



Currying Favour with the Algorithm: Online Sex Workers' Efforts To Satisfy Patriarchal Expectations

Brittany Palatchie¹ · Alice Beban¹ · Tracey Nicholls¹

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Abstract

The rise of the online sex work industry is reshaping how people conceptualise and negotiate sexual encounters across digital and offline spaces. This article analyses content from an online sex work forum (AmberCutie Forum (ACF)) to examine how online sex workers establish boundaries between their online and offline lives to manage competing expectations from their partners and viewers. Our analysis reveals a misogynistic double standard whereby workers are seen to threaten monogamous values, while viewers escape the same level of moral culpability. We argue that the cultural logics of monogamy function to delegitimise the labour involved with online sex work and increase the risk posed to online sex workers through retributive misogyny, including cyber-harassment toward sex workers. This impacts sex workers' emotional and financial wellbeing and reinforces gendered power relations by prioritising stereotypically masculine pleasure over workers' economic interests.

Keywords Platform capitalism · Online sex work · Affective boundary work · Misogyny · Cyber-harassment · Monogamy

Introduction

Online sex work challenges traditional conceptions of monogamy, complicating sex workers' personal and professional relationships. This article examines the affective boundary work that online sex workers conduct to manage expectations of monogamy from their offline partners and expectations of availability from their online viewers. We show how cis-hetero-patriarchy's expectations of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'

✉ Brittany Palatchie
b.palatchie@massey.ac.nz

¹ School of People, Environment and Planning, Massey University, Palmerston North, Auckland, New Zealand

undermine sex work as a legitimate form of work, and how patriarchal standards of monogamy and women's availability are reproduced in online spaces.

Online sex work involves selling sexual services and content through online platforms. Unlike offline sex workers, who might advertise their services online but perform them in person, online sex workers provide services digitally. This can include webcamming platforms such as MyFreeCams, where workers typically livestream publicly, although if they have good viewership levels they can livestream privately and get tipped by viewers for sexual acts, or subscription-based platforms like OnlyFans where workers create explicit content behind a paywall although may have some content publicly available to attract customers to subscribe. The sex work industry features a 'whorocracy' where "some forms of sex work are more acceptable than others" (Easterbrook-Smith, 2023, p. 320). Online sex work is typically regarded more highly than offline work. This higher status is due to neoliberal narratives where "the webcam model is seen as a strong, entrepreneurial woman while prostitutes ... are deemed less than others and often experience legal consequences for their chosen work" (Cox, 2020, p. 530–531). Despite being better positioned on the 'whorearchy' online sex workers still face challenges with how they're perceived in society and with how their work is valued (Stutz et al., 2024).

Rooted in patriarchal systems, monogamy has traditionally enforced gendered power-differentials that subordinate women. With the rise of Christianity, extra-marital relations became 'sinful.' Marital laws prevented illegitimate children inheriting property and unwed mothers were ostracised from their communities for birthing illegitimate children (MacDonald, 1995). While strictly-enforced monogamy was successful in reducing the number of children born out of wedlock, its normative force also reinforced a social world in which 'suitable behaviour' of girls and women was constructed and policed by men. In essence, monogamy was produced through patriarchy. Today, as many liberal-democratic societies move away from strictly patriarchal family structures and towards greater gender equality, it is more common for people to practice 'serial monogamy' (multiple, consecutive monogamous relationships), facilitated by the ability to divorce and remarry. Although serial monogamy suggests a relaxation of monogamy's force as a value, expected adherence to monogamous ideals persists. As we show, monogamy, as a value and an expectation against which other people are judged, is reproduced in online sex work.

Although monogamy is framed as an expectation of both genders, feminist theorists highlight the gender bias in monogamous expectations, with marriage historically granting men privileges over women's labour and sexuality (Federici, 2017). This bias persists, allowing men more sexual freedom, often justified by claims that men's natural desire to reproduce is incompatible with cultural norms of monogamy (Northrup, 2006). Discourses of promiscuity function as a form of disciplinary control of women, with women more likely to be shamed and harshly judged for infidelity, while men's sexual freedoms are excused and celebrated (Foucault, 1977; Walker, 2017). Moreover, gendered stereotypes interact with other normative ideas about women's race, class, and sexuality (hooks, 2015). Consequently, certain women are more likely to be labelled as promiscuous due to their social position. In the case of online sex work, workers are reviled as indecent women for having many clients (i.e., earning a living). As Federici's (1975) work stresses, societal norms have

long portrayed female sexual pleasure as sinful and women's sexuality as a service to men, acceptable only within the confines of marriage and procreation.

That is not to say that female sexuality is still as repressed as it once was. Sex positive movements have contributed "to the advancement of women's sexuality" (Fahs, 2014, p. 267) helping decriminalise sex work in places, provide greater representation to queer sexualities, and "have, in many ways, turned upside-down the notion of the once highly dichotomous public/private, virgin/whore, and deviant/normal" discourses (Fahs, 2014, p. 268). However, women still face struggles related to sexuality, particularly with commercialised sex. While the digital economy is celebrated for enabling women's empowerment, digital platforms reproduce traditional monogamous values through their algorithms. Profitability of sex work platforms relies on workers fostering 'parasocial' relationships with viewers, where viewers feel a sense of connection and intimacy even though they don't know the worker personally. Workers expend affective labour creating these connections to secure long-term paying customers. Platforms reward workers for their affective labour by ranking workers through algorithmic scoring systems, providing better exposure to high-earning workers. This perpetuates gender hierarchies by incentivising behaviours aligned with patriarchal norms, reflecting the biases of stereotypical masculinity, and representing them as the preferences of predominantly male platform owners and viewers. Neoliberal narratives of self-responsibility normalise the idea that a worker's success or failure is determined by their individual actions (Ashman et al., 2018), ignoring these woman-subordinating structural constraints, which also constrain non-binary and non-gender conforming persons.

This article contributes to the burgeoning literature on structural dynamics of online sex work by revealing how the cultural logics of monogamy are reproduced in digital spaces. Drawing on a content analysis from an online sex work forum (Amber-Cutie Forum (ACF)), we examine how workers establish boundaries between their online and offline lives to manage competing expectations from their partners and viewers. Our analysis reveals a misogynistic double standard whereby workers are seen to threaten monogamous values, while viewers escape the same level of moral culpability. We argue that these monogamous expectations delegitimise the labour involved with sex work and increase the risk posed to online sex workers through retributive misogyny, including cyber-harassment. This impacts workers' emotional and financial well-being and reinforces gendered power relations by prioritising stereotypically masculine pleasure over workers' economic interests.

In the following section, we explore literature on misogyny in online sex work (2.1), and on the paradox of affective labour—defined as managing others' emotions professionally and privately—revealing quandaries workers face in forming parasocial relationships for income while delineating personal boundaries (2.2). Following a discussion of methodology, we present results in three sections.

Theoretical Frame

Monogamy and Misogyny

Research on the impact of monogamous expectations on online sex workers is limited. Existing studies explore how infidelity in relationships might be experienced in online spaces, and how stereotypical forms of intimacy reinforce gendered power relations. Online behaviours like “flirting, sharing personal details, establishing emotional intimacy” on platforms like Facebook can be perceived as infidelity, impacting relationships (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, p. 1). Jones (2016) examined the development of intimate relationships between online sex workers and clients, shedding light on similarities between commercial and non-commercial intimacies. Moreover, studies show how stereotypical gender roles, such as women being submissive, may be assumed in online webcamming interactions due to socialised understandings from porn (Antevska & Gavey, 2015). This perpetuates objectification of women and reinforces “masculine constructions of female sexuality” (Henry, 2018, p. 23). We build on this objectification scholarship by revealing how structural misogyny is reproduced through the affective boundary work required by online sex work.

Misogyny is a “policing” practice that reinforces patriarchal norms by insisting on women’s provision of “feminine coded goods and services” for men (Manne, 2017, p. 111). Should women transgress our ‘proper’ place in society, we are disciplined and criticised, while men are offered sympathy for not receiving the care and support they’re supposedly ‘owed’ (Manne, 2017, p. 22–23). Misogyny’s manifestation in digital realms includes online harassment, cyber-stalking, doxing, and gender-trolling (Ging & Siapera, 2018; Moloney & Love, 2018). Online misogyny thus entails digital forms of policing where men seek to punish and discipline women through violent vitriol including death and rape threats, intended to “dominate, silence, and control women” (Moloney & Love, 2018, p. 8). While misogyny doesn’t always manifest as physical violence, it always encompasses some degree of harm whether that is “psychological, professional, or reputational” (Ging & Siapera, 2018, p. 516), and jeopardises the safety and inclusion of women in digital spaces. In its commitment to a rigid gender binary, misogyny does not just exclude women from public space; it erases the possibility, and personhood, of non-binary existence. Recent literature sheds light on how online sex workers confront misogyny, employing strategies from blocking harassers or using anonymity as a shield, to internalising the blame for harassment and rationalising their experiences as ‘normal’ for the industry (Dellner, 2022).

As online sex work involves sexual intimacies akin to what is typical of monogamous relationships, utilising monogamy and misogyny as a lens to understand workers’ experiences is fitting, as monogamous expectations placed on workers devalue their labour and expose them to misogynistic retribution. This research builds on feminist debates on whether sex work should be recognised as legitimate labour and concerns about patriarchal control of sexuality. Radical second-wave feminists view sex work as exploitive and a form of control, advocating for its abolition (Tyler, 2021). However, many liberal feminists view sex work as personal choice and legitimate labour, fighting for workers’ rights while acknowledging potential exploitation

(Tyler, 2021). While research has explored efforts made by feminists to achieve recognition of sex work as labour (Pitcher, 2014) and have pinpointed some of the troubling dynamics of sex work (MacDonald et al., 2021), there is an absence of literature looking at the ways online sex work is devalued and how workers' labour is overlooked in favour of the monogamous, romantic, or emotional needs of viewers and partners of online sex workers. Thus, this research shows the complexities of online sex work, where commercialised intimacy is framed by monogamous understandings of intimacy, and the consequences this has for online sex workers' economic security, wellbeing, and autonomy.

Affective Labour and Parasocial Relationships

Affective labour involves work carried out to influence the emotions of others, distinct from emotional labour which involves managing one's own emotions during interactions (Negri & Hardt, 1999). In sex work studies, emotional labour is a common concept that authors draw upon to highlight strategies sex workers use to protect their emotional wellbeing (Bernstein, 2007; Jones, 2020; Rubattu et al., 2023). Studies find that offline sex workers manage risks posed to their emotional wellbeing by producing a manufactured identity and reserving certain sexual acts for private intimate moments or staying out of private relationships while doing sex work, which helps workers protect themselves psychologically "from a range of negative effects caused by selling access to parts of the body" (Sanders, 2005, p. 323). In these examples, emotional labour is a strategy for establishing boundaries to protect workers' *own* emotions.

While less explored, affective labour—the management of others' emotions—is also crucial in sex work for managing client and partner expectations. Online sex workers create boundaries to manage the expectations of their online viewers and offline partners, a form of labour we term 'affective boundary work'. This builds on Oso Casas (2010), who does not explicitly use affective boundary work as a concept of analysis, but focuses on how offline sex workers manage the emotional experiences of others, establishing boundaries with clients who try to negotiate sex without a condom or discounted rates if they feel they are on friendly terms with workers. Affective boundary work is complex, involving managing parasocial relationships with viewers and romantic relationships with partners when monogamous values are desired.

While studies on 'parasocial relationships'—one-sided relationships that individuals form with media personalities—have largely emerged within media studies, marketing, and psychology (Chung & Cho, 2017; Aw & Chuah, 2021; Kim & Song, 2016), this concept has significant implications for online sex work. Hesse and Floyd (2019) suggest that pornography viewers may develop parasocial bonds to alleviate loneliness. Rouse and Salter (2021) show how cos-play creators on platforms like Instagram and OnlyFans engage in affective conversation or show intimacy toward clients to maintain parasocial relationships, and Cardoso and Scarcelli (2021) analyse how OnlyFans creators curate their profiles to create a branded character that clients would find likeable. These examples highlight how parasocial relational labour is a part of the self-branding process and is often not recognised as part of sex work.

We extend on Rouse and Salter (2021) and Cardoso and Scarcelli's (2021) work to explore how online sex workers provide social, affective, and physical intimacies through the fantasy they offer to strengthen parasocial relationships with viewers. These intimacies are a form of affective boundary work as they are not only done to invoke positive feelings in the viewer but also to establish firm boundaries between online (fantastical) and offline (real) environments. Yet, this affective boundary work is fraught with risks, especially when monogamous expectations from partners or viewers' misconceptions lead to emotional and economic repercussions for workers. We examine how these dynamics underscore the inherent misogyny in expectations of women's availability and subservience, and how they manifest in the digital economy, compelling workers to engage in affective boundary work to satisfy conflicting demands.

Studies in labour sociology have examined the emotional labour carried out by workers who must manage their own feelings as part of their job and the power dynamics within workplaces (Erikson, 2016; Elliot & Smith, 2004; Toerien & Kitzinger, 2007). Moreover, studies have explored how precarious labour conditions affect workers in the platform economy, highlighting issues like lack of platform regulation and the lack of protections for independent contractors (Zanoni, 2019). This study builds on labour sociology in a novel way. Although it doesn't examine emotional labour, it does use affective labour - the work done to elicit positive emotional experiences in others -- to show platform economy conditions create precarious work environments. Workers must engage in affective labour to facilitate parasocial relationships with their audience members and, due to monogamous expectations of viewers and partners, workers must also maintain affective boundaries between their public (working) and private lives, which challenges them and exposes them to risks. To date, we have not located research that utilises parasocial relationships as a lens to understand the ways viewers and partners place monogamous expectations on workers and how these expectations undermine workers' labour. This research therefore provides a unique understanding of online sex work platforms as spaces where parasocial relationships are not only emerging but are necessary for workers' success. It also speaks to the difficulty in maintaining *effective* affective boundaries when monogamous expectations are present. As studies that explore parasocial relationships have largely emerged from media, communication, and psychology studies, this sociological piece provides new ways to think of parasocial relationships outside the typical celebrity-fan dynamic, instead looking at parasocial relationships in the context of labour and precarity.

Methodology

This research set out to understand online sex workers' experiences working digitally. Our collaboration on this article has been informed by feminist commitments to sharing labour, aiming for consensus in decision-making, and building capabilities of emerging scholars. The lead author (a PhD student) has done the substantive work of collecting the data, framing the argument, and drafting the article. Successive drafts were critiqued and revised by both co-supervisors/secondary authors in a

shared-labour approach that saw us trading off 'first read' (substantive comments and contribution to writing) and 'second read' (commentary) responsibilities.

We used a constructivist grounded-theory approach in our data analysis, obtaining data through a content analysis of an online forum called AmberCutie Forum (ACF) utilised by online sex workers (including live streamers on webcam platforms such as MyFreeCams and content creators on subscription platforms such as OnlyFans), viewers, and the public. The research began following low-risk ethics approval from Massey University (application approval number: 4000025322). A constructivist grounded theory approach was beneficial for understanding the personal perspectives of workers (Burns et al., 2022). Charmaz (2008) explains how a constructivist approach "views research as an emergent product of particular times, social conditions, and interactional situations" (p. 160), it also acknowledges "the values, beliefs, lived experiences, and assumptions of the individuals engaged in the research" (Brandhorst et al., 2023, p. 188) which is reflective of the principles of self-reflexivity we adhered to throughout this project (Tracy, 2010). For this research, forum data relaying workers nuanced experiences was interpreted and knowledge was constructed with these contextual frames in mind.

Threads on ACF were filtered by engagement, and content analysis was conducted on the most engaged threads: all 7 threads on the "General Cam/Creator Chat" section and 48 threads on the "normal threads section". Content analysis was conducted on these forums, using grounded theory memoing techniques to contextualise the data against the research aim: understanding how the commercial sex work industry operates within platform capitalism and how these models of labour impact online sex workers. We undertook both content analysis and grounded theory memoing in an iterative process. Content analysis is a "systemic and rigorous approach" (White & Marsh, 2006, p. 22) that involves making "sense of the data to learn what is going on and obtain a sense of whole" (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 109), thus allowing arguments to be deeply grounded in data from a wide collection of texts. For this project, this sensemaking process involved doing the initial read through of forum threads and helped us interpret popular topics of conversation requiring further analysis.

To support the content analysis, we used grounded theory memo writing techniques to "capture ideas in process", tracing the development of categories and helping prioritise the data into NVivo (Charmaz, 2008, p. 166). Using NCapture, a browser plugin that allows researchers to screenshot entire internet pages, data was captured and uploaded into NVivo where text (poster quotes) was highlighted and coded accordingly. We followed Charmaz's initial and focused coding framework in NVivo. The initial coding identified key insights, themes, topics, and analytic possibilities (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2008, p. 163). Similar forum posts were grouped together to form categories and subcategories, helping to identify similarities and differences (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 423). The focused coding was more synthesised to refine and capture the exact phenomena in question. An unexpected theme that emerged was how monogamous values are understood in relation to online sex work.

Findings

Affective Management of Romantic Partners

Online forum discussions revealed the affective boundary work online sex workers engage in as they manage disclosing or concealing their profession in romantic relationships. This section analyses affective boundary work sex workers undertake to navigate partners' monogamous expectations both pre- and post-disclosure.

Online sex workers can be hesitant to tell their partners about their work due to the stigma they often face. One webcammer discussed their rationale for keeping their occupation a secret, at least temporarily, from their partner:

I thought I didn't need to tell him as I cammed in disguise, I am enacting a persona to some extent. However, I felt guilty not telling him. It's fair if he doesn't like it at all, and I must respect that [Worker – ACF, 10 April 2021].

By using a persona and disguise online, this worker, like others on the forum, rationalised their decision to keep their job a secret. However, they felt guilty not disclosing their work, showing the futility of establishing boundaries between online and offline environments when broader social and moral discourses are expected to be upheld. Other workers on the forum noted that being 'out' as an online sex work involves varying levels of disclosure, as they might make their job known to their partner, but not disclose their job to their significant others' friends or family:

How many camgirls are completely out about their work? not the majority. Even less are out to their significant others' friends and family. When someone enters a relationship with a camgirl he's expected to weave an elaborate web of lies to protect her privacy. This is fucking stressful [Worker – ACF, 20 April 2016].

This perspective emphasises the possible burden of entering a relationship with an online sex worker, although the stakes are especially high for online sex workers, as disclosure to a partner carries the risk of compromising their privacy:

Search for men on a fetish/sex related group/platform. They're likely to be comfortable with sex work and might also participate in some activities that they wouldn't want family to know about. Then if you break up and they play dirty you have leverage to play dirty back (forgive me that sounds terrible but I think you'll understand) [Worker – ACF, 13 April 2017].

This pragmatic approach to seeking partners within certain niches indicates a risk mitigation strategy. Critics may view this strategy as deceitful, but it can also be seen as a response to the moral constraints imposed by monogamous expectations within a society that marginalises sex workers, granting them minimal power and status, thereby forcing them to adopt such defensive strategies.

Online sex workers who have disclosed their job discussed the lengths they go to, and the constant pressure they feel, to make the distinction between themselves and their sex worker identity known to people post-disclosure:

Does anyone else feel this constant need to prove that they are not a bad immoral person due to societal stigmas? [Worker – ACF, 7 September 2020].

These efforts to prove oneself a moral person are examples of the affective labour workers do to manage the desired emotions of others. To make this kind of affective boundary work easier, other forum posters suggested finding someone who doesn't see online sex as a violation of monogamous values:

I think relationships thrive on shared values, if one person values monogamy and considers camming a violation of that, they're best matched with someone who agrees [Worker - ACF, 12 May 2018].

Determining shared values also means setting boundaries within your relationship, although the nature of online sex work means that boundaries are often crossed:

She set the boundary that she would not tell viewers things that were non-sexual. But the other day a long-time viewer came into her chatroom and she says: "oh my love is here" and she LIT UP. Then she said "write to me later, don't let anything stop you. I think about you all day" and I felt completely and absolutely devastated and betrayed [Partner of online sex worker – ACF, 31 October 2020].

In this example, the affectionate language used is reflective of 'the girlfriend experience' where intimacies previously associated with private interactions are provided as part of the service sold by sex workers (Carbonero & Garrido, 2017). Commodified and non-commodified intimacies can become blurred, creating challenges for online sex workers who must manage their online and offline relationships in ways that are strikingly similar, as one worker noted:

I use words like "luv" when referring to members. But I'll spell it differently so members can make the distinction between real, in person LOVE versus me showing that I care about them [Worker – ACF, 2 November 2020].

This careful approach with wording demonstrates the complexities surrounding the textual nature of working online, where sex workers engage in written communications to encourage parasocial relationships with viewers, while also indicating boundaries between the fantasy and their offline intimate relationships. However, there is no guarantee that viewers will make the distinction between online sex work and genuine intimacy (see Sect. 4.2), or that their partners won't misconstrue the affect they show their viewers as genuine romance. This exposes the vulnerabilities of engaging in *effective* affective boundary work in monogamous societies, as online sex workers

are expected to fulfil social expectations of monogamy from partners, whilst navigating expectations of clients who are also seeking the girlfriend experience.

Another partner on the forum was troubled that they cannot agree upon the boundaries they want to establish in their relationship, specifically feeling uncomfortable with their partner sharing social media with viewers:

I would be okay if we agreed on the boundaries that should not be broken but we have a different point of view about it. It makes me feel uneasy that she's sharing her social media with her viewers, even if I know they are not her personal ones [Partner of an online sex worker – ACF, 26 May 2022].

Many of the boundaries that partners seek in relationships fail to differentiate online sex work as labour, inclusive of its relational labour. Moreover, when examining these boundaries, partners prioritise their feelings and desires in their relationship, overlooking the economic needs of their partners. In response, several online sex workers emphasised the benefits of having a social media presence and promoting themselves online and acknowledge that their success can be contingent on multimedia use. This insistence on performances of conventional monogamy reflects a social backdrop in which men control women's sexuality and economic participation and women passively acquiesce.

Even though some partners can objectively understand that these actions are done for work, that doesn't always stop them from experiencing jealousy. In fact, when partners expressed jealousy, other partners on the forum agreed that intimate acts should remain within one's relationship:

I want sex in the relationship to be an intimate encounter and it simply cannot be intimate for me if the girl is sharing her sexuality with other men (especially for money, I don't want money to have ANY relation to my intimacy with a girl) [Viewer - ACF, 4 August 2017].

Viewing online sex work as a violation of the exclusivity of a monogamous relationship shows the value sex continues to hold in society, as a sacred intimate act occurring between two people. One worker responded to the comment above by raising concerns about how this demand for exclusive access to women's bodies reproduces the patriarchal policing of women's sexuality:

I could never be with a partner who viewed my body and my sexuality as something they were entitled to, or who thought it was theirs. Those are partners who shouldn't be involved with sex-workers at all, because they will try to force models to quit their careers to meet their demands at exclusivity [Worker - ACF, 4 August 2017].

Social norms around sexuality and monogamy shape the boundaries partners expect online sex workers to abide by privately and publicly, which can be detrimental to workers' earning power. These boundaries reveal how patriarchal power dynamics are perpetuated and upheld across public and private environments, and show how a

women's labour isn't constrained to the workplace, as she must undertake different kinds of affective boundary work to manage both her work and private relationships. This devalues online sex work as labour and disciplines women who put their own economic needs first. The affective boundary work women engage in therefore reinforces their own subordination through appeasing male desires at their own expense.

Dangers of Parasocial Dynamics for Online Sex Workers

Debates on ACF forums explore the ethical quandary of whether online sex workers have a moral duty to inform viewers of their relationship status. This discussion reveals problematic power imbalances wherein viewers' traditional monogamous expectations clash with the realities of sex workers. Viewers who have developed parasocial attachments feel entitled to police and enter workers' personal lives. This section examines how such skewed interactions can escalate into misogynistic aggression and cyber-harassment, inflicting emotional and financial harm on workers in both their professional and private spheres.

Online sex workers may withhold their relationship status to maintain the illusion of intimacy and availability to a singular paying viewer. This deception can be a strategic aspect of their professional branding, aligning with neoliberal self-promotion norms necessary for financial success (Duffy & Pooley, 2019), as one webcammer notes:

Though I have a boyfriend, I am lying about him on my stream. Sometimes it makes me feel like a complete slut, but I really want to make my followers, especially in privates, feel like they are the ONLY men I have, and that they take a special place in my life. I don't want to ruin their picture of me [Worker – ACF, 17 March 2022].

This person exhibits a tension between a desire to construct a fantasy of exclusivity with clients and a desire to be truthful. Yet, being truthful can have harsh consequences, as another worker noted:

I once had a high tipper in my room who said he was young and single and eventually he asked me if I was single. I felt icky lying, so I told him the truth that no, I am not single. I never saw him again. I am always honest. [Worker – ACF, 6 February 2019].

One way workers navigate this tension is to perceive online spaces as a site of fantasy, where the line between deception and performance is blurred. Withholding information such as age, interests, nationality, and relationship status is sometimes part of the affective boundary work required to maintain a professional persona, and understanding this selective sharing as the construction of fantasy enables workers to perceive their affective boundary making as performance rather than lying:

Many models in this forum call it 'lying' when they are not disclosing details of their real life [but] you are not being dishonest in my opinion because you talk

about a fantasy and that fantasy is whatever the model wants it to be. I guess this job is complicated enough in terms of communication. If, on top of that, you call yourself a liar you might burden yourself with problematic baggage [Worker – ACF, 17 March 2022].

To uphold online/offline boundaries, some workers explicitly draw the distinction between online fantasy and the offline ‘real’ with clients:

I’m very straightforward about being unavailable. I just say, “I’m a fantasy, online only” and they get it. I don’t want the types who want me to maintain the illusion of attainability, partly because it makes me uncomfortable and partly because I don’t want stalkers [Worker – ACF, 22 April 2022].

Yet, outright disclosure does not always prevent invasive inquiries, as one worker noted:

I used to be upfront and honest about my partner and that he was the father of my kids. But then quite a few started asking me personal questions about him, which I don’t like because I’m protective. So now I’m going to be a little more evasive [Worker – ACF, 17 March 2022].

Probing questions can escalate into instances of cyberviolence, where viewers may threaten or harass workers based on the personal information shared. West (2014) refers to cyberviolence as instances whereby someone assaults an individual or group of individuals through digital technologies causing “psychological, social, physical, and economic” harm (p. 14). By disclosing personal information about their lives, such information can be used against online sex workers in cyberthreats from viewers. For example, one worker described how a viewer’s aggression led to threats against her family:

The member started becoming aggressive and was offending my family, values, and my husband since they all accept that I am a cam girl. He started threatening me, claiming he would find out where I lived and would kidnap my kids to teach them how to be respectable human beings. In my case he knew I was married, and it wasn’t until I firmly told him no [that I wouldn’t meet him] that it escalated. I ended up banning him because he was too much to deal with, but I lost 75% of my income [Worker – ACF, 22 August 2021].

In this example, the viewer’s rejection has manifested into ‘disciplinary’ measures where they have attempted to shame and intimidate the worker. Their anger might be explained as a response to being rejected by a woman and thereby losing control “in the face of shifting gender-power relations” (Thompson, 2018, p. 84). This scenario underscores the gender-based violence that occurs virtually, with women falling victim to forms of online abuse at a higher rate than men (Kavanagh & Brown, 2020). The economic impact on the sex worker who had to ban a problematic viewer underscores the financial risks associated with addressing cyber-harassment. While

banning is an adequate defensive measure for many online sex workers, some find it necessary to pause their work to evade persistent harassment.

I had a viewer tipping me constantly and he fell in love with me. Soon he became insanely jealous and got aggressive with me saying that he would find me in person. It became so bad I had to cut him off, so I lied to him and told him I stopped camming and created a new account. But he found my new account and has started calling me a “cam whore, slut, and useless” and has mentioned how much he hates me and has distributed my videos to tube sites. I’m nervous and scared and I think what he’s doing is harassment. I’m now scared to cam again, but I want to continue camming [Worker – ACF, 17 March 2019].

This degree of cyber-harassment shows the misogynistic entitlement some viewers feel toward online sex workers when they form unhealthy parasocial relationships. Moreover, prior to stopping webcamming, this worker attempted to create a new account and distance herself from the aggressive viewer, showing the degree of unpaid emotional labour involved in attempting to stay safe while working online.

Cyberstalking is one of the cyberviolences that online sex workers must navigate because of viewers’ patriarchal expectations about the sexual availability of women. Such expectations are complicated in the capitalist marketplace; as platforms have commodified interactions with workers, viewers may feel as though they deserve more from the worker they are interacting with, and that a worker’s romantic interest can be bought. Some viewers’ narratives on the forums depicted men as victims of sex workers’ ‘scams’, in cases where workers are friendly with viewers or do not disclose their relationship status:

I wish these girls/operators would realise the hurt they cause. No, it isn’t the guy’s fault ‘for not understanding the situation’, when they specifically go out of their way to let you know it isn’t a normal situation for them. I can’t believe how few morals they have. My only hope is the world bites them in their ass for acting this way. They don’t ever deserve happiness after treating people like that. They even go as far as fake crying to try and convince you. Pure scum in my opinion [Viewer – ACF, 22 February 2020].

A huge problem with this from the position of specifically female cam models is that it is considered socially acceptable for them to lie with the intention of further establishing a parasocial bond for the purposes of increasing the amount of money they make. There has to be a line there where you go from creating a fantasy to actively manipulating a delusion you built [Viewer – ACF, 26th November, 2023].

In these narratives, workers are portrayed as wrong-doers while men are the victims, justifying punishment toward women. Consequently, online environments can further victimise workers by giving credence to patriarchal narratives, akin to what we see in offline environments, whereby narratives of inappropriate femininity or behaviour characterise sex work as deceptive, and immoral (Wong et al., 2011). Fur-

thermore, these narratives dismiss online sex work as genuine labour, underscoring how monogamy and sex work are at odds.

Ultimately, as both viewers and workers on the forums argued, viewers need to be able to distinguish fantasy from reality and recognise how online spaces are separate from their offline spaces:

Cammodels are a fantasy, entertainment, a form of escape from real life. Models play into both fantasies (of being single or taken) regardless of their actual status because playing out viewers fantasies is part of the job. It becomes a problem when a viewer is unable to separate fantasy from reality [Worker – ACF, 22 September 2021].

You must understand that camming is a business and when you go online you're entering a fantasy land where the model is performing a service for tokens [Viewer – ACF, 17th February 2024].

These perceptive posts point to the paradox of parasocial relationships, for parasocial attachment is required to enact the fantasy that enables online sex workers to make a livelihood, but also poses risks to workers if viewers expect a genuine relationship. To not recognise the transactional nature of the interaction oversteps some workers' boundaries, to the point that some see it as an ethical decision to let viewers know the relationship is not real. As one worker noted, "if a member is so smitten by me that he thinks we're in a real relationship, then I'm ethically bound to give him a harsh reality check" [Worker – ACF, 22 September, 2021].

This subsection has shown how parasocial relationships emerge on platforms as online sex workers engage in affective boundary work to build interpersonal connections with their viewers. Some viewers don't recognise these relationships as fantastical and transactional, developing an unhealthy parasocial relationship. While blame often falls on the worker for the cyber-harassment that can result, it is ultimately the misogynistic expectations placed on workers -- to be either monogamous (and not working) or to be fully available to viewers -- that need to be addressed.

Gendered Double Standards of Monogamy

This section explores how gendered narratives of monogamy are reproduced online in ways that excuse men from abiding by monogamous standards, while causing women to experience guilt and confusion. Forum discussions about whether viewers should tell their partners they are engaging in cybersex reveal a double standard whereby viewers escape an equal moral culpability to uphold monogamous values in their own relationships. We analyse quotes from viewers' forum posts to explore how viewers justify their engagement on sex work platforms, counterposing these with quotes from workers that reveal how they internalise misogynistic expectations of monogamy, and the strategies they deploy to manage misogyny. These strategies reveal the role empowerment discourses play in online sex workers' positive view of their work despite the discrimination they routinely experience.

Some viewers justify their consumption of webcamming as a means of avoiding offline temptations and protecting offline monogamous relationships:

I love my wife and have no interest in cheating on her or any other type of real-life relationship. But it's like cam girls offer a loophole, I can feed my urge to re-experience flirting/courtship/desire without it actually fucking with my own emotions/temptations or another woman's [Viewer – ACF, 20 October 2020].

The viewer's comment shows a contradiction over what is considered infidelity; he justifies his actions as occurring within the 'loophole' of cyberspace. This justification exposes a gendered double standard of monogamous expectations, wherein workers occupy the passive, giving role expected of women by performing a fantasy of monogamy for clients and are subject to slut shaming and cyber-harassment (as discussed in the previous section), while viewers enact a masculine script, rewriting what could be considered internet infidelity to satisfy what they claim are their unmet needs.

Another viewer echoes the first viewer's sentiment that 'visiting cam sites' does not constitute 'crossing the line':

Visiting cam sites provides me with an outlet for these desires without 'crossing the line'. I do think that repeatedly visiting the same models, developing an emotional connection etc. would be considered cheating by many, including my wife. I've 'felt unfaithful' at times doing this but for me it's still somewhat better than the alternative and I feel comfortable with it. [Viewer – ACF, 21 October 2020]

This viewer's desire to experience flirting reveals the insidiousness of gendered standards of monogamy; while flirting is part of the affective boundary work online sex workers engage in to fulfil a fantasy for viewers, and viewers expect it, women are socially vilified for flirting and enjoying male attention without the intention of securing only one man and entering a monogamous relationship with them. In instances where viewers' partners have discovered that their husbands are engaging in cyber-sex, workers are targeted and vilified for ruining their relationships. This was evidenced in a forum thread by a viewer's partner:

As someone who's boyfriend was a member of cam sites and how bad it has affected our relationship and sex life. I have read about how many of you don't care if your members are married or in relationships, not really thinking about how their wives and girlfriends might feel which is cheated on and betrayed [Viewer's partner – ACF, 22 April 2022].

In response many argued that rather than blaming the worker, the viewer should be held accountable as it's not the worker's relationship to protect. Still, workers are often blamed for the emotional turmoil of cheating, underpinned by dominant discourses of sexuality that see sex workers as deviant, dirty, and promiscuous (Siegel et al., 2022). This double standard of sexuality norms is clear as even women expect

online sex workers to suppress their sexuality. Moreover, it reveals how online sex is inherently gendered in a rigidly binary way (despite the presence of non-binary and non-conforming workers), with workers' sexuality being viewed within a paradigm of women's sexuality, as problematic and needing to be policed, while viewers, structurally/stereotypically treated as men, are seen as remaining faithful to their partners.

While dominant discourses of sexuality hold considerable power in society, these discourses are in a constant state of flux, and can be both challenged and negotiated through empowerment discourses that resist misogynistic beliefs about sexuality, or internalised in ways that might disempower online sex workers and undermine how they feel about their work. Some workers asserted that "I don't see what I'm doing as cheating. It's erotica and fantasy" [ACF, 16 January 2021]. These moral justifications are telling as they show how workers attempt to differentiate their labour from societal expectations around sex. However, other workers have noted feeling uneasy about their work, feeling guilty about the transactional nature of the client interaction and not feeling genuine in their actions. In response to a forum post from a worker who felt guilty for faking arousal during a show, another worker remarked that they shouldn't feel guilty:

Sex is only sacred if you believe it. If you evaluate your beliefs and find that sex is NOT sacred to you, then the shame is most likely coming from external, societal expectations. It has been drilled into us that we should reserve our sexuality for someone we love and [to] never put a price tag on sexual acts. I think sex workers perform a great service to society. [Worker– ACF, 12 August 2017].

Their comment locates online sex work within broader societal understandings of sexuality, recognising how sex has been historically stigmatised, but optimistically arguing that sex work has the power to change that. By constructing online sex as a service rather an interaction between two people in love, this poster reframes their work as helping others address sexual shame. In this way, dominant discourses of sexuality are redefined.

The redefining of subordinated sexualities through discourses of empowerment is a common theme that emerges in discussions of societal norms on the forums. This quote from a worker is emblematic of many on the forum:

Once I remember why I want to do online sex work, I remind myself that I am safe and that this is my choice. There's a lot of great things that can come from this. It can be SO empowering. You are in control here. You can explore your sexuality and what you like and don't like [Worker – ACF, 16 August 2017].

Despite online sex workers drawing heavily on the narrative of empowerment, some were more sceptical, noting that the empowerment discourse may be used as a defence mechanism to deal with the social stigma they face:

Sometimes I think the emphasis on empowerment is a defence mechanism, overcompensating the dehumanisation that often happens to sex workers. I think focusing on "it's so empowering, we make bank, etc." is irrelevant and

erases the perspective that many sex workers don't find it empowering and don't make bank. Jobs don't need to be empowering to still require safe working conditions and rights, etc. I work in an office right now and I don't find it empowering, and I don't think anyone would argue that I should if I want the right to do it [Worker – ACF, 27th June 2015].

This worker's comparison to an office job underscores that sex work is work, demanding a broader understanding of sex work that recognises the legitimacy of the profession and demands respect for the rights and safety of sex workers, regardless of the personal fulfilment they may or may not derive from their work.

Discussion

Online sex work is often lauded as being a safer and less stigmatised alternative to offline sex work for women (Cox, 2020; Minichiello et al., 2013). However, this study shows how monogamous norms perpetuate misogyny within the digital economy of sex work, materially impacting workers' safety and autonomy. Our analysis of online forums reveals how monogamous expectations are disproportionately imposed on workers by partners, platforms, and viewers alike, reproducing a patriarchal ideology that both risks violence and undermines workers' financial independence. One limitation of this article is its examination of a limited selection of sex workers who appear to identify as female and heterosexual. This assumption is made on the pronouns used in the conversations and reflects the cis-heterosexist social biases of the forum itself.

Patriarchal expectations placed on online sex workers are demanded from partners, viewers and the structural design of platforms. The impossibility of living up to relationship boundaries is evidenced in the very design of the platforms, which capitalise on the affective and unpaid labour of their workers (Denegri-Knott et al., 2023). The affective boundary work conducted by workers requires building rapport with viewers on sex work platforms and social media, making viewers feel comfortable in one's chatroom, and entertaining them. Workers who perform affective labour in ways that create parasocial relationships with viewers are rewarded through visibility on the platform and higher tips from viewers. Withholding the performance of affect jeopardises one's ability to generate an income. The intimate nature of online sex work and the relational labour workers conduct may not be recognised by partners as labour but misperceived as genuine forms of romantic interest toward viewers.

A significant finding in this research was that online sex work platforms are a space where parasocial relationships are not only expected as part of the affective boundary work online sex workers do to create fantasies of interpersonal connections with viewers, but are emerging in ways that create physical and financial risks for workers. While this paradox of parasocial relationships has long been discussed in the domains of TV and movies (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Ballantine & Martin, 2005), when this interaction occurs, the parasocial interaction may be perceived as reciprocal social interaction. However, for sex workers, the interaction and intimacy offered is a form of labour, hence making it parasocial from their perspective (Kowert & Daniel, 2021). Viewers' assumption that workers are sexually available to them beyond the

services they are paying for is a patriarchal norm that is built into the structures of platforms where tipping boosts visibility.

These platforms encourage and depend on the male gaze and are a space where men can surveil working women. On webcam interfaces, viewers can hover over a worker's avatar and see a preview of them in their chatroom before even entering. This normalises patriarchal surveillance and the objectification of women, the erasure of other gender identities, and masculine valuations of sexual attractiveness and romance-worthiness, seeing viewers interacting only with those they find sexually attractive and worthy of romantic pursuit. This attraction is then fed by the affection that workers show their viewers to generate an income. Viewers whose advances are rejected by workers or who find out that they have life-partners offline can experience hurt and betrayal, with some viewers escalating those emotions into retributive forms of misogyny such as cyber-harassment.

With parasocial relationships vulnerable to cyber-harassment, due to patriarchal expectations being unfulfilled, the misogyny of online sex work platforms sees viewers asserting toxic forms of masculinity in ways that mimic and reinforce offline gendered power structures. These power differentials are evidenced not only in instances of cyber-harassment but in the broader double standard that exists in which (typically male) viewers aren't held to the same moral standard as (typically female) workers. Viewers on the forum justified their sexual interactions as fantasy, and even saw their consumption of online sex as protecting monogamous relationships, thereby escaping moral culpability, while online sex workers are decried as sluts and home wreckers. This gender bias is deeply misogynistic: men are encouraged to feel they are owed pleasure even when it comes at the expense of the feelings and economic needs of women.

Many online sex workers struggle with the internalised misogyny of monogamy and availability norms. To manage this tension, some workers have firmly separated their understanding of sex from monogamous discourses, recognising that sex doesn't have to happen within the confines of monogamy and that selling sexuality can be empowering. Sexual agency and autonomy were therefore common themes raised in the forums that sought to resist societal stigma and reshape sexuality scripts. However, the different ways of coping with misogyny reveal that online sex work involves a range of experiences including both oppression and empowerment, both of which operate under broader patriarchal, capitalist systems.

We contribute to scholarship on parasocial relationships that occurs through more interactive platforms where direct engagement with viewers occurs. Scholarship on adjacent, similarly interactive platforms like Twitch (Woodcock et al., 2019) and Patreon has examined the affective / relational labour live-streamers engage in, including the risks they face (Bonifacio et al., 2023). However, our research specifically explores online sex workers' experiences through the interdisciplinary lenses of feminism and labour sociology providing new ways to think of parasocial relationships outside the typical celebrity-fan dynamic, instead looking at parasocial relationships in the context of labour and precarity by highlighting the emotional and economic risks workers face. Moreover, this is the first article to explore parasocial relationships against the affective boundary work online sex workers do to meet demands placed on them as part of their work and to uphold monogamous values.

We provide a unique viewpoint that shows how longstanding ideas of sexuality are reproducing online in complicated ways and are continuously managed by online sex workers through the affective boundary work that they do.

Conclusion

The misogynistic expectations maintained or fulfilled by online sex workers sees the labour involved in sex work go unrecognised by those outside of the industry. This makes it difficult for workers to navigate and establish suitable boundaries between their online and offline lives. While sex work platforms are a space for sexual engagement to occur transactionally, boundaries are threatened in various ways, either by workers who cross monogamous boundaries established in their relationship for the sake of their labour, or when offline relationships are being sought by viewers who expect more from workers than the labour they have paid for. In both instances, it becomes clear that sexuality-policing discourses, such as monogamy and women's availability to men, place expectations on sex workers that rationalise punishing them for deviating from patriarchal norms of gendered behaviour. This punishment can occur in two ways. First, when partners become upset and confrontational about a worker's behaviour online, they can illustrate misogyny's policing character by, for example, surveilling the worker in her workplace. Second, punishment can occur in the form of misogynistic retribution, as was seen in the cases of viewers' cyber-harassment of workers. While online sex work is labour that is highly sought by (typically male) viewers, misogynistic expectations create emotional and economic vulnerabilities for workers who are simply trying to do their job. Moreover, it becomes clear that while online sex workers are criticised for how they interact on sex work platforms, viewers escape the same kinds of moral judgement, exposing a double standard. This raises questions around how misogyny can be combatted in ways that don't rely on online sex workers bearing the burden of patriarchal practices that naturalise unequal power relations between genders, particularly where men's interests in pleasure are prioritised over women's economic interests.

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Data Availability The data utilised for this manuscript came from public forums, while users on these forums typically use aliases, to further protect the identities of those who commented on the forum, direct links to quotations will not be included as a precautionary measure.

Declarations

Ethical Approval The research began following ethics approval from Massey University, with the ethics application having been deemed low risk (application approval number: 4000025322).

Consent to Participate No consent was required for this project as the data referred to in this study came from an open public domain, the AmberCutieForum. As Rodham and Gavin (2006) state: Messages which are posted on such open forums are public acts, deliberately intended for public consumption, which means that researchers need not take more than ‘normal precautions’ when accessing such data. We therefore argue that as long as researchers’ maintain the confidentiality of the individuals who have ‘posted’ and record data in a manner that would not cause personal identification, it is not necessary to seek consent of individuals using open message boards because ethical boundaries are not crossed (p. 94–95). It’s important to note that forum users typically go by alias/industry names, but effort has been made by the first author to paraphrase forum quotes to reduce identifiability.

Consent for Publication Data was obtained from posters on a publicly open forum, AmberCutieForum, as these posts were published publicly consent is effectively granted through their own publication of such materials.

Competing Interests The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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