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Prefigurative politics in the platform economy: online sex workers restaging collective mobilisation through informal communities of care

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ABSTRACT

As platform capitalist models of labour intensify, with jobs once done offline moving to online marketplaces, attention must be given to the political standing of platform workers and the constraints and possibilities of collective mobilisation. This study explores the everyday forms of resistance online sex workers undertake in private communication networks, finding that workers are strategically restaging where their collective mobilisation is occurring given the risks of public mobilisation. We discuss the value these communities have for workers and for broader understandings of prefigurative politics being undertaken within the platform economy of online sex work.

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1. Introduction

Digital platforms have transformed work, embedding it within the gig economy and presenting new challenges and opportunities for labour resistance and solidarity. Unlike traditional workplaces where employment relationships are formalised through contracts, platform work casts workers as independent contractors. This offers them flexibility and autonomy but lacks the stability and benefits common in traditional employment. Scholars debate whether platform workers have been mis-classified as independent contractors (Cherry 2016), and whether they should receive protections akin to those of traditional employees (De Stefano 2016). Platforms are seen as a third globalisation, reconfiguring globalisation itself through the ‘reorganisation of a wide variety of markets, work arrangements, ... and value creation and capture’ (Kenney and Zysman 2016, p. 61). With the growth of digital technologies, it has become important to understand how the independent contractor model and the platformisation of work are reshaping the current landscape of worker advocacy.

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Online sex workers offer valuable insights for researchers seeking to understand political possibilities for platform workers, because sex workers have longstanding experience dealing with stigma, exploitation and labour precarity, issues that have not gone away with the shift online but instead emerge in different ways. Although sex work has historically fallen outside of traditional employment structures – for example, in New Zealand sex workers ‘in brothels have signed agreements that say they’re independent contractors’ (Community Law 2024) – the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective (NZPC), sex workers, and other allies’ efforts to decriminalise sex work in New Zealand with the Prostitution Reform Act (Hynes 2015) granted sex workers important legal protections and a stronger political voice (New Zealand Parliament 2012). New Zealand’s sex work industry has thus been regarded as a successful case of collective mobilisation as collective efforts resulted in a legal framework that acknowledges sex work as legitimate and shifted sex work to a regulatory approach that affords workers, even those classified as independent contractors, with formal rights and protections. Brothels, for example, must maintain health and safety standards such as providing hygienic conditions, managing physical safety hazards, allowing workers to choose who they engage with, and ensuring adequate break times and appropriate shift lengths (New Zealand Prostitutes Collective 2024).

Despite these wins, there are still problems that affect sex workers. The precarity of sex work means that despite being independent contractors and having the flexibility to potentially earn more money, workers are not guaranteed a stable, pre-determined wage. Workers may feel ‘a financial need to do certain services . . . [something that can be disguised by the] “romanticising” narratives of the money in sex work’ (Bond 2022, p. 172). Furthermore, the Prostitution Reform Act excludes the protection of migrant workers on visas, and the continued stigmatisation of sex work in New Zealand can prevent workers from speaking about problems they face, as Bond (2022) states:

The stigma that remains in the Aotearoa New Zealand sex industry reduces the rights usually afforded to workers under Aotearoa New Zealand law: if workers must keep a discreditable identity secret to avoid the taint or mark of stigma, then workers experiencing poor material conditions are unlikely to come forward to resist current conditions. (p. 25)

Workers thus remain affected by labour precarity, risk, and stigma in sex work, problems that workers continue to negotiate in online contexts, albeit in different ways given the platformisation of sex work. A significant shift from street-based to online sectors has been observed (McLean 2015, Jones 2015b), a trend accelerated by the Coronavirus pandemic as people who lost their jobs in the pandemic turned to online sex work to survive (Robinson 2020). Labour sociologists and feminist theorists are divided about whether this shift online may be beneficial for sex workers. While appealing due to its convenience, accessibility, potential lucrativeness, flexibility, safety, and the empowerment that can come from being self-employed (McLean 2015), platform structures could undermine the political progress and power sex workers have gained in countries such as New Zealand (Tichenor 2020).

Platform economies are underpinned by a power hierarchy enforced by algorithmic control and big data. App algorithms determine the supply and demand of work and distribute available jobs to workers (De Stefano 2019). Algorithmic surveillance

imposed on workers includes user- and platform-generated performance ratings (Chan 2019) seeing power held over workers and how they are situated on the platform. Terms of Service agreement breaches also illustrate the power dynamics operating within the platform economy as platforms can deplatform workers if there's a reported, although not always verified, breach to the rules laid out in the agreement (Swords *et al.* 2023). Examples of terms of service breaches include being reported for engaging in prohibited sex acts (Stegeman 2024), or for suspected solicitation of offline services (Bhalerao and McCoy 2022). As platforms don't always verify whether these breaches occurred, workers are at the whim of platforms who hold power in the decision-making process and who can choose not to engage in a formal investigation of these suspected breaches. This kind of structural violence against workers can create a climate of compliance and fear which can weaken workers' political positioning.

In online sex work, patriarchal biases intensify this surveillance: for example, earnings-based 'CamScores', a scoring system used on platforms like MyFreeCams and Bonga, dictate visibility and potential income (Jones 2015a). Workers, predominantly female, must satisfy assumed-to-be male viewers to favour algorithms, perpetuating patriarchal dynamics and gender stereotypes through viewer-controlled performances (Vlase and Preoteasa 2022). User-generated rating systems function similarly to control workers, as viewers can weaponise their ratings if workers don't conform to their expectations. Workers who breach Terms of Service agreements, which are also monitored algorithmically, are punished through censorship (Swords *et al.* 2023), charge-backs – where viewers request their money back from their credit card provider (Beebe 2022), and deplatforming (Tiidenberg 2021). Platforms further exploit their position by harvesting user data to optimise their algorithms for profit, which can reinforce network effects (Varga *et al.* 2023). These effects strengthen platforms' market dominance, producing monopolies that inhibit potential competitors and increase worker dependence on (few) platforms.

Given the concentration of power within certain platforms, workers may become overly dependent on these platforms. This dependence presents several challenges. There is an increased risk of exploitation, including unfavourable working conditions where the platform's algorithmic management systems might compel workers to prioritise clients' needs over their own (Sun 2019). Workers may receive low wages, partly due to their status as independent contractors, which limits their ability to negotiate, and partly due to the scarcity of alternative platforms for work (Aloisi 2019). The autonomy of workers can be compromised by international politics and the operational frameworks of platforms, which enforce compliance with Terms of Service agreements (Tichenor 2020). Platforms dominating their respective industries act as 'regulatory structures', shaping the possible actions of users, as noted by Kenney *et al.* (2020). This is especially true in countries with a *laissez-faire* attitude toward platform regulation, such as the United States, which has more lenient enforcement of regulations intended to promote fair competition and prevent consumer harm. Consequently, a growing political challenge is to balance the control between private platforms and public governance (Gorwa 2019), or to constrain private platforms within public governance, particularly as workers with limited bargaining power seek to address their needs in the face of powerful platform monopolies wielding power transnationally.

The platform economy presents challenges, with its decentralised workforce who now operate from home rather than in spaces such as brothels or the street (Ghose *et al.* 2008), and the dominance of international platforms outside national regulatory reach. As platform workers are geographically dispersed and lack a physical workspace typical of traditional forms of work, this can make it difficult for them to meet and communicate in person and hurt their ability to build solidarity and coordinate collective action. Platform workers' own subjectivities can also impede collective mobilisation. For example, online sex workers may instead see themselves as content creators, individual entrepreneurs in competition rather than in solidarity with other workers. This standpoint simultaneously shifts responsibility for working conditions onto workers, not platforms, and discourages workers from joining with support organisations that advocate for workers' rights.

The growth of online sex work underscores the need for research into how online sex work platforms operate within the platform economy and the conditions of possibility for workers' collective mobilisation. Sex workers' everyday resistance and solidarity are well-studied in offline contexts but less so online. Studies of offline sex workers explore the strategies sex workers use to resist the stigma associated with their work (Grittner and Walsh 2020). Jeffrey and MacDonald (2006) explored how sex workers resist unfavourable working conditions in brothels, while Hoffstetter's (2023) study of German sex worker social movements noted how workers' acknowledgement of their personal privileges invoked feelings of responsibility to undertake activist engagement and resist worker marginalisation. In contrast, solidarity may be diminished in online environments (McLean 2012, Jones 2015b), although other researchers, such as Feldman (2014), suggest that social media and blogs may enable workers to meet other workers and engage in online activism.

Our article engages in this debate, drawing on interviews with online sex workers in New Zealand and analysis of discussions on international online sex work forums to examine the contemporary manifestations of collective mobilisation in this gendered industry mediated by transnational digital platforms. Sex workers' experience of platform capitalism is that it dictates and reinforces global patriarchal norms and standards of behaviour. Accordingly, we ask: how has the platformisation of the commercial sex work industry shaped the political positioning of online sex workers? In what follows, we first describe our methodology (2.0), and then introduce the theoretical framework (3.0). We discuss our findings in two sections: in [section 4.1](#) we explore the challenges sex workers face that limit possibilities for overt resistance against platforms. In [section 4.2](#), we explore how sex workers enact new kinds of informal political action, including 'imagined resistance', a term we coin to refer to workers' use of private spaces to strategise and plan the collective action they want to take against platforms in future, and the formation of online communities. We reveal how these acts of imagined resistance encourage workers to meet online, build solidarity, and forge communities of care, offering prefigurative promise for broader social transformation in future. As defined by Jeffrey and Dyson (2021), "prefigurative politics is an inherently spatial and performative genre of political activism in which people enact a vision of change – through organisation, design, architecture, practices, bodies, or something as simple as a gesture or demeanour – and promote this as indicative of an imminent or more distant 'future' (p. 643).

2. Methodology

This qualitative study included a content analysis of an online forum called AmberCutie Forum (ACF), a public forum utilised by international and New Zealand based online sex workers (phase one), and interviews with eight online sex workers based throughout New Zealand (phase two). Data collection for phase one commenced following low risk ethics approval from Massey University (application approval number: 4000025322). Data (forum quotes) were all from different users and have had identifiable usernames removed and are paraphrased to protect forum users' anonymity. Given the volume of threads available on ACF, threads were selected from the 'General Cam/Creator Chat' section on the forum. This section comprises 'sticky threads' (7 posts pinned by the forum owner that discuss the most repeated and relevant topics across all forums) and 'normal threads' (posts that are not pinned by the forum owner). The sticky and normal threads on the General Cam/Creator Chat section hold approximately 8,400 threads. All 7 pinned sticky threads were read, and 48 of the most engaged normal threads were initially read. Common themes from the threads emerged by undertaking an interpretive (Strauss and Corbin 1998) grounded theory approach using the constant comparative method typical of grounded theory methodology (Bryant and Charmaz 2007). Data was constantly compared as it was read, and subsequently key themes and coding categories came to the fore. The search function was also used to type in keywords to locate additional threads relevant to the refined themes of interest.

The second phase of research involved semi-structured interviews with eight New Zealand based online sex workers following ethics approval from Massey University, with the ethics application having gone through full review (application approval number: 4000026982). The reason for full review involved concerns over the potential for psychological harm should interviewees choose to discuss traumatic experiences during the interview. Measures were taken to ensure interviewees had post-interview resources available to them. Moreover, while the interview was semi-structured, potential questions listed on the interview schedule did not include any questions that expected interviewees to discuss traumatic experiences; rather, they were asked about their favourite and least favourite experiences with working online, leaving interviewees to choose what they wanted to disclose. One interviewee asked to read the interview schedule prior to commencing the interview and was emailed the schedule. Interviewees were also made aware that they were welcome to terminate the interview at any time or skip over any questions they didn't want to answer. To recruit participants, a participant information sheet and a flyer outlining the study and eligibility criteria was sent to online sex workers through the ACF, the NZPC, and by reaching out to them directly through online platforms. All interviewees chose pseudonyms and have been identified by their chosen pseudonym in this research. Interviews with all eight participants took place over Zoom, as per the interviewee's preference. The interviews were transcribed through Trint software and analysed.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. *Workers' resistance and the restaging of workers' collective mobilisation*

Workers' resistance occurs both formally, through organised labour movements and union groups, and informally, through grassroots organising and everyday forms of resistance within, or against, the workplace. Our research utilises Gallo-Cruz and Tulinski's concept of restaging to show how online sex workers are restaging their collective mobilisation, turning to informal networks such as online forums and Discord servers to mobilise, rather than using more formal routes to resist exploitation. Restaging, as defined by Gallo-Cruz and Tulinski (2020) is 'the collective strategic movement of relational politics from one social sphere to another, as an explicit effort to resist and reformulate those politics' (p. 208). Despite lacking formal structure, these networks are deeply subversive, with workers engaging in counterpublic work (Ticona and Tsapatsaris 2023) by sharing their thoughts and experiences, offering support and mutual aid, building solidarity, and engaging in collective planning for future action and change. Underpinning these networks is care, which becomes a crucial political tool for resistance. Workers challenge the status quo of platform capitalism's individualisation of responsibility and subvert patriarchal, platform-capitalist structures that exploit workers, particularly through commodifying their care and neglecting their needs. Rather than being something used for monetary gain, care shapes workers' endurance in their everyday lives, and holds the capacity to shape our future worlds (Tironi and Rodríguez-Giralt 2017). Below we outline formal and informal resistance that has occurred in the broader platform economy as well as in the online sex work industry and explore the idea of restaging collective mobilisation, emphasising the role care plays in online sex workers' resistance.

Scholarship on formal resistance examines the role of social movements and campaigns including protests and strikes (Taylor and Van Dyke 2004), while research on informal resistance primarily looks at what Scott (1986) terms 'everyday forms of resistance', the covert subversive acts workers engage in. Our research builds on Scott's (2012, 2016) understandings of infrapolitics and everyday resistance. Infrapolitics is the 'prevailing genre of day-to-day politics for most of the world's disenfranchised' (p. 133), an 'evasive politics' that describes small, everyday acts of resistance that are covert and maintain anonymity.

Platform workers are undertaking both formal and informal resistance to exploitative work conditions. Platform workers' social protections vary by country, depending on institutional frameworks and enforcement of regulations, with governments sometimes classifying platform workers as self-employed or extending specific protections (Sieker 2022). Legal actions against companies like Uber have secured some of these rights (Adams-Prassl *et al.* 2021), while others have been achieved through union alliances, such as Foodora workers in Italy (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020). Additionally, informal strategies include Instacart drivers campaigning for separate customer tips and base wages (Joyce and Stuart 2021), and Uber and Deliveroo drivers manipulating algorithms by disabling the auto-accept function or rejecting low-paying jobs to influence future job offers (Veen *et al.* 2020, Vasudevan and Chan 2022). Informal networks also help platform workers challenge platform authority (Cini 2023).

Online sex workers have also undertaken some formal resistance, although this is limited. In Australia and the United Kingdom, sex workers have joined forces with the Scarlett Alliance and the Sex Workers Union, respectively, advocating for their rights through governmental submissions and social media campaigns. Workers' informal, everyday resistance is varied, such as circumventing AdultWork's exclusivity clause by applying filters, cropping, or retouching images for use on other platforms (Hardy and Barbagallo 2021). This means that the image differs from the original uploaded onto AdultWork and can be used elsewhere, one example of workers resisting and challenging platform authority and the rules imposed on workers. Workers have also established their own websites or social media to attract higher paying clientele (Hardy and Barbagallo 2021). This is also witnessed in workers making 'platform affordances work in their favour' (Rand and Stegeman 2023, p. 2110) by livestreaming with other workers to earn more than what's possible while streaming alone. Moreover, workers will often share their contact details within the community and retweet one another's X posts to boost engagement with potential clients (Hardy and Barbagallo 2021). This kind of collaboration prioritises workers' economic interests and labour over platform and client interests.

Because of the power platforms hold, it is challenging for workers to mobilise traditionally and publicly without putting themselves at risk of being deplatformed (Arias *et al.* 2021). By restaging their collective mobilisation to private, low risk networks, workers can evade their working platform's scrutiny. Workers can leverage the anonymity that private networks afford, establish connections with others, and coordinate efforts as they deem suitable. With this, workers lay the foundation for future collective action and change they can enact when the timing is right for them. While everyday forms of resistance can be overlooked because they are not public, feminist scholarship highlights their significance. MacLeavy *et al.* (2021) describe 'reworking' as 'imagining and enacting alternative forms of politicisation' (p. 1570). For example, feminists distrustful of state-run, patriarchal institutions instead organise outside these institutions, in much the same way that sex workers are restaging their organising privately on forums and Discord servers. This shows how private social relations can be powerful political acts (Vachhani 2024).

Previous studies on restaging, such as Gallo-Cruz and Tulinski (2020) demonstrate the power of restaging women's 'sexual politics' (p. 210) publicly, acknowledging the 'transformative potential to undo the power of the private' (p. 210). Our research shows private-public restaging in reverse, offering an analysis of workers collectively mobilising in private spaces, both to evade the structural violence perpetuated against workers publicly on online sex work platforms (e.g. arbitrary, retaliatory deplatforming) and to offer support to each other. Private arenas have become powerful political sites where workers are able to escape the surveillance and punishment they face within the platform economy and engage in imagined resistance, build transnational solidarities, and forge communities of care which can empower them in their everyday lives.

3.2. Care as feminist politics

Collaborative efforts among workers represent feminist solidarity, with workers uniting to care for one another and resist socioeconomic inequalities and

patriarchal power dynamics within the platform economy (Hatzi 2023). Such resistance often arises when formal avenues are obstructed, a common challenge for platform workers who risk platform retaliation (Alyanak *et al.* 2023). Furthermore, workers' information sharing acts as counterpublic work, challenging dominant narratives controlled by platforms with their own critiques and experiences. Ticona and Tsapatsaris (2003) found that domestic care workers on Care.com used 'networked gossip' on forums and customer review sites to voice marginalised perspectives, turning these spaces into sites of political discourse that 'contest platform practices' (p. 4006). Care is central to the social relationships built on private networks, with workers offering mutual support to one another, building trust among themselves through shared experiences, along with expressing empathy, all of which are key for participation, building group resilience, and sustaining collective movements (Santos 2020).

There are both challenges and opportunities with private mobilisation that can be observed in contrast to historic public forms of mobilisation made by offline sex workers. Past efforts by offline sex workers occurred publicly at rallies and protests in attempts to decriminalise sex work and advocate for the rights of sex workers. Yet, this exposed them to great risk, including increased police surveillance, social harassment, violence, and ostracism (Smith and Mac 2018). Despite these risks, one key strength of public mobilisation is that workers directly confront the systems of power that affect them, such as police or political institutions (government). This kind of visibility increases political pressure and helps raise awareness of issues, amplifying workers' voices which is important given that marginalised groups are often excluded from mainstream political discourse (Levy-Aronovic *et al.* 2021). Still, important political work occurs in informal networks, with care being the collective act that represents workers' efforts to resist the exploitation they face. As Tironi and Rodríguez-Giralt (2017) state: 'care highlights the practical and relational character of knowledge as well as the embodied and affective processes involved in the shaping – and consequences – of possible worlds' (p. 93).

4. Findings

4.1. Barriers to publicly mobilising online

This section examines the working conditions of online sex work platforms and details reasons why workers may not publicly mobilise against unjust treatment. Reasons include patriarchal biases that favour clients (primarily male) over workers (primarily female), the imposition of American laws internationally, platform monopolies, and a neoliberal ethos that discourages worker activism and promotes individual responsibility for workplace issues. Technology plays a significant role by diminishing workers' political power and rendering traditional mobilisation strategies ineffective or inaccessible.

As we noted in our introductory discussions of platforms as globalised patriarchy, the online sex industry is dominated by a patriarchal structure where clients' interests override workers' rights. When interviewees were asked about the challenges of working online, a common theme was the patriarchal punishment bias workers face. One worker shared an experience on AVN Stars, where a client's

chargeback request was honoured without consulting her, leading to the withdrawal of her earnings. Chargebacks occur when clients request a refund from their credit card provider which the credit company approves/denies (Beebe 2022). Although some platforms have chargeback protection schemes for workers in case clients pay for their service then later place a chargeback, as Dee states below, these are not always fully honoured, and platforms do not notify when chargebacks have occurred. Such chargeback practices underscore the immediate credibility given to (presumed to be) male clients, undermining workers' rights and undervaluing their labour:

During the lockdowns on AVN stars, I got a lot of chargebacks, there were people using dodgy credit cards and I lost 700USD from one client. And I saw him in person once, it made me so sick . . . because that's theft. Then I heard of another worker that argued her point and she got some money back and she told me they have insurance for that. So, I went in [on the platform] and requested my money back, and I got half. But . . . they don't give you any notice. You just see your payouts or your earnings screen and every now and then there would be a chargeback. And you never get notified, you must see it yourself and think, fuck, now what? [Interviewee – Dee – 7th June 2023]

Other interviewees report similar experiences on OnlyFans, a popular subscription-based platform where workers create and upload content behind a paywall. OnlyFans' chargeback policy specifies that while clients involved in disputes 'may be discontinued or limited' from using the platform, any chargeback amounts will be deducted from the creator's earnings (OnlyFans 2024). Although the Terms of Service suggest potential penalties for clients, workers encounter immediate consequences. This patriarchal punishment bias is evident as protections are inadequate to prevent financial losses for workers. With that said, it's not uncommon in the platform economy for platforms to forbid workers from meeting clients offline, as platforms try to control the worker–client relationship to receive their cut from payments exchanged between both parties (Jarrahi *et al.* 2020). Thus, platform punishment biases function as a control mechanism – a mechanism that affords control to platforms across borders.

Another interviewee highlighted a separate issue with clients attempting to arrange offline meetups, a violation of platform rules:

Since I work in person as well, people will often be like, hey are you in this place right now? And I'm like, no, don't! Because if people talk about in person meet ups, then you're likely to get your account banned because these sites really have no interest in you being an in-person sex worker. [Interviewee – Maddison – 5th July 2023]

Speaking to this issue, another interviewee, Kat, states how such conversations result in platforms retaining one's earnings:

. . . They say, well, essentially you were doing illegal activities, even though it's legal here [in New Zealand], so you're not entitled to this money because you've gone against our terms and conditions. [Interviewee – Kat – 9th June 2023]

United States anti-prostitution laws are being imposed on workers, undermining the historic political gains made for New Zealand sex workers where prostitution was decriminalised in 2003, and taking from workers like Maddison and Kat the right to lawfully engage in offline sex work. The implementation of American anti sex-trafficking

laws FOSTA (Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act) and SESTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act) has intensified platform surveillance and penalties for workers (Jones 2022). To avoid losing online income, workers comply with unfair Terms of Service, often refraining from reporting issues due to the emotional toll and lack of trust in platform responses:

Their customer service is terrible, when I have had to dispute things with them, it takes them a couple of days to respond and it's not good enough. . . . you must figure out their emailing system, I've never seen a contact number, and then hope that someone will reply to you. I always get anxious when I dispute things as well because that obviously puts attention on my profile and I am like, have I done something that doesn't fall in line with their terms of service? [Interviewee – Kat – 9th June 2023]

Additionally, the monopolisation of some online sex work platforms, especially in smaller countries like New Zealand, explains why workers avoid escalating issues, particularly via public avenues:

In New Zealand if we tried doing that [using X for activism purposes] with New Zealand Girls, which is a great ethical company, but if they pissed us off, because we must be exclusive with them, it's hard going public with any problems. Because you don't want to be banned from the site. . . . You can get your account banned for so many things, once I got taken off the platform because I had a link to one of my fan sites. That's one of the biggest annoyances. [Interviewee – Dee – 7th June 2023]

Platform monopolisation and exclusivity demands challenge the independent-contractor status of workers by controlling their ability to work on multiple sites, akin to traditional employment. Misclassifying workers as independent contractors leaves them without protections like those against wrongful termination, or the right to unionise and address issues such as chargebacks without fear of retaliation. For instance, NZ Girls' Terms and Conditions enforce exclusivity, restricting the use of content to their platforms only and allowing unilateral termination of access (New Zealand Girls 2024). Since the time of the interview, NZ Girls has updated its Terms of Service to allow advertising for online platforms like OnlyFans. However, it's important to note that NZ Girls is not a traditional online sex work platform as they do not directly pay workers, rather, they provide a space for people to advertise their services. Still, their content restrictions are similar to the monopolisation seen in other online sex work contexts where workers' ability to engage with other platforms is constrained because of dominant platforms. Content exclusivity alongside payment exclusivity where workers must use approved payment methods through the platform's interface (Facentro 2024) creates scenarios where workers can become dependent on the platform for both visibility and for payment. This is akin to employees who are required to work exclusively for certain employers in traditional labour models.

With traditional online sex work platforms trying to push workers into circumstances that preclude the possibility of employment on other platforms, workers become more likely to fit within the definition of 'dependent contractor' (Cherry and Aloisi 2016, p. 655). In Canada, as Cherry and Aloisi (2016) argue of Uber drivers, being classified as a 'dependent contractor' could confer benefits to workers, although if they were to work on other platforms or have a full-time job outside of the platform economy, this could impact their eligibility to be classified as a dependent contractor.

The current dynamic of being classified as ‘independent contractors’ influences workers’ political stances and approaches to resolving platform issues. For example, in response to a webcam model being banned from MyFreeCams after her attempts to organise a strike through X, one worker draws on anti-feminist neoliberal ethos of entrepreneurship by distinguishing between independent contractors and employees:

Cam models forget that they are not actual employees but are independent contractors and are self-employed. Cam sites can ban your account for any reason and withhold the tokens in your account at the time of the ban and zero legal recourse can be taken against them since the sites are well within their legal boundaries to do so. Is it fair? Not always. Models should be aware of this before bitching and moaning and making threats on social media, because you’re biting the hand that feeds you, putting a target on your back. [Worker – ACF – 7th April 2020]

Workers may internalise their status as independent contractors, believing it disqualifies them from speaking out against platforms due to the lack of legal protections afforded to employees, such as the right to organise and to union representation. One interviewee, Kat, who works with the NZPC, noted how worker subjectivities can prevent workers from forming alliances with existing sex work groups who could offer support:

There are barriers in connecting with younger generations who are doing sex work who might not realise that they’re doing sex work. OnlyFans girls not really realising the risk of putting your face out there in a porn situation, so, we [the NZPC] created a few different resources for online work and for online safety. But they haven’t looked at the resources before something’s gone wrong, it’s been this impulsive decision doing online sex work and then something goes wrong and then they’re like, omg, who can help me, and that’s when they come to the NZPC unfortunately. I don’t get to meet people in a good capacity. [Interviewee – Kat – 9th June 2023]

Younger generation OnlyFans workers are labelled as ‘creators’ on the platform which sees sex work blending into content creation. The NZPC acknowledges ‘content creators’ on their Instagram page, using inclusive language to indicate their services cater to all creators. However, their website does not reflect this inclusivity. More significantly, the organisation is still commonly known by its original name, NZPC, despite rebranding to NZPC | Aotearoa New Zealand Sex Workers’ Collective. As online sex work gains popularity, organisations might need to reconsider how they address and understand the evolving landscape of sex work and worker identities to enhance their outreach. Additionally, existing organisations face challenges adapting to the needs of online sex workers. For instance, Kat, who works both online and with the NZPC, suggested that organisations could better support online sex workers by educating their staff about the online sex industry:

I guess for me, when someone has come into the space and has an online problem, they’re kind of directed to me, just because of the lack of knowledge of what’s going on online. I am probably the person most connected to it, but it doesn’t make me an expert by any means. [Interviewee – Kat – 9th June 2023]

This section has shown how the working conditions in the online sex work industry influence worker subjectivities and shape how workers understand their experiences and

their political positionality. Fears of platform retaliation and monopoly control discourage public collective action, which might explain why research on online sex workers' public mobilisation is limited. Moreover, a lack of self-recognition as sex workers might prevent workers from aligning with existing organisations that could offer support. Nevertheless, these workplace constraints are giving rise to new forms of political action by online sex workers, which we discuss in the following section.

4.2. Platform workers' enactment of new kinds of political action

4.2.1. Subversion through imagined resistance

Workers utilise private communication networks such as online forums and Discord servers to communicate with other workers and to enact imagined resistance. We coin the term 'imagined resistance' to convey a form of invisible organisation that restages workers' political practices to private spaces external to the platform they work on and involves a planned collective action of workers against platforms that is yet to transpire. This contrasts with everyday resistance which describes acts of resistance that are carried out covertly. As we describe below, when informal collectives of workers come together to imagine and plan how they might resist oppression, this act of imagining can itself strengthen transnational communities of care among workers. In this way, the concept aligns with Kelley's (2022) work on 'freedom dreaming', which describes how envisioning of alternative futures has been crucial for Black liberation struggles. Imagined resistance differs from freedom dreaming, as it describes the imagining of resistance itself, rather than dreaming of the possible outcomes of resistance. Hence, imagined resistance highlights the strategic planning that could help bring those futures into existence. Like Kelley (2022), we find that collective imagining builds solidarity and is a key site of prefigurative politics.

Imagined resistance is evident in workers' discussions on ACF about forming unions that can advocate on behalf of workers and offer better social protections. The desire for unions stems from the need for just and equitable working conditions, amid increasing concerns about the expansive control platforms exert over workers and the retaliatory actions workers face. For example, one worker shared their encounter with platform-imposed punitive measures on the ACF forum:

All sex workers must organise and form a union to make this a fair and equal workplace . . . Chaturbate can ban anyone for any reason . . . It's just not right for them to [have] so much power and control over workers. I'm on xhamster now and they seem much fairer when it comes [to] banning models. [Worker – ACF – May 11th 2023]

This worker's support for unionisation opened space for dialogue among workers around unfair working conditions and alternative possibilities to platform operations, with other workers responding to their ideas. Additionally, the worker above shows a subtle dissent by recommending alternative platforms to other workers, challenging hegemonic power relations that subject workers to evaluation and punishment by the major platforms. In other ACF threads discussing unionisation, workers expanded the discussion of possible models and the complexities of establishing them:

I was going to propose a model-run non-profit or union. Some of the benefits that could result from a model-run support system include: Health insurance benefits, mental health

resources and coverage, financial and legal consult and resources. But for this to be feasible, reliable and trustworthy, it must be run by responsible individuals. This industry has a strong tendency to attract scumbags and con artists ... This union would need to be donation-based too, you're not going to get government funding for adult entertainment, corporate may be a possibility in certain realms, but many models shy away from that. [Worker – ACF – 10th October 2014]

As this worker suggests, the logistical complexity of establishing a union on a transnational scale is fraught with challenges, exposing the tension of workers wanting to enact traditional organising strategies within the platform economy. Nevertheless, on ACF workers discussed how they could consider attempts to reclassify themselves as employees, which would afford them the right to formally unionise and collectively bargain with platforms, or form alliances with existing sex work groups.

Beyond discussions of unionisation, workers have used the ACF forum to imagine the value of platform cooperatives (co-ops), which form under collective ownership and governance of digital platforms by workers and users (Bunders *et al.* 2022):

Can we please get a model run custom video site where sellers are protected! If there is one, I'd like to join. Or if anyone is working on one, I would also love to help in any way I can. We deserve to have protection against scamming buyers and unjust support on adult platforms. I filmed a video for a buyer the other day and I did everything he requested but he filed a complaint falsifying the situation – obviously he wanted a free video. I received an email saying that the buyer's complaint was successful and this isn't the first time this has happened. [Worker – ACF – August 24th, 2018]

This worker's comment suggests involvement in decision-making processes could avoid the punishment bias that exists where platforms side with users (primarily men). Other workers responded positively to this worker's suggestion, imagining what a co-op might look like and how it would help workers, while some raised potential challenges:

I love the thought of creator economy platform cooperatives, but the obstacle is in the marketing and support costs and the online transactions processing. And it is even more complicated when it involves adult content because of the legalities and vigilance required. We're talking about an amount of start up and runway capital that a group of individuals are not likely to be able to self-finance. [Worker – ACF – 7th December 2023]

Despite obstacles such as establishment cost, the imagined resistance these workers are engaging in shows that workers are establishing the shared ideas and relationships which may create a challenge to platform capitalism. By using private communication networks as well as public forums that enable anonymity through aliases and anonymous profile pictures, workers have found spaces to discuss potential strategies while avoiding platform retaliation. These spaces can become important sites for collective support, as one worker noted of ACF forums:

There are a lot of models working this forum as though it's a part-time support job, and who are good at helping not just clients, but models. Behind the scenes many workers advocate for a lot of changes to site features that will greatly help models. I've seen some models really fight, and put a ton of energy into advocating like that, with site support staff that use the forum etc. [Worker – ACF – July 23rd 2022]

This quote illustrates how workers are cultivating alternative spaces outside hierarchical platform structures. While the imagined resistance discussed in this section is yet to be enacted, workers' alternative visions for the platform economy point to the desire for fairer and more secure working conditions. Furthermore, private communication networks encourage solidarity, as workers, who are spatially fragmented and are told to see other workers as competition, are instead fostering transnational communities of care which support them and challenge neoliberal norms underpinning the platform economy.

4.2.2. *Subversion through communities of care*

This section examines how subversive forms of care and gossip on private platforms help workers navigate problems they experience working digitally while challenging neoliberal discourses, norms and values, thereby developing communities of care.

Seven of the eight interviewees for this project said they use Discord to meet and communicate with others in the industry. On Discord, workers arrange private invite-only groups and provide a supportive space to network with one another, share information and resources, and seek and offer advice which can support their professional success and personal wellbeing. In this project, authors did not have access to these private networks wanting to maintain respect of the group's privacy. Interviewees' responses showed how private forms of collective mobilisation may be preferred to traditional, public forms of collective mobilisation. Below one interviewee discusses how Discord not only provides a hub for workers to build relationships online but also to translate relationships from online to offline environments:

It's amazing, especially for some of us who live and work alone or are virtual a lot. I travel a lot, and so I'm often in a hotel room by myself and the phone's dead and you're stressing out. You spent money to go away and it's not busy enough. And so, you just get online and have a bleet [vent], it's just nice to have people that know what you're going through. People show you what they've cooked for breakfast that morning, we talk about our partners, boyfriends, booty calls, good sex that we have had with a client, all that stuff. It's just like chatting with your girlfriends at work, but ours is just sex work. It's really cool, I am so glad that I found it. I've met so many other girls, we go out for dinner sometimes if we're in the same town. [Interviewee – Dee – 7th June 2023]

In building community through Discord, worker solidarity is strengthened as workers can bond and support one another. For Dee, the Discord community has helped alleviate stress and isolation, which is especially important given the remote nature of the job. In future, workers may also be able to leverage these social ties if an opportunity arose to take their grievances public and fight for broader level change. These social ties speak to the overlooked strength in everyday forms of resistance such as those witnessed on forums – as Patrick-Thomson and Kranert (2021) state 'the sharing of similar experiences and the performing of collective outrage on . . . forum[s] establish[es] the solidarity necessary to underpin collective action' (p. 1047). This is important to recognise as there has been criticism of whether everyday forms of resistance are 'real' acts of resistance (Contu 2008), as evidenced in Zizek's decaf versus real act dichotomy.

Zizek criticises everyday forms of resistance, which he terms decaf resistance, which refers to subtle, less disruptive forms of resistance. Zizek asserts that real acts of resistance directly confront and transform conditions that perpetuate inequality, oppression, or

exploitation, as opposed to everyday resistance which he argues is more superficial and symbolic (Žižek 2004, Stavrakakis 2016). Everyday forms of resistance, according to Žižek, are insufficient if true political change is to occur. Even if workers criticise the corporation they work for, by showing disdain, or reject the corporation to some capacity, they still operate within the ideological threshold of said corporation, in the case of this research, the platform. However, idealising ‘real’ acts overlooks the nuance of platform workers’ political struggles and action; the smaller processes that encompasses everyday acts can still disturb platform capitalist systems and ideologies without overthrowing them or immediately transforming them. Additionally, as Du Plessis (2018) argues a ‘limitation of this Žižekian perspective . . . is that it becomes difficult in a concrete analysis to identify anything but harmless decaf resistance, since its alternative, in the form of the revolutionary real act, happens very rarely’ (p. 572).

Online forums have created safe spaces to oppose the status quo, with workers undertaking counterpublic work that challenges romanticised ideals of platform work which fails to acknowledge the lived realities of many workers. This kind of counterpublic work is inherently subversive in that workers have created spaces outside of the control of the platform which broadens possibilities for social change. In fact, platforms understand the power of private organisation and the threat it brings when workers’ resistance turns public. For example, Rappi drivers in Argentina organised a strike through WhatsApp following changes to the platform’s assignment mechanism (Elbert and Negri 2021). The strike involved withdrawing deliveries during peak hour and resulted in significant financial losses for the platform. Following the strike Rappi invited activists to meet with them to discuss their concerns, however, after meeting with activists and identifying those who participated in the strike, Rappi removed the involved workers from app (Arias *et al.* 2021). These efforts show how platforms seek to control public discourse and maintain the status quo through the suppression of workers’ voices and collective action.

However, there have been some successes for platform workers following collective action. In Spain, the passing of the ‘Rider Law’ has afforded delivery workers such as those on Glovo, UberEats, and Deliveroo, with rights and protections including recognising an employment relationship exists if workers are managed by algorithms, and that platforms must ‘inform the worker when automated processing and profiling methods are used’ (Todoli-Signes 2021, p. 3), meaning that algorithmic transparency is required. The Rider Law shows how resistance organised through private networks can shift public interaction (Metawala *et al.* 2024). However, it’s not just workers’ shared experiences and outrage that facilitate solidarity and eventual collective action and change; the everyday element of care practised within these communities supports and sustains workers’ political resistance across time. Thus, care builds loyalty, and the transformation that Žižek reveres cannot happen without each of these aspects.

As social ties are being formed internationally – given that workers from different countries are communicating within these private networks – the possibility for collective action across the globe is real. This kind of transnational solidarity suggests that despite workers’ geographic dispersion, they are adapting their collective mobilisation efforts through the establishment of online communities of care. Thus, network building is invaluable to address shared challenges and the needs of workers within the community, particularly in their everyday lives. Below an interviewee, Adora, who engages in both

online and offline sex work, explains how peer support on private Discord groups has helped her overcome significant challenges:

Yeah. It's amazing. Everything that is good about sex work I've learnt from those groups and from my peers, it's been an absolute game changer and sanity saving as well. Because you get to process stuff. You get to talk it through. You get people who really understand the anger. I was assaulted in the brothel that I was working at, and I was like, fuck, I can't believe that happened. And then when I got home after the after my shift, I got to talk about it and a process that really easily - it was amazing. I had people there that understood, that were able to listen and not judge, and just be like, yip, cool sweet, blah, blah, blah. And I've never processed sexual assault, or whatever it was, as quickly as I did that one time because of the support that I had. So, it's massive. And even in terms of content as well, the ones of us who do content, we're really supportive of each other's work. It's awesome. [Interviewee – Adora – 9th June 2023]

Adora's comment shows how private Discord groups can provide a safe space, free of judgement, where personal stories can be shared and validated among the community. This kind of care among workers is a political act; by offering assistance and prioritising workers' wellbeing, these communities directly oppose platform capitalist systems that commodify human care, intimacy, and connection, instead enacting care in a non-transactional setting for the sole benefit of workers.

By caring for one another and sharing their stories, these communities also serve to strengthen safety measures for workers. As Dee explains, workers on the Discord group who also engage in offline services have shared information on dangerous clients, empowering them to protect themselves:

I was in a chat with about 10 girls in the South Island . . . and my friend mentioned she was going to Queenstown and she screenshotted a message [between her and the client] and I checked the numbers and messages I had, and he was abusive. And because of that she wouldn't agree to seeing him. [Interviewee – Dee – 7th June 2023]

Information sharing through Discord protects workers from entering dangerous situations while perhaps equipping them with the knowledge necessary to recognise future warning signs with abusive clients. When interviewees were asked if they had reported their assaults to the authorities, they said they did not want to bring attention to, or put further energy into, the matter. Rather, they wanted to focus on moving on from the incident. That is where Discord has played a crucial role, as workers often rely on humour to cheer one another up:

Absolutely and I think a sense of humour helps as well. Someone will have a mad client, or they will post a really terrible inquiry, or something like that, and we will all go to town and post GIFS and memes and we will all jump in [laughs]. We will laugh at it as much as we need to [laughs]. [Interviewee – Amy – 4th June 2023]

By posting memes and GIFs, workers can relate to one another's struggles and alleviate some of the low feelings they may be experiencing in the industry. Humour 'has been strongly associated with critique and resistance against the established powers, and often viewed as something rebellious and subversive' (Karlsen and Villadsen 2015, p. 6). In the case of online sex work, workers' humour becomes intertwined with care and undermines the structures that work to oppress them; it provides space for workers to assert control and power over situations that might otherwise have left them feeling

disempowered, or even exploited. By sharing and laughing about their experiences with clients, humour becomes a tool of resistance. Although not a typical form of protest, it allows workers to reclaim a sense of agency and disrupts common social narratives of sex worker victimhood (Vitis and Gilmour 2017).

As such, private groups allow workers a space to navigate challenges privately and avoid outside, unwanted interference. Workers leverage the potential of real-time communication on Discord to communicate with the group shortly after an incident occurs, which shows that these private forums can also move beyond emotional support to empowering workers through sharing knowledge and allowing them to overcome hardships through humour.

Private forums can also serve as a precursor to more public forms of collective action. For example, real-time communication through private online forums enabled public collective action on ACF when OnlyFans proposed banning online sex workers from the platform in October 2021. This proposal followed increased concern from key financial institutions, Visa and MasterCard, that FOSTA-SESTA laws were being breached. Workers who heard about the proposal before OnlyFans released an official statement took to the forum to discuss their concerns. After OnlyFans released an official statement, workers used the forum to update others as the situation unfolded, as well as offering emotional support and alternative arrangements for workers. A week later, OnlyFans retracted their statement, claiming they had received assurances from banks that they could continue to host sex workers on the platform (Weil 2022). However, some workers left the platform and posted about their decision on ACF:

They've destroyed all of their credibility with us now, even if they embrace their role as a sex work platform it's too late. They've fucked themselves royally and I doubt most of the people jumping ship will want to come back. I sure as hell don't. [Online sex worker - ACF - August 25th 2021]

This example shows how forums like ACF and Discord create space for resistance and can give rise to collective action that can evolve into more visible forms of action (such as withdrawing support from the platform). A second example shows how forums can be used to coordinate a public disturbance. When a third-party payment provider used by some sex workers, Firstchoice Pay's chosen bank (Choice Bank) went into bankruptcy in 2018 all funds were frozen. Workers were unable to access their income, with some still receiving payouts from liquidation companies as recently as 2023. During this time, workers used forums including ACF to share resources, such as email addresses and phone numbers of liquidators' offices and helped one another translate legal documentation to pressure the liquidators and ensure everyone was able to apply for their money. This group engagement was sustained for 3 years on the forum, with workers from across the globe participating in this action. The collective, everyday efforts of the community resulted in many workers getting their money back, despite the difficulties posed during the liquidation process and this highlights both the collective strength of these international communities and the longevity of these groups thanks to the care and support afforded through these groups.

While the examples above reveal how private forums can enable collective action during tumultuous times, workers also use Discord and the forums daily to disseminate

information and educate others. Interviewees discussed how they share relevant news to keep each other up-to-date, and help each other to navigate platform rules:

We, or one of us will see something on Twitter that's concerning and post about it and post a link or whatever in the Discord we will chat about it. Actually, one girl, she's amazing, she's actually created a whole different Discord with how to navigate every single different platform, basically what it requires, how to sign up, and everything else, she's done a huge amount of work. So that's a really good resource. [Interviewee – Amy – 4th June 2023]

Compiling and sharing information about each platform's Terms of Service agreements, as Amy discusses above, enables workers to navigate the particularities of each platform and avoid being de-platformed. However, despite private forms of mobilisation having many benefits as discussed above, there are also limitations to these spaces. One interviewee noted that the forums like Discord can feed collective negativity, rather than offering solutions, as workers often agree with one another:

The one downside is that we all agree with each other. So, we're kind of yelling into an echo chamber. So, all of us hate men. All of us hate that the rudeness and the entitlement. And so, we kind of feed that in each other. So, I don't know if any of us are going to change easily if we need to change behaviour, you know what I mean? So, if we need to give men more room or more space, none of us want to do that. So, we're all encouraging each other to not do that. Whereas a year ago we were thinking maybe we need to be a bit more positive, and then I had a couple of experiences, and I was like, no, no, we don't need to be more positive [laughs]. [Interviewee – Adora – 9th June 2023]

Adora's comment is reflexive in that while she acknowledges how Discord might prevent workers from changing their behaviour, the ability to vent about experiences as they occur has allowed workers to accept that it's not always their behaviour that needs to change. Discord helps workers validate the wrongdoing of others through their shared narratives, allowing them to speak to the injustices they face. In this way, workers hold clients accountable for their behaviour through their networked gossip, and in doing so subvert existing power dynamics and reclaim strength in knowing they're not alone in their struggles. This is especially important given the landscape of platform work where workers operate under algorithmic control and are subject to punishment bias where platforms often side with, or better protect, clients, as opposed to workers.

5. Discussion

This article has shown how online sex workers are restaging collective mobilisation, developing new pathways for political participation in private arenas that operate transnationally on chat forums and Discord servers.

Within these digital spaces, workers' sharing of their personal experiences serves as an important counterpublic tool. As Dias (2003) argues, narratives 'embody, reproduce, and/or alter cultural scripts; they may also push at the boundaries of what is unsayable and untellable in particular contexts' (p. 32). The ways sex workers express variations of the Second-Wave feminist principle that 'the personal is the political' (Hanisch 1969) demonstrate the patriarchal constraints of platform-based sex work: its privileging of the pleasure received by a predominantly male customer base over the safety, well-being and economic survival of women workers, and its algorithmic bias that favours and rewards

patriarchal and heterosexist performances of sexuality. In this way, workers' narratives can be inherently subversive, and either implicitly or explicitly feminist, as they push the boundaries of knowledge about the online sex work industry, often directly challenging and deconstructing dominant discourses or cultural scripts of the neoliberal economy which seeks to maintain public-private (political-personal) boundaries.

Kinser (2004) views narration as an avenue to explore 'how it feels to live a feminist life, how feminism informs and complicates one's sense of identity and how one stabilises that identity' (p. 137). Within the platform economy, workers' subjectivities are self-perceived differently: alongside the prefigurative politics of care we have been exploring here, there is a dominant neoliberal 'feminist entrepreneurial' ethos that can shape how individuals view and approach the issues they experience. For example, some workers express neoliberal understandings of themselves as independent contractors, and feel solely responsible for issues they face, believing they do not have a right to organise and act against the platform. Others adopting neoliberal subjectivities may be doing so as a strategic measure or to mitigate risk. For example, Stardust (2019) discusses how porn workers' staging of authenticity is a strategic measure to succeed in a 'precarious "gig economy"', where work [is] temporary, contractual or short-term' (pp. 3–4). Likewise, Ticona (2022) notes of workers utilising on-demand platforms how the "digital hustle 'isn't only done to meet economic needs; it also plays a role in identity construction, providing a source of dignity within often humbling labour market conditions' (p. 21). However, Berg (2021) found that some sex workers consider sex work to be less economically insecure than regular forms of employment and couldn't imagine going back to a regular job where there is less earning potential. While in these instances workers are using their neoliberal subjectivity to cope with platform conditions or to their economic advantage, as Ticona (2022) highlights 'it also produces a self that keeps workers trapped in the logic of entrepreneurial capitalism' (p. 42) where worker 'independence' usurps platform responsibility for its precarious working conditions.

Nevertheless, other workers acknowledge their independent contractor status, but their subjectivities are shifting in ways that contest the defeatist notion that workers cannot organise because of that categorisation – or because they recognise platforms must change their operations and experiences. These divergent worker subjectivities mirror the inconsistencies between feminism and neoliberalism in that while feminism, broadly construed, is committed to bringing about gender equality and analyses the power structures that constrain and diminish groups and individuals (Rottenberg 2022), entrepreneurial feminism attempts to draw on feminist principles to improve the lives of women, yet expects this to occur within a neoliberal environment where women are constrained and subordinated on a daily basis. Moreover, entrepreneurial, neoliberal feminism promotes self-reliance arguing that women must take ownership of their own circumstance, seeing one's ambition as one of the sole causes for change (Rottenberg 2022). This ignores the structural barriers that need to be transformed, something that is probably best achieved through collective mobilisation.

Yet, workers' creation of private communication networks directly challenges neoliberal imperatives to act individually, not collectively. Workers are facilitating collective mobilisation of independent contractors, and their imagined resistance has, in some cases, sought to hold platforms accountable for their unjust operations and allowed workers to envision future possibilities that would better serve them. In sharing their

experiences, workers are building solidarity and establishing communities of care on a transnational scale. Interviewees emphasise this notion of care by revealing how these communities have helped them heal and move past traumatic experiences, have offered an emotional release by providing a place to vent and have their stories validated, and have allowed workers to find happiness in moments of defeat through the everyday conversations that uplift their morale. For workers, these networks are internally transformative and, as Kinser (2004) claims, their narratives can offer a sense of stability, particularly for workers who are precariously positioned within the platform economy.

Workers' communities of care are valuable sites of emotional support and prefiguration, with workers engaging in imagined resistance. Imagined resistance builds on our understanding of collective mobilisation. Rather than paying attention to actualised collective action that we have seen historically with offline sex workers, it focuses on the potential for collective action endorsed within communities of care. Imagined resistance highlights that although public mobilisation isn't feasible because of the power dynamics in the platform economy, workers are still engaging with the idea of collective resistance and that is thanks to the solidarity formed within the communities of care workers have created. These communities are vital spaces for workers to share their experiences and affirm their struggles, offer emotional support to one another, share knowledge and learn from one another, and help workers to navigate the everyday challenges of platform capitalism. By caring for one another, trust is established, and workers may then engage in imagined resistance by visualising alternatives for the online sex work industry that would better support them. This may then lead to future, actualised resistance. Given the ever-changing policies within the platform economy, as evidenced in OnlyFans proposed ban and the Choice Bank bankruptcy scandal, these online groups are important for timely organising and worker response where they can pre-emptively plan how to act, as well as offer mutual support.

Our research adds to existing literature on sex worker mobilisations; Campbell *et al.* (2019) explored sex workers' safety strategies, finding forums were used for information-sharing about dangerous clients. While their research focuses solely on aspects of safety, we corroborate and add to this discussion by not only looking at how online forums are used for information sharing, including safety matters, but as a space where workers' collective mobilisation can be seen as prefigurative. Another study by Feldman (2014) examined sex workers' use of blogs, discussing how workers share their perspectives and personal experiences, engage in counterpublic work by critiquing 'media portrayals of sex workers' (p. 8), share 'information about movement events' (p. 15), and 'provide support for activists across space and time' (p. 15). Although Feldman largely focuses on how blogs are used 'to supplement more face-to-face action' (p. 3), our focus is on understanding how this resistance and community building are emergent real-time events.

Everyday forms of resistance are often overlooked as a legitimate resistance strategy. As Žižek's real-act-decaf dichotomy posits, everyday forms of resistance are symbolic, whereas 'real' acts of resistance are radical acts 'where the subject breaks with the symbolic order in which it is placed, and acts beyond desire, in a manner that results in the symbolic coordinates around the subjects existence being radically altered' (Du Plessis 2018, p. 567). However, insisting that individuals recognise their radical responsibility and perform 'real', revolutionary acts overlooks the political struggles of marginalised groups who are not able to engage in overt resistance. Žižek also overlooks the

importance care and solidarity have in bringing forth radical possibilities in future. It is not plausible for all individuals to participate in public, overt forms of resistance, and political theory biased toward those who do have that privilege minimises the real efforts of those who are enacting covert forms of resistance in private, less visible spaces (Rosales and Langhout 2020). Feminist scholars have discussed the significance of recognising women's everyday experiences and acknowledged the intersecting factors that contribute to women's disadvantage in public spaces (Crenshaw 1994). Elias and Rai (2019) claim 'feminist work reveals a more embodied understanding of global politics and political economy that "make visible something of the mess, pain, pleasure and pressure of everyday life"' (p. 10). Recognising private forms of mobilisation as legitimate resistance acknowledges these everyday gendered, embodied experiences whilst also acknowledging the 'transformative agency' these spaces hold for workers, and even future platform possibilities. This suggests that private forms of collective mobilisation, which entail everyday forms of resistance, are a kind of collective mobilisation that is being robustly built within the platform economy of online sex work.

Online sex workers' imagined resistance could be useful for other highly gendered occupations where workers may benefit from the anonymity of private networks and mobilisation. Gendered occupations that are typically dominated by women and involve care work, such as nursing and teaching (Cortes and Pan 2018), can place expectations on workers to uphold gender norms, leading to exploitation and sexist treatment. Private mobilisation within digital environments may help workers who feel isolated support one another and, like online sex workers, build solidarity across geographic borders and provide the foundation for public collective action. Such cross-border solidarities can inspire deeper cultural shifts in the workforce. For example, the #Metoo movement, where women and marginalised workers utilised social media to share their stories of sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace by using the #MeToo hashtag, was instrumental in raising awareness to environments and industries where significant power imbalances exist between workers. These power imbalances make it difficult for workers to speak out, normalising a culture of harassment and inequality. The entertainment industry in Hollywood became a central focus of the movement, with actresses speaking out about predatory directors on X, leading to terminations following collective outcry (Suk *et al.* 2021). While utilising social media and hashtags is known as clicktivism and has been criticised by some for promoting 'political complacency' (Zohouri *et al.* 2020 p. 8) and 'minimal effort engagement' (Karpf 2010, p. 3), its real-world impact cannot be overlooked. Imagined resistance, like clicktivism, is a low-risk form of participation with the potential to develop into more substantial forms of resistance resulting in broader cultural change as seen with the #Metoo movement.

Future research might explore how platform workers in other industries are mobilising and whether they are engaging in forms of imagined resistance. To date, studies on platform workers have largely focused on ride hailing and food delivery workers and their collective mobilisation and action, exploring how these workers utilise communication networks such as Facebook and WhatsApp to communicate their resistance strategies, including both everyday resistances and more overt forms (Cant 2019), as well as how they utilise public meeting points to develop their collective solidarity (Abilio *et al.* 2021). However, the platform economy is diverse, encompassing a wide range of industries, therefore

interrogating other industries and workers' experiences could shed light on their political positioning and whether they too have established solidarity networks. We have shown how imagined resistance is an act of prefigurative politics that emerges from, and helps to further build, communities of care. While the acts of resistance workers collectively imagined (such as sex work platform co-ops) were not yet established at the time of writing, the discussion of possibilities and supporting one another are themselves acts of resistance that create new possibilities for worker solidarity. If more formal organisation such as worker co-ops do emerge, future researchers might explore the enactment of online sex workers' imagined resistance and the restaging of workers' collective mobilisation back from private to public arenas, reporting on workers' imaginaries being implemented. It would be beneficial to understand how workers' collective action shifts from the private (imagined) to public (actioned) and how these changes stand across time.

Researchers might also consider how private communication networks might be strengthened. This could involve building solidarity between existing social movements and organisations. For example, if existing sex worker movements engage with worker forums or join Discord servers, workers could leverage the support of these movements by collaborating with them on joint campaigns, both offline and online. Essentially, there is an opportunity to strengthen their collective voices and power and facilitate the imagined into reality. Additionally, given that workers are interested in independent unionisation, forming alliances with intermediary unions and social movements might assist workers in better understanding some of the logistical and legal considerations required for forming an independent union, especially given that many existing organisations are knowledgeable about local legislation and labour laws. In the case of Canadian Foodora workers, their alliance with the Canadian Union of Postal Workers prior to their unionisation helped them successfully unionise (Lewchuk 2021). Having these kind of support systems in place could prove valuable, and communication networks might help to facilitate workers' independent unionisation thanks to the kinds of collaboration that occurs within these networks.

To conclude, workers' imagined resistance within private communication networks builds solidarity as workers share their experiences, offers advice and support to one another, and considers alternative ways to work within the online sex work industry, along with discussing their future visions for the industry. The communities of care that are forged as a result hold considerable prefigurative promise, and show that workers' restaging of their collective mobilisation from public to private spaces is strategic and subversive, undermining the logics of platform capitalism in many ways. These communities and their everyday forms of resistance hold transformative power, not just in the everyday lives of workers as they navigate the challenges they face with greater ease thanks to the care they receive, but in laying the blueprint for a different future for platform work that provides fairer working conditions for workers and allows workers to reclaim power within their shifting subjectivities of what it means to work online while prioritising the collective interests of workers.

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