriminated against in the labour market, and have disparate access to higher education, which obscures more respectable work, making them less likely to be able to 'freely choose' sex work.

Migrant sex workers are "by far the largest group of sex workers in the region [the European Union]" (TAMPEP 2015: 2) and have received extensive political attention and media coverage for their unfreedoms. A *The Guardian* article titled "I trusted him": human trafficking surges in cyclone-hit east India' (2023) exemplifies this. The article opens with "Poverty-stricken women and girls are being tricked and abducted in West Bengal", continuing, "...traffickers target women and girls in the area with promises of jobs, marriages or simply better living standards" (Ellis-Petersen and Kahn n.p.). Accompanying the article is a picture of two young Bengali girls looking worried. This trope is common and recognisable: brown, poor women fall easy prey to sex trafficking at the hands of brown men because of their combined naivety and precarity. Here, a lack of options becomes a lack of agency. All migrant sex workers are thus trafficking victims, because they cannot 'freely' choose sex work. Despite sex work scholars suggesting that research has conflated migrant sex work and sex trafficking, which has led to an overestimation of the number of trafficking victims (Ellison 2017; Weitzer: 2007, 2010; Kelly et al 2009), this narrative has persisted.

Casting migrant sex workers as trafficking victims has paved the way for what Nicola Mai (2018) terms 'sexual humanitarianism'. Musto et al. define this as

an affective mode of neoliberal governance constructing specific social groups as uniquely vulnerable in relation to their sexual behavior, identity, and the work they do according to neo-abolitionist understandings of victimhood (2021: 7).

In other words, anti-trafficking lobbyists<sup>5</sup> assume that sex workers are victims who lack the capacity to choose because they do not have the same choices available to them as the neo-liberal ideal agent would. This has let governments, NGO's and platforms to regulate and police them, in order to 'save' them from their exploitation (Musto et al. 2021). In practice, the lobby

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<sup>5</sup> This includes the 'strange bedfellows' of feminists, Christian evangelists and Western governments (Bernstein 2010)

against the traffic in women<sup>6</sup> has led to increased state surveillance and policing of *all* sex workers, but particularly migrants (Mai 2018; Voulajärvi 2019, 2020; Cruz 2018).

More recently, anti-trafficking notions have come to inform policy applied to online spaces. In 2018, the US Congress and Senate bills Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (FOSTA-SESTA) were passed. The legislation provides exemptions to Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, a legislation which has previously kept platforms from being liable for content stored on their platforms (Gillespie 2018). Specifically, FOSTA-SESTA makes platforms liable for content which is seen to promote trafficking or facilitate solicitation (Albert et al. 2020). Vivially, the legislation affects sex workers in the US, as well as those who work outside the US but host content on sites which are seen by US users (which is true for most social media sites), and has therefore had widespread impact on sex workers worldwide (NSWP 2021; Jones 2022).

In particular, FOSTA-SESTA has had a negative effect on sex workers' ability to make themselves visible in online spaces. This is partially due to the shutdown of many platforms associated with the sex industry<sup>7</sup>, including Backpage (the largest site to advertise sexual services in the US) (Ridley 2022), stricter moderation of adult content on social media sites like Tumblr (which used to be a sex worker hub before 2018), Reddit, Instagram, and Facebook (Blunt and Stardust 2021), and shadowbanning of sex worker accounts (Blunt et al. 2020). In an extensive report conducted by the sex worker and accomplice collective Hacking//Hustling, they find that most sex workers experience the legislation as “an overbearing, paternalistic law that does nothing to actually fight sex trafficking—but instead would be used to censor sex worker presence online and create more dangerous situations” (Blunt et al. 2020). Of 98 online sex workers who responded to the survey, 70% of participants reported decreased access to sex worker communities. This made it more difficult for sex workers to access harm-reduction tools, such as client blacklists, leading them to make more risky decisions at work. Moreover, 72.5% of participants reported that they had experienced increased financial instability following the introduction of the legislation. Danielle Blunt and Ariel Wolf therefore argue that the bill “facilitates sex worker erasure and normalizes the digital and physical oppression of sex working and AOP<sup>8</sup> communities” (2020: 4).

In the UK, the Online Safety Act 2023 implemented two clauses which seek to prevent sexual exploitation online. Platforms that mediate two-way relationships between users will now be held liable for ‘causing or inciting prostitution for gain’ and ‘controlling prostitution for

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<sup>6</sup> Anti-trafficking lobbyists rarely consider men trafficking victims (Mac and Smith 2020)

<sup>7</sup> See the full list of sites which shut down as a consequence of FOSTA-SESTA at <https://survivorsagainstsesta.org/documentation/>

<sup>8</sup> Activists, organisers and protesters

gain' (Online Safety Act 2023). While the act primarily seeks to prevent sexual exploitation, sex worker organisations have noted that 'controlling prostitution for gain' is often widely interpreted by British courts and has been used to prosecute sex workers in the past (English Collective of Prostitutes 2022). While the act does not give Ofcom - the official UK communication regulator - the power to shut down platforms like FOSTA-SESTA did, this means that there is a concern that the legislation will be used by platforms to motivate control of consensual sex work (Keighley and Sanders 2024), which could lead to similar marginalisation as FOSTA-SESTA. Ofcom are currently consulting with affected groups, including sex workers, and will be publishing guidance which will come into effect in 2025 (Ofcom 2024).

What I have tried to do here is draw out two points. First, I have suggested that radical feminists have contributed to essentialised notions about sex workers' victimhood and agency, and specifically, cast all migrant sex workers as victims. Second, I have suggested that these narratives have increased the regulation of sex work. In turn, this has limited the modes of visibility available to sex workers, impacting their lives and livelihoods. In the next section, I introduce Sara Ahmed's and Linda Martín Alcoff's phenomenological theories. I suggest that they can be used to centre the experience of sex workers, and specifically, the way their bodies and work are made visible.

#### IV. Introducing Phenomenology

*I will advertise as a black woman. That's what I will advertise like. I mean, I do - You know what? I don't even know? Because I was about to say, like, 'oh, I advertise it a lot'. I actually don't. It's just that, like, that's who I am. So it's seen. (...) But yes, I do advertise it. I would advertise as like a BBW<sup>9</sup> as well, but again that's just who I am. (June (they/them))*

Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience, and how it relates to the subject's consciousness and position in the world. Critical phenomenologists have argued for a 'queering' of phenomenology, that is, a phenomenology which pays attention to the ways in which bodies are made (or not made) "at home in the world" (Ahmed 2007: 58). In the previous section, I made the point that theorists have essentialised sex workers' experiences, which in turn has allowed governments and platforms to regulate their bodies. In turn, this has obscured the modes of visibility available to them, specifically their ability to market themselves online. To counter this, much research conducted by sex workers and allies focuses on centering the experiences of sex workers, challenging the stereotypes discourse has produced, as well as outlining the ways in which these narratives have harmed sex workers. While these haven't necessarily drawn on the field of phenomenology, they have also concerned how sex workers' bodies are made (or not made) at home in the world.

In this section, I suggest that previous research on online sex work can be by drawing on phenomenology, and that this can be used to elucidate two claims about online sex work. First, I argue that online spaces are structured around normative bodies, and are generally 'oriented away' from sex workers' bodies. This leads to sex workers being marginalised in online spaces, and made either involuntarily invisible or hypervisible. These are modes of visibility which are both dangerous to sex workers. Second, I suggest that these structures are specifically oriented away from sex workers that do not fit into hegemonic norms. This affects the modes of visibility available to them, that is, how they can self-represent. In both cases, I suggest that these orientations are obscured (that the norm is unseen), and that this serves to uphold narratives about sex work and specific sex workers. Finally, however, I contend that these modes of visibility can be and are subverted and re-orientated through resistance. An important part of this is drawing attention to the visibility regimes on platforms and their effects, which this dissertation is dedicated to.

For Sara Ahmed, spaces are 'orientation devices'. This means that we come into spaces which face certain ways, directing us in certain directions. Ahmed draws on the example of the philosopher who sits at his desk. He faces the desk in front of him, the paper and the ink, and understands that they are at his disposal: the desk turns him towards it. However, whether we

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<sup>9</sup> Big Beautiful Woman

are able to turn ourselves in the direction which the space orientates us towards depends on our bodies. In Ahmed's words, "[spaces] are made for some kinds of bodies more than others" (2006: 51). The fact that the philosopher is able to sit down at his desk and write on the piece of paper requires that other things, such as his children and housework, are "relegated to the background" (Ahmed 2006: 31). If the body fits the space, they can extend into the space. If the philosopher's wife was to come stand at the table, perhaps she would not have the time to sit down and write. In other words, she would not be able to extend into the space as it was intended. The structure of the space thus puts things 'within reach' for those that fit.

So how do we understand which bodies 'fit'? This can be explained through Linda Martín Alcoff (2007) employment of the concept of 'perceptual habits'<sup>10</sup>. Perception, here, is characterised as the way we make meaning of our sensations of spaces. When we become more attuned to the way we should interpret sensation, then "the overt act of interpretation itself is skipped in an attenuated process of perceptual knowing" (Alcoff 2007: 21). Some perceptual habits work through the 'visual registry'. Alcoff contends that one such habit is racialisation. In this view, race is signified through the visual field, where physical traits such as skin colour and facial structure are equated with racial identities through 'perceptual knowing'. These identities are then equated with "rational capacity, epistemic reliability, moral condition, and (...) aesthetic status" (Alcoff 2007: 23).

Perceptual habits are self-reinforcing: we view certain spaces and professions as 'for' people with specific identities more than others because we are used to seeing those bodies in those spaces, and make those who not conform "feel uncomfortable, exposed, visible, different" (Ahmed 2007: 157), meaning those who stand out are less likely to inhabit those spaces. Because this is a perceptual habit, *the norm remains unseen until a 'deviant' enters*. For example, because many institutions such as universities have colonial and racist legacies, whiteness is the norm, which means that White professors are just professors, whereas black professors are precisely that, black professors. Perceptual habits also reinforce the orientations of the space, 'standing out' makes it more difficult for black professors to 'reach' success (be that a pay rise or tenured status), and when those people do not inhabit those spaces, the spaces remain the same.

Digital spaces are spaces which enforces its norms through the 'visual registry', placing people into categories based on what is seen, which in turn puts things 'within reach'. As I suggested in section II, sex workers often use perceptual habits about sex workers to their advantage, relying on norms about what is attractive as well as stereotypes about certain

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<sup>10</sup> Both Ahmed and Alcoff draw on Mearleau-Ponty, who is known for articulating the idea that subjectivity is located in the body; or in other words, that "the body is our general medium for having a world". 'Orientation' and 'perception' are terms borrowed from his work.

features in order to make themselves seen. However, because sex work is highly stigmatised and regulated in online spaces - due to the discourse I outlined in section III - all online sex workers' bodies are considered non-normative. This means that, as Ahmed suggests, sex workers are often exposed or overly visible *in a way that makes them uncomfortable*, that is, which is outside of their control.

Hanne Stegeman et al. (2024) suggest that the modes of visibility sex workers are subject to can be characterised as 'hyper(in)visibility'. This "means that a person is sometimes paid exceptional attention and is sometimes exceptionally overlooked, and it can happen simultaneously" (Gailey 2014: 7; cited by Stegeman et al 2024: 2). This can mean that marginalised subjects are visible in their stereotyped form (Johnson 2019), but that their individuality is invisible and that they aren't listened to (Newton 2022). As Russ Bahorsky (2023) elucidates in her writings about black women, who are often both hypervisible and hypersexualised,

...their subjective intricacies get lost in the reductive generalizations people make about them as a result of not truly seeing, hearing, or knowing them beyond their images (n.p.)

In other words, they are seen as the identities they are perceived to have, rather than as individuals with subjectivities.

Sex workers are often involuntarily made hyper(in)visible in both discourse and in individual instances. As I've suggested, migrant sex workers are highly visible in discourse, yet their testimonies are not listened to. Moreover, sex workers' hypervisibility promotes risks; these include verbal abuse and harassment (Jones 2015, 2020; Sanders et al. 2018), increased privacy concerns and risks of personal information being shared online, known as doxxing (ESWA 2022; Do and Nathan-Roberts 2021), and content being shared without workers' permission, known as capping (ESWA 2023; Cole and Cox 2022). This counters the norm for online creators which is that any kind of visibility is a sign of success (Cotter 2018; Petre et al. 2019), or that "visibility is all there is" (Banet-Weiser 2018: 18).

While all sex workers deviate from the norms of online platforms, those who don't conform to hegemonic beauty standards do so even more, becoming more exposed. For example, white sex workers are not commonly categorised as 'white' on porn websites, whereas black sex workers are labelled 'black' or 'ebony' (a term which has colonial roots (Payola E 2022)) and asian sex workers are labelled 'asian' (Saunders 2020: 72). Similarly, trans performers are difficult to find on the first page of most porn websites, and are instead only found through search engines (Jones 2020). This shows the way in which porn website reinforce hegemonic orientations, and simultaneously make them unseen. Moreover, while these categories perhaps not in themselves fetishising, they often cater to an audience which

hypersexualises them, cementing the stereotypes people associate with these identities (the perceptual habits) (Payola E 2022; Pezzuto and Comella 2020).

At the same time as sex workers are made hypervisible in digital spaces, they also invisibilise their bodies and labour. To some extent, this is a consequence of their visibility: when platforms perceive them as sex workers, they censor them. As I have suggested, social media platforms in particular act against sex workers as a consequence of legislation targeting trafficking. When algorithms pick up content of sexual nature, they often demote it (Blunt and Stardust 2021), shadowban users (Blunt and Wolf 2020; Blunt et al. 2020), or automatically flag it, leading to the deletion of sex workers' accounts and content (Are 2023; 2022). The invisibility of sex workers is exacerbated for those who are intersectionally marginalised. For example, social media sites automatically flag black and brown bodies for explicit content more often than they flag white bodies (Akhtar and Mitchell 2021). Further, disabled sex workers often struggle to access other sex workers' content because of the coded language that sex workers use due to censorship being inaccessible to those who rely on screen readers (Coombes 2022 et al.), making them less able to access internet communities.

Taken together, these modes of (in)visibility reproduce stereotyped notions of what sex workers in general, and some sex workers in particular, are like. It also reinforces the hegemonic orientations of online platforms, putting some things 'within reach' for those that 'fit' more than others. Few studies on online sex work have examined these dual modes of visibility, but Hanne M. Stegeman, Carolina Are and Thomas Poell (2024) research on online sexual(ity) creators<sup>11</sup> is a recent exception. They suggest that while hyper(in)visibility affects sexual(ity) creators in ways that are out of their control, "platform visibility logics can be bent and redirected" (2024: 9) through 'visibility management'. This means "making strategic decisions on where and how one becomes visible" (2023: 3). Specifically, they look at how sexual(ity) creators employ strategies of 'strategic invisibility', that is, practices which avoid getting them banned, flagged or censored. This includes includes using coded language (e.g. writing 's3x work' instead of 'sex work' or 'skripper' instead of 'stripper') or posting censored content on platforms which have stricter policies.

First, this study extends Stegeman et al.'s (2024) findings on visibility management, looking further into the strategies sex workers employ to navigate platforms' visibility regimes. Specifically, it looks at to what extent sex workers can manipulate how they are perceived and how this is connected to their (perceived) physical identities. Secondly, it considers how sex workers' experience doing digital 'visibility work', that is, how the pursuit of visibility affects them and their livelihoods.

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<sup>11</sup> They use 'sexual(ity)' "as an overarching term to refer to sex workers, nude and sexual content creators [and] those whose content involves sexual expression and education" (2)

I argue that regimes of visibility do not unilaterally act ‘on’ sex workers, but instead, that they manipulate and subvert how these regimes work, ‘re-orientating’ the spaces they exist within. In Kate Hardy and Camille Barbegallo’s words, “sex workers’ agency and forms of resistance also reshape the digital platforms that profit from them” (2021: 14). The technological innovations outlined in the introduction are just some examples of how platforms have been shaped by sex workers’ past labour. I thus suggest that phenomenology, which pays attention to experiences of spaces rather than the structures of those spaces, can be used to highlight the orientations of spaces (“to make visible the practices of visibility itself” (Alcoff 2007: 25)), as well as how these spaces are an effect of sex workers’ labour.

#### **IV. Method**

Sex work researchers have historically failed to include the perspectives of sex workers themselves<sup>12</sup> (NSWP 2020). Additionally, researchers have failed to prioritise the safety and wellbeing of participants (ESWA n.d.) To address this, this research method has been developed in line with ESWA’s ‘Gold Standard for Safe and Ethical Sex Work Research in Europe’ (n.p.) to the extent that it is possible. ESWA’s guidelines establish that Gold Standard research should involve sex workers in the research process, including in the development of methodology and research questions, as well as the overview of the finished research. A limitation of this study is that sex workers were not involved in developing this research methodology or questions. Nevertheless, I have aimed to develop my research questions based on an extensive review of sex worker-produced research, sex worker testimonies online, as well as creative work produced by sex workers, as well as based on conversations with sex workers. The psychological and physical safety of participants was of utmost priority to this study, with measures being taken to prioritise the anonymity of participants and to ensure that they were emotionally supported throughout the participation process.<sup>13</sup>

This research is based on qualitative interviews and pre-interview surveys with five online sex workers based in the UK on their experiences of online sex work. Both forms of data collection focused on their experiences of censorship and surveillance on platforms, how they market themselves and make themselves visible, and how the (in)visibility of their online personas and labour affects them.<sup>14</sup> The interviews were semi-structured in order to allow for

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that sex workers and academics are exclusive categories, just that they have been marginalised from academic spaces - see Mistress Snow (2019) for further discussion

<sup>13</sup> This included providing research participants with resources for mental health and legal support; ensuring full transparency of the research and data process; being flexible in how/when to conduct interviews; and how they would like to be addressed in writing, i.e., which pronouns and pseudonyms they would like to use

<sup>14</sup> Interviews were conducted between April-May 2024. See Appendix A for a list of the interview questions.

research participants to deviate from the script. To make research participants feel as comfortable as possible, they were given the interview questions beforehand and asked if there were topics they would like to avoid.

Three cis-women, one non-binary person and one trans-man were interviewed. Their ages ranged from 25-44 (3 were 25-34, 2 were 35-44). Three of the participants were White (White English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or other), one was Black (British, Caribbean, African or other), and one was mixed-race (Black (British, Caribbean, African or other) and White (English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or other)). One participant reported having a disability. All participants had been engaging online sex work for three years or more.<sup>15</sup> Participants were recruited through existing networks, from in-person sex worker-events, and online through social media and sex worker blogs. Participants were required to be 18 or over, based in the UK and engage in sex work partially or entirely online in order to be eligible. As an incentive, £50 was donated to a sex worker support organisation of each participant's choice<sup>16</sup>.

Participants were chosen and outreached to using selective sampling, to ensure that the participant demographics were diverse (Palinkas et al. 2016)). This was particularly important considering the research's focus on how different physical bodies mediate how sex workers experience sex work. It's worth noting that since the population of sex workers is unknown, there can be no guarantee that the sample is unbiased (Cusick et al. 2009). Moreover, some sex workers may not want to take part in research because of the quasi-criminal nature of sex work (Sanders et al. 2018) or because this was not a paid study. Therefore, there is no guarantee that these experiences are representative of all UK-based online sex workers' experiences. Despite this, the interviewees nevertheless provide insight into the experiences of online sex workers based in the UK and how platforms mediate online work.

The interviews were analysed using a phenomenological perspective. The purpose of phenomenological research is "to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation" (Lester 1999: 1). For some researchers, this means "to capture experience in its primordial origin or essence, without interpreting, explaining, or theorizing" (van Manen 2017: 775). Yet, as others have noted, it is impossible for the researcher to be unbiased, since the researcher's subjectivity is always implicated in the research they produce (Stanley and Wise 1983; Olmos-Vega et al. 2023). Moreover, the research participants' descriptions of their experiences are interpreted by themselves when they are communicated to someone else, as well as mediated by how they view this experience to fit in with the rest of the world (Williams 2021). Critical phenomenologists have therefore suggested that experience should be

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<sup>15</sup> Participant demographics are aggregated for anonymity

<sup>16</sup> The fact that this was not a paid study was another limitation

understood within a larger context of “ideology, politics, language, and power structures” (Simms and Stawarska 1999: 11), and that critical theories should help elucidate how individual experiences are shaped by intersubjective structures (Guenther 2019). In this dissertation, I apply the theories introduced in earlier sections to make sense of the experiences of sex workers.

## **V. Demanding presence: Digital spaces, physical bodies**

The interviewees elucidated that online sex work requires significant skill, time and entrepreneurialism in order to be successful. The strive for visibility and the marketing of self meant that many participants experienced a blurring between their work life and their personal life, as well as between the work self and their personal self. These demands could to some extent be resisted, but would come at the cost of less visibility.

Participants were asked what an average day in their working life looked like. The majority of participants stated that their day started off online. Hugo (sex worker, he/him), who both works online and in-person, starts his working day by turning on his work phone and marking himself as available for in-person meetups on multiple sites.

I might have a client, maybe that I've arranged a few days in advance with to see, but a lot of the time I take kind of last minute clients who are like ‘can you come in a couple of hours’ and then there's a lot of sitting around and waiting for someone to message (...) And then checking them across on like apps like Client Eye which has like a client blacklist (...) usually in that waiting period I'm doing stuff like filming videos for like online subscription services. (Hugo)

Combining online and in-person sex work in this way was a common experience for participants. June (sex worker, they/them), said that if they have a client pre-scheduled then they'll book a day-use hotel room. Afterwards, they'll stay in the hotel to complete webcamming or admin work while they see if they get any more in-person bookings for that day. This can be seen as a way of minimising the time spent managing work outside of their other responsibilities.

Overall, these testimonies support the idea that sex workers, in line with other gig workers, need to be online and act fast in order to make a profit. The immediacy of sex work was viewed as both positive and negative. On the one hand, it can provide high income opportunities which are seldom found in other gig economies, such as cleaning or bar work. Quinn (sex worker, she/her) states,

...if a client comes to you and says ‘can I have a booking for tonight?’, whatever. If you don't deal with that in the moment, you could lose £600 pounds, £1000. Like it's, you know, you have to be kind of on the court all the time. (Quinn)

On the other hand, as Sanders et al (2018) have noted, needing to make decisions quickly can also be a safety risk if it means that there is not enough time to screen clients. Moreover, multiple participants noted that there was no guarantee that they would make a certain amount of money each month. This is exacerbated by the criminalised nature of sex work and consequent lack of labour protections, which means that there is no sick-leave and if a client refuses to pay you, then there is a guarantee that you will be able to get them to (Warin 2023).

Most participants diversified their income streams by posting on multiple platforms in line with other online creators (Glatt 2022). This meant, for example, offering both in-person meet-ups and porn clips available for purchase. Hugo said that he relies on subscription services to know the minimum he'll make each month:

The payment comes out on a monthly basis and it's like sort of set a couple of weeks behind (...)  
So I already know in a given month how much money I will get paid for sure, even if almost everyone who was subscribed to me dropped out that day. (Hugo)

Some participants had other kinds of jobs alongside sex work, including paid advocacy work for sex worker organisations.

It has been emphasised that one of the perks of digital work is that it can always be done at a distance thanks to technology. This is particularly true in the case of online sex work. Maya Andrea Gonzalez and Cassandra Troyan write about being a sugar baby:

For a professional girlfriend, the workplace is both nowhere and everywhere — everywhere, that is, that her smart-phone can get reception. The boundary as to where her work ends and her actual life begins is altogether blurred. (2016: n.p.)

Most participants responded that one of the things they appreciated most about their work was the flexibility it offered. Olivia schedules her day around her maternal responsibilities, and starts by logging into her subscription services and responding to client messages from 5AM-8AM. She then has a meeting with her assistant and her social media assistant, after which she returns to work, either on content creation, or admin and press work for the sex worker organisation she works for. She stops work around 3PM to pick her children up from school and will go back to working at night again. Olivia viewed her work schedule as a positive thing, stating “it's flexible, it pays well, it works around my family life, I'm respected and I call the shots”. The flexibility and relative lucrativeness of sex work compared to other gig work was also viewed as positive for Rae, who is also a mother, and formerly worked as a dancer.

Others were more negative about the effects of technology, saying that the need to be online interrupted their personal lives more than they wanted to, specifically the need for visibility which relied on ‘feeding the algorithm’ with content. In practice, this can lead to burnout: in Martín-Romo et al. (2023) systematic review of mental health and risk factors

among sex workers, they found that 53% of sex workers reported a lack of energy and 50.7% reported difficulty sleeping. Hugo said, for example, "I'll be doing stuff like hanging out with friends and we're all watching TV together and I'm like, OK, I have to pull out my phone and just like post another Reddit post that I've pre-prepared". These two different views explain why participants' satisfaction with their work-life balance varied; when asked to rate their work-life balance on a scale of 1-5 (1 is very dissatisfied, and 5 is very satisfied) two participants responded 2, one responded 3, and two responded 4.

Some denied that they had any work-life balance at all. June stated,

I'd really say like I guess, like very honestly but also non-judgmentally towards myself, I don't have any work-life balance. Like there is no limit, it's all intertwined. (...) Like sometimes I'll go and have a drink with a friend and I'll be like, 'This is nice. I need to take a picture because I need to remember to post it'. Do you know what I mean? So it's like if, for work, I choose to pretend that this persona has a normal life then I need to make this persona have a normal life and as far as I'm aware, I'm only one person. (June)

This illustrates not only how online sex work breaks down of the barrier between the digital spaces and physical space, but also complicate the boundary between the work persona and non-work persona. Helen Rand argues that the blurring of the work-self and non-work-self is with what Melissa Gregg (2014) terms "presence bleed" (3, quoted in Rand 2019). Presence bleed is common for many forms of labour, but particularly for those who rely on personal branding to sell things through sponsorships, such as online creators. While it is possible, as June states, to create a 'persona' for work, perhaps making this persona

For some, they resisted the demands of authenticity by 'performing pleasure' (Jones 2020b). Hugo said,

While I was with that client or like when I'm filming porn videos, I'm mostly doing like a moaning track that I sort of have saved in my brain that I'm just doing like, it's automatic for me. So I'm not actually enjoying any of what I'm doing. I'm trying to, like, feel stuff as little as possible because I'm like, I have to film five videos today. Like, it would be exhausting.

While some might argue that having a 'moan track' implies that the work itself is against Hugo's will, this instead suggests that the performance of pleasure was a strategy for avoiding burnout. Heather Berg suggests that,

such flexibility is important in part because porn performers are called upon to perform on multiple levels: for the camera, for management, and for and with coworkers. Emotion management strategies function differently according to the context in which workers deploy them. (2021: 81)

In other words, to emotionally detach from certain scenes is a way of managing the burden of having to do visibility work.

Others felt like the demand for a certain kind of content made them feel inauthentic. If sex work is sometimes part of not only one's work identity but also one's personal identity, this can feel like a betrayal of oneself. Quinn says

Unfortunately, speaking from my experience, they tend to have like less interest in like beautiful or creative or interesting pieces, and they kind of just wanna see some, like, sexy stuff and have the same kinda like, robot domme-lines, like drilled into their heads, all the time. (Quinn)

To counter this, Quinn, who is a pro-domme<sup>17</sup>, runs a BDSM studio alongside her work. Despite the overlap between her sex work and her studio, she views this work as completely separate from her sex work. She says,

So my mistress-persona or character, or the branding and the marketing around that is like, very... Like I spent years working out what that is, and it was like a specific kind of side of me, but for the studio I'm trying, it's much more like community-led and it's more like an authentic me. (Quinn)

In this way, while sex work didn't let Quinn feel authentic, she found her way to studio work through sex work, which now lets her be more content with her work.

This section has highlighted the impacts on sex workers of doing visibility work, suggesting that online sex work can put some things within reach - for example, a higher income or the ability to manage work flexibly. However, it has also elucidated that doing visibility work is emotionally and physically demanding, requiring sex workers to give large parts of themselves and their skills to their work, despite not being sure that this will lead to a reward. In the next section, I look at how sex workers manage their visibility online.

## **VI. Managing Visibility: Navigation and subversions**

The interviewees indicated that visibility was very important to their livelihoods, and that visibility management made up the majority of their work<sup>18</sup>. All participants used social media to promote themselves, and four out of five participants used ASWs to facilitate their work. They experienced both moderation and censorship, and to some extent hypervisibility. In all cases however, they were well aware of the oppressive visibility regimes of platforms, and had ways of navigating and sometimes these through visibility practices.

Physical attributes were one of the key qualities participants emphasised in creating their brand. Rae (sex worker, she/her), who produces fetish content and is over 35, says,

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<sup>17</sup> Professional dominatrix

<sup>18</sup> In the pre-interview survey, participants were asked to 'how much time do you spend creating content as opposed to the rest of your work (e.g. marketing yourself on other platforms or messaging clients)?'. Two participants responded 'I spend an equal amount of time on creating content and the rest of my work', one participant responded 'I spend slightly more time on the rest of my work compared to creating content', and two participants responded 'most of my time is spent on the rest of my work'.

So I have been thinking about different content, how to make what I do work on there [TikTok] because I kind of fall into the category of 'muscle mummy' at the moment. Obviously on TikTok you will get bombarded with, you know, 25 year old girls in bikinis. I'm in a bikini. But you know, I'm an older woman and I'm a strong woman, so I have to kind of think how I can market myself differently but still get views. (Rae)

This suggests that Rae's process of developing personal brand is a relation between her lived body, as an 'older woman' and a 'strong woman', and how these attributes are perceived by audiences. Rae identifies these features as fitting into a distinct category, 'muscle mummies', which in turn is made into something that can be marketed. Similarly, June (they/them) who primarily advertises Girlfriend Experiences (GFE) states that they had recently started describing themselves as hairy. They say,

...there's a few escorts who will be like, you know, advertise as hairy and stuff which, like, actually it has quite a lot of success amongst clients. But I realised a lot of my clients told me that like, oh, they struggle to find a black, hairy escort. So I'm kind of like, OK, then, it seems like maybe that's my niche or maybe there is like, you know, a market there, kind of thing. So I often I try to like put these to the forefront, if that makes sense.

In Stegeman et al.'s (2023) quantitative study on the categorisation mechanisms on webcamming platforms, they suggest that "extensive categorization regimes are at once potentially harmful and emancipatory" (3), because they are superimposed, yet may allow for a celebration and capitalisation on bodies which do not fall into normative beauty ideals. Here, Rae's and June's experiences shows how physical attributes which don't fall into hegemonic beauty standards are listed using categorisations mechanism, and are in this way strategically exploited for profit.

However, interviewees also noted that certain physical attributes would be part of their personal branding, whether they emphasised them or not. June states,

I would say it really varies, but like I will advertise as a black woman.(...) I mean, I do - You know what? I don't even know? Because I was about to say, like, 'oh, I advertise it a lot'. I actually don't. It's just that, like, that's who I am, so it's seen. (June)

Here, June experiences being a black woman as 'being seen', because it stands out from the norm, which is whiteness. In other words, the orientation of whiteness is made unseen. June states that being perceived as a black woman sometimes led to clients fetishising them. They say about this experience,

I don't really mind because several reasons. I think the the first one is because of the way it's approached, in the sense that like, I know it from the start. Because they'll tell me and that's something that I actually like, quite appreciate. I like straightforwardness. So for me, it's like I know what you're looking for and you're gonna like - I don't know how what the expression is in English, but in French we say - to call a cat a cat. So you know, they'll say it like it is. And I prefer that rather than, 'oh, no, I'm not racist, but oh, you're looking like Beyoncé and Mariah Carey at the same time'. And I'm like, they're not even the same people. (June)

This suggests that fetishisation itself wasn't what was June perceived as harmful, since June appeared to assume that clients would fetishise black women, but instead, the idea that clients weren't aware of the fact that they wanted a black woman.

Similarly, Hugo (he/him), is a trans man who capitalises on this identity when choosing on where and which platforms to market himself on. He said that there were two kinds of audiences he catered to: gay and bisexual men, and trans 'chasers', which he defined as people who "fetishise transness in general". He stated that half of the content he produced would appeal to both demographics, while the other half specifically targeted chasers. He then markets his clips on niche subreddits or X-threads which attract these audiences. He also uses specific keywords to promote his content, some of which may be inaccurate or degrading, stating,

They [clients] are not people I care about. So I sort of make that sacrifice for the ability to advertise more easily. And that is largely so that I can have random chasers if they search certain terms on Pornhub, my videos will come up rather than being more accurate and having my videos not show up when they search for me. (Hugo)

Hugo's experience is not surprising considering that while trans porn performers have long called for an overhaul of transphobic terms on porn sites and have made some progress, many transphobic slurs are still used on sites due to their recognisability (Steinbock 2017). This demonstrates how platform affordances (in this case tags, categories and algorithms) are not value-neutral features, but instead informed by people's expectations of how other users utilise those feature, or by what Taina Bucher (2017) labels 'algorithmic imaginaries'.

Advertising on social media in particular conjured risks of hypervisibility, because it meant that people who weren't their target audiences might be shown their content. In line with previous research (Jones 2020b), Hugo noted that there are relatively few trans men who are present on online platforms which make them "a flashpoint of visibility". He recounts an experience of online abuse,

... it might be the case that I post something like a clip from a porn video or something online to advertise. I post it on there and then like a group of transphobic, like gender-critical feminists will find that and then explode it, share it everywhere, and be like 'this is disgusting' etc. And then that becomes huge because there aren't that many of us to target. So a lot of them save my profile so they can come back to it for like rage content or shock content whenever they want to, to share something from there. (Hugo)

In this case, groups use Hugo's content to perpetuate their own transphobic narratives. These forms of abuse are not only harmful, but the visibility gained from them rarely help sustain an income. Hugo says,

...a lot of the people who treat you like that aren't going to become paying clients. Like their sexualisation, part of it is that they want to be degrading, and they don't want to pay someone

that they're degrading and provide the money for that, they just want to treat them poorly.  
(Hugo)

This was a common experience for interviewees on social media, who sometimes found that their content was not reaching its target audience, that is, paying clients. Quinn (she/her), suggested something similar, stating, "I think that there's a bit of a misconception about having a large social media following meaning that you're getting booked by clients, which isn't necessarily the case". In line with Stegeman et al.'s (2024), this suggests that "commonly held assumptions on the relationship between visibility and income in the creator economy do not necessarily apply to all sexual(ity) creators" (n.p.).

All participants stated that they had experienced content moderation which negatively impacted their work. This included having their posts removed and accounts being banned or suspended. In line with Carolina Are's (2023a; 2023b) findings, participants suggested that this primarily was because of strict nudity guidelines. Olivia (she/her) said that one of her main revenue streams was TikTok, which has strict policies prohibiting content of sexual nature and solicitation. She recalls yawning and her armpits were on display, which led to her having her content taken down. This shows the excessive form of censorship of online platforms, but also how imprecise platforms' mechanisms are for determining which content is of sexual nature. Those who tried to appeal content moderation were always unsuccessful, and often felt like the appeal was automatically moderated. The emotional impacts of content moderation were clear. Rae, for example, said,

I get so frustrated with the fact that they they take down our content all the time. And it does, it makes you feel like lesser. Why are they taking this stuff down, but you know, they'll leave up a really hideous fight video or... Why do they see this as lesser? (Rae)

Participants found their way around strict content moderation through strategies of what Hanne Stegeman, Carolina Are and Thomas Poell call 'strategic invisibility' (2024: n.p.). These strategies include using coded language (e.g. writing 's3x work' instead of 'sex work' or 'skripper' instead of 'stripper' as well as adapting content to platforms). Olivia states,

So like a dildo, you wouldn't use as a dildo on there. You would sort of pretend it's something else and play dumb. And just kind of put it there and just go, I don't know what that is. You know, don't draw attention to it. (Olivia)

Olivia states that sex workers could get around no-solicitation policies by making the references to sex work very subtle: "so if you have something in the background that says, you know, LoyalFans over here, then you're not talking about it, you're not referencing it, but it's there" (Olivia). All participants employed strategies to avoid automatic flagging, e.g. posting non-explicit pictures on Instagram but shorter, explicit clips or GIFs on Reddit.

One of the main ways that sex workers navigated and resisted visibility regimes on platforms was through reliance on the sex worker community. This counters scholars who've contended that the migration of sex work to digital spaces might have dissociative effects (Jones 2015; McLean), instead suggesting in line Valeri Feldman (2014), that the internet provided a space for emotional support, professional guidance and collective organising. Rae and Hugo say,

We actually have a group chat which is really, really useful, so it's all the girls that are involved in this industry, the girls I work with in \*\*\*\*\* and then kind of, there are other girls that we add in. So there's always so many resources. If someone puts in the group chat. 'Can anyone help me with this?', 'I need information about this'. Someone comes with an answer. 'Have a look at this website' or they'll give their own experience on how to do it. (Rae)

All of the sex worker group chats I'm in are so useful to me. (...) Because anytime that a platform updates their policy, someone will post in the union group chat within a day with like a full breakdown of like, here's the Terms of Service, here's this one. So like when Just for Fans updated their policy on what kind of content was allowed immediately the next day it was in the Union chat and they were like, 'if you have videos with these things in them, you should remove them within the next 48 hours before they start putting out strikes and moderation. If you normally post stuff like this, here's another platform that you can post it to', and they'll give alternatives, which is like great. (Hugo)

These testimonies suggest that the sex worker community is vital to sex workers', and that the internet allows them to access these, and in turn hack, hustle and subvert platforms.

### **Conclusion**

In this dissertation, I have suggested that the platformisation of online sex work has made the pursuit of visibility central to the lives and livelihoods of online sex workers. I argue that some modes of visibility have been obscured by an anti-trafficking lobby which employs blunt tools to regulate sex workers under the guise of 'saving' them. Thirdly, I suggested that critical phenomenology can be usefully employed to analyse how sex workers' visibility and doing visibility work. Finally, I looked to online sex workers' experiences to elucidate some of the ways in which visibility works both for and on online sex workers. These experiences suggested that online sex work was demanding, yet could at times yield high rewards, particularly outside of work, with online sex work allowing for flexibility and a relatively high income, as well as producing a sense of community.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview questions**

1. Can you tell me about a day in your working life?
2. What kind of digital tools do you use to facilitate your work?
3. How do you find information about how to find clients?
4. How do you find information about the law/policy?
5. How do you find information about platform policy, e.g. what kind of content is allowed on social media?
6. How do you market yourself on social media? Is there a specific audience you are catering to?
7. What aspects of your work do you most enjoy?
8. What aspects of your work do you least enjoy?
9. Is advocacy work important for you? If not, why not? If yes, why?
10. Are there any misconceptions about your work and if so, how do you cope with that?
11. What do you think online platforms could do better to uphold sex workers' digital rights?